

## Quietism and Normative Symmetry: Comments on Andrew Sepielli's *Pragmatist Quietism*

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Let me get the praise out of the way at the start. This is a *fabulous* book. It develops a sweeping meta-ethical vision and does so with impressive attention to detail. It is packed full of novel ideas about representation, truth, reasoning, and other topics, all of which fit together to support the big picture. The scope of the book is really quite dazzling—it doesn't miss the forest for the trees, nor the trees for the forest.

The meta-ethical view that Sepielli develops is, he claims, both quietist and objectivist. Quietist, insofar as “nothing is relevant to ethics unless it is of first-order ethical significance”; ethical truths can be defended on ethical grounds, but they cannot “be either undermined or vindicated from the outside... from fields like metaphysics, or semantics, or the theory of rationality” (p. 2). And objectivist, insofar as “ethical truths are not only true... but objectively so, where objectivity is understood, at least provisionally, as mind-independence of the relevant sort” (p. 11).

The kind of objectivity at stake becomes apparent in Chapter 10, where Sepielli discusses an objection to quietism that he attributes to David Enoch (2011).<sup>1</sup> The objection imagines a community that uses different ethical concepts from ours—they act on the basis of ‘schmeasons’, not reasons, which leads them to live and behave very differently from us—and argues that quietists have no resources with which to say that *our* ethical concepts are privileged over theirs. The charge is that quietism implies a “normative symmetry” between us and them, with neither way of life inherently more valid than the other. As Sepielli puts it, the charge is that quietists have “no satisfactory account of how we’re responding to normative reality better than the members of Enoch’s alternative linguistic community are” (p. 202). Sepielli is very keen to resist this charge, going so far as to say that it *must* be resisted “for ethics to be objective in every sense worth caring about”. So objectivity, as Sepielli understands it, requires not just that truths about reasons be mind-independent, but that a symmetry-breaker favoring reasons over schmeasons be found.<sup>2</sup>

Sepielli argues that his quietist view can meet this challenge of normative symmetry-breaking. I think he succeeds in meeting *Enoch's* challenge, but I also think Enoch did not present the challenge in its strongest form. My aim here is to formulate the challenge better and show that Sepielli's quietism cannot meet it.

I should say that I consider this a *feature*, not a bug, of Sepielli's view. For philosophical reasons explained elsewhere, I don't think the kind of objectivity at issue here is possible.<sup>3</sup> (And for personal reasons, I think this is no bad thing—life is far more *exciting* when seen as a blank canvas to paint, not a fixed template to fit.) So, I am not so much objecting to Sepielli's view as I am highlighting what I consider to be an unadvertised virtue.

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<sup>1</sup> And Tristram McPherson (2011), but I will focus on Enoch's presentation in what follows.

<sup>2</sup> Or one favoring schmeasons over reasons, but let's hope for the best.

<sup>3</sup> If you tollens the ponens, you will find the beginnings of such reasons in Dasgupta (2024).

## 1. Normative symmetry

The issue is whether there is *normative symmetry* between us and the schmeasons community, the idea being that normative symmetry is a mark of non-objectivity. But if we're to use normative symmetry for this purpose, we must take care to understand what it does and does not consist in.

To this end, put aside Sepielli's quietism for now. Consider a simple relativist view of right and wrong on which there are no facts about right and wrong *simpliciter*, just facts about right and wrong *relative to* a given ethical code, where all codes are on a par. Imagine a community  $C_U$  that accepts a utilitarian ethical code recommending actions that maximize total pleasure. They go about producing pleasure, and that's the right thing to do relative to *their* ethical code. Now imagine another community  $C_D$  that accepts a "divine command" code recommending actions that promote God's will. They go about doing the Lord's work, and that's the right thing to do relative to *their* ethical code. This is a normative symmetry: they're both doing the right thing relative to their respective ethical codes, and according to relativism that is all there is to say. Note that the symmetry remains even if their codes are incompatible. If the Lord's work includes torturing atheists, there'll be an obvious asymmetry in what each community *does*: one tortures non-believers, the other feeds them (let's suppose). Nonetheless, there is *normative symmetry* insofar as what each community does is right relative to their own ethical code, and according to relativism there is no further fact to distinguish one community as doing what's "really right", as it were. This normative symmetry marks an important respect in which right and wrong are not *objective* matters, on this relativist view—neither community is "responding to normative reality" better than the other, to use Sepielli's phrase.

So far, so good. But exactly how to characterize the symmetry depends on the details. To see this, focus on judgments of the form

A is the right thing for S to do,

where A is an action and S is an actor. According to relativism, the truth of a *token* judgment of this form depends on whether A is recommended by the ethical code accepted by... well, by *whom*? There are three salient options: the actor S, the person making the judgment, or the person evaluating it.

On the first option, when I judge

(D) Torturing atheists is the right thing for citizens of  $C_D$  to do.

my (token) judgment is true because (let's assume)  $C_D$ 's ethical code recommends torturing atheists. Likewise, when I judge

(U) Feeding atheists is the right thing for citizens of  $C_U$  to do.

my (token) judgment is *also* true because (let's suppose)  $C_U$ 's ethical code recommends feeding them. This is the symmetry as represented in *my* ethical judgments: I can truly judge that both communities are doing the right thing. But as a member of neither community I'm seeing things "externally", as it were, from outside the case. How do the citizens of  $C_U$  and  $C_D$  see things? Well, *their* token judgments of (D) and (U) are true too, for the same reason mine are. This is "live-and-let-live" relativism: both communities can truly judge themselves *and the other* to be acting rightly. In this way, the symmetry is represented in their ethical judgments as well as mine.

Turn now to the second option, on which ethical judgements are true or false depending on the ethical code of the judge. Now if I judge (D), would that be true? It depends on what ethical code *I* accept, and I haven't said. This is intentional, for if I specified my ethical code I would in effect become a third party "internal" to the example. As we'll see, it will be important to distinguish what there is to say about normative symmetries from the external perspective of a neutral observer, looking at the case "from nowhere" (as it were), versus from the internal perspective of someone involved in a putative symmetry, looking at things through the lens of their own ethical code.

How then do things look to citizens of  $C_U$  and  $C_D$ ? This time there is no spirit of live-and-let-live. For if a citizen of  $C_U$  evaluates  $C_D$  and thinks

(D) Torturing atheists is the right thing for citizens of  $C_D$  to do,

that would be *false* because  $C_U$ 's ethical code does not recommend torturing atheists. Rather, citizens of  $C_U$  will truly judge that torturing atheists is the *wrong* thing for  $C_D$  to do. Likewise in reverse: citizens of  $C_D$  will truly think that  $C_U$  are doing the *wrong* thing, because feeding atheists conflicts with their own ( $C_D$ 's) ethical code. This is "dogmatic" relativism: both communities will truly judge *themselves* to be acting rightly and *the other* to be acting wrongly.

Still, there is normative symmetry insofar as each community's evaluation is a reflection of the other's and there is no further fact to privilege one set of evaluations over the other. The difference (from the first option) is that this time, the symmetry is not reflected in *first-order ethical* judgments—not in our judgments from outside the case, nor in theirs either. To see the symmetry one must stop doing ethics and start doing anthropology. This is easy for us, standing outside the case: we can clearly see that (on this semantics) both communities *truly* judge themselves to be acting rightly and the other as acting wrongly. But they can see this from inside the case too. A citizen of  $C_U$ , for example, can appreciate that what  $C_D$  does is recommended by  $C_D$ 's ethical code, so she can recognize that  $C_D$ 's ethical judgments—that they ( $C_D$ ) are acting rightly and that  $C_U$  are acting wrongly—are *true* when evaluated by the lights of their ( $C_D$ 's) ethical code. Which is, on this second option, the appropriate code by which to evaluate them. For a citizen of  $C_U$ , then, the symmetry consists not in the fact that the other community's actions are equally right, but that their ethical judgments are equally *true*. (For various reasons it's perhaps cleaner in this context to talk of *correctness* rather than truth. But I'll ignore this and use both terms interchangeably.)

Turn finally to the third option, on which ethical judgments are true or false depending on the ethical code of the evaluator. Clearly, any token judgment of (U) will be true as evaluated by  $C_U$  but false as evaluated by  $C_D$ , while any token judgment of (D) will be true as evaluated by  $C_D$  but false as evaluated by  $C_U$ . Like dogmatic relativism, then, both communities will judge themselves to be acting rightly and the other as acting wrongly. But this time, they cannot as anthropologists recognize the *truth* (or *correctness*) of the other community's judgments either. For on this third option, when  $C_U$  sees members of  $C_D$  judging that *they* ( $C_D$ ) are acting rightly and  $C_U$  are not,  $C_U$  must evaluate this judgment by the lights of their own ( $C_U$ 's) ethical code; hence they'll conclude that  $C_D$ 's ethical judgments are *false*. We might call this "double-down dogmatic" relativism. Still, they can perfectly well recognize that the same goes in reverse; that is, that  $C_D$  will evaluate *their* ( $C_U$ 's) ethical judgments as false by the lights of  $C_D$ 's ethical code. Which is, on this third option, the appropriate code for  $C_D$  to evaluate them by. Thus,  $C_U$  will see the normative symmetry not in their own ethical judgments, nor even in their (anthropological) evaluation of the other community's ethical judgments as true; but rather in their (anthropological) recognition that while the others' judgments are false, the others will *with equal legitimacy* evaluate their ( $C_U$ 's) ethical judgments as false too.

Note that "equal legitimacy" is to be understood descriptively here, not normatively. Take  $C_D$ 's judgment that  $C_U$  acts wrongly and (in ethical matters) believes falsely.  $C_U$  will not think this is *true*, as we've seen. But nor will  $C_U$  think it's *rational*, or *reasonable*, or *justified*—at least, not if 'rational' and 'reasonable' and 'justified' are normative concepts to which the same brand of relativism applies. For then the claim that  $C_D$ 's judgement is rational (or reasonable, or justified) will be true or false depending on the ethical code—or more broadly, the *normative* code—of the evaluator, and (let's imagine) it is *not* true by the lights of the  $C_U$ 's code! Thus, when I said that  $C_U$  can recognize that  $C_D$  will "with equal legitimacy" evaluate their ( $C_U$ 's) ethical judgments as false, I did *not* mean that  $C_U$  can recognize that  $C_D$  will *with equal reason* (or *justification*, or *rationality*) judge that their ( $C_U$ 's) ethical judgments are false. Rather, I meant that  $C_U$  can recognize that this is, as a descriptive matter, what  $C_D$  will judge—at least, *if  $C_D$  are using normative concepts in the manner prescribed by this relativist theory*. More fully, the relativist theory describes how the concepts are to be used and evaluated, and  $C_U$  are in a position to recognize that *if  $C_D$  use the concepts in that way* then  $C_D$  will judge that their ( $C_U$ 's) ethical judgments are false. This is a *descriptive* claim about what follows if  $C_D$  use the concepts in a certain specified way.<sup>4</sup>

In sum: according to this double-down dogmatic variety of relativism, the situation from the perspective of  $C_U$  is this:

- (i)  $C_D$  are *acting wrongly* and have *false beliefs* about right and wrong.

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<sup>4</sup> To be clear, the relativist theory itself might make use of normative expressions—for example, that the *appropriate* or *correct* code by which to evaluate a normative judgment is that of the evaluator, not the judge. But the claim that someone *is in fact* evaluating normative judgments in this way is purely descriptive (as is a claim about what they *would* do or think were they to evaluate normative judgments in this way). Compare: the rules of a game might specify what one must or must not do in certain circumstances, but it's a descriptive matter whether someone is in fact playing in accordance with those rules.

- (ii) Nonetheless,  $C_D$  will *with equal legitimacy* evaluate us ( $C_U$ ) as acting wrongly and having false beliefs about right and wrong in return.

Note that (ii) does not conflict with (i) on this relativist view (this will be important later). This is *relativism*, after all, a trademark of which is the idea that another community might take a very different evaluative stance from one's own, even if that is (as a descriptive matter) the result of a fully legitimate use of the relevant concepts. No surprise, then, that there is no contradiction in  $C_U$  maintaining that  $C_D$  are wrong in action and false in (ethical) belief, while *also* recognizing that a fully legitimate application of the relevant concepts will (as a descriptive matter) have  $C_D$  making the symmetrical negative evaluation of them ( $C_U$ ) in return. This *would* be contradictory on an "objectivist" view on which ethical concepts are to be applied so as to correspond with ethical reality. For on that view, for  $C_D$  to apply their ethical concepts *with equal legitimacy* would require that their judgments correspond equally well with ethical reality, which they wouldn't do if  $C_U$ 's did. But on this relativist view,  $C_U$ 's descriptive judgment (ii) does *not* undermine their normative judgment (i); and it is in these judgments that the normative symmetry is reflected. (Perhaps surprisingly, then, the *normative* symmetry as seen from  $C_U$ 's perspective consists partly in a *descriptive* judgment (ii).)

Precisely how the symmetry is to be characterized depends, as we've seen, on which semantic option the relativist picks. I won't comment here on which option is best; the point is that *there is* normative symmetry on all these options. As there must be, insofar as we're using normative symmetry as a mark of non-objectivity. For the relativist metaphysics on which there are no facts about right or wrong *simpliciter*, just facts about right and wrong *relative to an ethical code*, is a paradigm example of a view that *rejects* ethical objectivity: it rejects the idea that one community is "responding to ethical reality" better than the other. Clearly, this remains the case no matter which semantic details the relativist pairs her view with.

The lesson is that it can be a delicate matter how to represent a normative symmetry. One choice-point is whether to represent it from a point of view outside the symmetry, i.e. from the external perspective of a neutral observer, or whether to represent it from the perspective of one of the communities involved in the symmetry. If the latter, we've learned that there can be normative symmetry *even if* each community correctly judges the other to be wrong in action and incorrect in ethical belief (*per* the third option above); in that case each community can nonetheless recognize the symmetry in the descriptive claim that the other will with equal legitimacy think the same about them.

## 2. Enoch on quietism

With this in mind, let us turn to the question of whether meta-ethical *quietism* yields normative symmetry. David Enoch (2011) argued that Tim Scanlon's quietist view does, and hence is *not* a view on which ethics is objective in the relevant sense.<sup>5</sup> I think Enoch's argument

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<sup>5</sup> Enoch was discussing Scanlon's view as described in *Being Realistic About Reasons*, delivered as the John Locke lectures in 2009 and published under that title in 2014.

fails because he characterizes the symmetry in a way that Scanlon can, quite reasonably, reject as illegitimate.<sup>6</sup> It will prove useful to see why.

Like all quietists, Scanlon thinks that ethical truths, and *normative* truths more generally, can be vindicated or undermined only on normative grounds. Indeed, Scanlon emphasizes that this is just an instance of his “deflationary” attitude to metaphysics in general (2014, Chapter 2). As Enoch describes it:

“Scanlon... argues that in general – not just in the metanormative context – the answers to existence questions are fully determined by the standards internal to the relevant domain, so long as no conflicts are generated with other related domains. Thus, numbers exist, and all that it takes for numbers to exist is that claims quantifying over them are licensed by the internal standards of mathematical discourse, together with the absence of any conflict with some other domain (like the scientific, empirical one). Witches do not exist, because even if claims quantifying over witches are licensed by the standards internal to witch-discourse, conflicts *are* generated with the general empirical, scientific discourse (because witch-discourse licenses causal claims, or claims that have causal implications). Getting back to the normative, then: all it takes for normative reasons to exist is that claims quantifying over them are licensed by the standards internal to normative discourse, and that no conflicts arise between normative discourse and the standards internal to some other domain, like the empirical, scientific one. These conditions are rather obviously met, and so normative reasons exist.” (2011, p. 122-3).

Enoch then argues that this yields normative symmetry by imagining another community that engages in what he calls a “counter-normative” discourse:

“Those engaged in that discourse treat counter-reasons much as we treat reasons. For instance, they take them to be relevant to their practical deliberation, or perhaps counter-deliberation, in roughly the same way we take reasons to be relevant to ours: when they judge that there is a counter-reason to  $\Phi$ , they tend to  $\Phi$ , to criticize those who do not  $\Phi$ , and so on. But their judgments about counter-reasons would sound very weird to us (once translated into reasons-talk). For instance, they think that it is rather obvious that that an action will cause the agent pain is counter-reason *for* performing it.

Do counter-reasons exist? I think that Scanlon is committed to an affirmative answer here. Quantifying over counter-reasons is licensed by the standards internal to the counter-normative domain. That domain is, we may safely assume, as consistent as our normative domain is. Furthermore, just as the normative domain is not in conflict with the empirical, scientific one (or so we here assume), neither is the counter-normative domain in such conflict. And this, after all, exhausts Scanlon’s criteria for existence. So counter-reasons, Scanlon seems committed to concluding, are as ontologically respectable as reasons are.” (2011, p. 124-5).

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<sup>6</sup> To be clear, I ultimately agree with Enoch *that* Scanlon’s view yields normative symmetry, just not in the manner that Enoch states.

But this last sentence is a non-sequitur, for Scanlon himself does not *endorse* the standards internal to the counter-normative domain. As a resident of Cambridge MA, he belongs to a community that engages in normative discourse, not counter-normative discourse; hence he will very much *not* conclude that counter-reasons exist. Nor does anything in Scanlon's view imply that he *should* endorse the counter-normative standards.

What Enoch's discussion leaves out is this relation of "endorsement" between a subject (or community) and standards internal to a given domain. We might otherwise describe this as a relation of being "committed" to the standards, or "engaging in discourse governed by" the standards. But however we describe it, some such relation must play a role in Scanlon's view. After all, witches do not exist, we are told, because claims that quantify over witches conflict with scientific discourse. But on Scanlon's deflationary metaphysical picture, there is nothing intrinsically privileged (as it were) about scientific discourse *per se*. It is, rather, a discourse that *we are deeply committed to*; hence, when we notice the conflict with witches discourse, it is the latter that we reject. Scanlon himself is (presumably) equally committed to the discourse of reasons, not counter-reasons. So, it seems to me that he is no more committed to concluding that counter-reasons exist than he is to concluding that witches exist; *viz*, not at all.

What Enoch is trying to get at, I think, is that there is symmetry here in the sense that there is nothing "intrinsically privileged" about the reasons standards over the counter-reasons standards. *Something* along those lines seems to follow from Scanlon's deflationary metaphysical picture. But the problem is how to *say* it. Enoch is *trying* to say it "from the outside"—from a perspective that doesn't itself endorse the standards of either domain. It is this that Scanlon can complain is illegitimate. To say *anything* intelligible while using the concept of reasons or counter-reasons, he might say, one must *endorse* the standards of the relevant domain. Thus, one can intelligibly say that there are reasons *and* that there are counter-reasons only if one endorses both discourses at the same time. Yet this seems to be impossible, due to the fact that (by stipulation) reasons and counter-reasons play the same role in practical deliberation. I cannot coherently judge *that there is counter-reason* to cause someone pain, and, at the same time, *that there is no reason* to cause them pain, if judgments about reasons and counter-reasons are supposed to feed into action in the very same way. To do so would be a practical contradiction. If I endorse the reasons standards, then, it looks like I have no choice but to see the "counter-reason" community from that perspective and interpret them as having *incorrect beliefs about reasons*. And indeed this appears to be Scanlon's diagnosis of the situation: these "imagined conclusions about "counter-reasons"", he said, "conflict with our conclusions about reasons only insofar as they are interpreted as conclusions about reasons" (2014, p. 29).<sup>7</sup>

Sepielli's diagnosis of the situation is similar, as we'll soon see. But notice—if they're right, all that follows is that the normative symmetry (if there is one) won't manifest itself in the first-order normative judgments of the either community inside the symmetry, nor in their evaluation of the other community's normative beliefs as true or correct. And remember—from that, it does *not* follow that there is no normative symmetry! This was the lesson of double-down dogmatic relativism, where there was normative symmetry even though each community correctly judges that the other acts wrongly and has incorrect ethical beliefs. In that case, remember, the

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<sup>7</sup> Scanlon is not entirely clear on his rationale for making this statement. The preceding paragraph is my attempt to reconstruct a line of thought, based on his quietism, that would lead Scanlon to say this.

symmetry manifested itself in the thought that the other community can *with equal legitimacy* think the same about the first community in return. The question, then, is whether *quietism* allows room for such a thought.

In particular, the question is whether, on the quietist view, such a thought is intelligible to subjects *inside the symmetry*. This is the lesson of Scanlon's response to Enoch: that when accusing a quietist of normative symmetry, it is a mistake to try and characterize the symmetry "from the outside". Rather, we must try to show that the thought about the equal legitimacy of each perspective is intelligible to subjects inside the symmetry. The answer might depend on the particular quietist view at hand, of course. So, rather than examining Scanlon's view further, let me turn—finally!—to Sepielli's quietist view and argue that it can, and must, answer in the affirmative.

### 3. Sepielli's quietism and normative symmetry

Like Scanlon, Sepielli conceives of the putative symmetry as it would appear "from the inside". Specifically, he asks what we'd say *from our perspective* about an imaginary community that differs *from us* in certain systematic ways, not what should be said *from no perspective at all* about two imaginary communities that differ systematically *from each other*. This internal perspective made sense with Scanlon's quietism and fits naturally with the quietist dictum of not looking at ethics "side on", so I will follow Sepielli in this regard.

Sepielli's diagnosis of counter-reasoners is similar to Scanlon's: he thinks there is no symmetry because the community of (so-called) counter-reasoners is really a community of *reasoners* with radically incorrect beliefs about reasons. To show this, Sepielli (rightly) takes great care not to beg questions when describing the counter-reasoners. We can stipulate (1) that they *live* a very different kind of life from us, one that revolves around considerations of pain instead of pleasure, say. We can also stipulate (2) that they use the word 'counter-reason'—or 'schmeason', as Sepielli imagines—in place of our word 'reason'. For Sepielli, what this means is that (the concept we express with) 'reason' and (the concept they express with) 'schmeason' play the very same role in practical deliberation. Thus, if we are motivated to do whatever we judge ourselves to have most *reason* to do, the Schmeasoners are motivated to do whatever they judge themselves to have most *schmeason* to do.

It follows from (1) and (2) that the Schmeasoners apply their word (or concept) 'schmeason' very differently from how we apply our word (or concept) 'reason'. While we say things like

(-P) I have reason *not* to cause pain to innocents,

and act on that basis, they say things like

(+P) I have schmeason to cause pain to innocents,

and act on *that* basis. And so on and so forth. On some meta-ethical views, such as Cornell Realism, it would follow that 'reason' and 'schmeason' differ in extension thanks to their different pattern of application. One might then argue that this yields a normative symmetry



insofar as (+P) and (-P) are equally *true*—the latter being a truth about *reasons*, the former a truth about *schmeasons*—and nothing in Cornell Realism privileges reasons over schmeasons. But as Sepielli notes in Chapter 10, this line of thought would beg the question against quietism because it uses *meta-semantic theory* to derive truths about reasons and schmeasons, contrary to the quietist dictum that truths about reasons can be vindicated or undermined only on first-order normative (or ethical) grounds.

Sepielli is, therefore, understandably careful not to prejudge whether ‘schmeason’ differs in extension from ‘reason’—or whether it is a different concept at all, for that matter. He marks this by assuming (3) that both concepts are *completely thin*, meaning that no inferences between beliefs involving them and beliefs involving non-evaluative concepts are constitutive of counting as employing the concept. According to (3), their different patterns of application do not *imply* that they are different concepts—nor that they differ in extension, therefore, if extension is constitutive of the identity of concepts. (I’m slurring over some details here. In fact, Sepielli does not *assume* (3) and instead treats it as one of three jointly exhaustive cases; he deals with the other two cases on pp. 211-17. But I see the discussion in those pages as, in effect, offering an argument as to why (3) makes sense on quietist grounds, and I’m inclined to agree with him on that. For the sake of argument, then, I’m just going to assume (3).)

That’s the set-up. Sepielli then argues on quietist grounds that ‘reason’ and ‘schmeason’ are co-extensive; that is, that something is a reason iff it is a schmeason. The argument starts thus:

“How should a quietist like me explain the correct application of ‘reason’? Not by assigning relevance to a semantic theory of how ‘reason’ (or any other term or concept) refers, or a metaphysical theory of how reasons reduce, but rather by engaging in ordinary, first-order ethical theory—more specifically, the theory of reasons. I would consult my ethical intuitions, both about particular cases, and about general principles; I’d try to reconcile them, and weigh competing claims; I’d try to assess myself qua discoverer of reasons, taking into account those criteria that seem to matter by my first-order ethical lights—my powers of empathy, my ability to abstract, my general intelligence, and so on. I might conclude all of this inquiry by coming to believe, among many other things, that I have reason not to cause pain to innocents, that reasons of partiality depend on shared positive histories, or what have you.” (p. 204)

As he explains on p. 206, the general idea is to start with the practical role of ‘reason’—the way it feeds into motivation—and “work backwards”, asking what considerations would render him so motivated. According to his quietist view, those considerations are reasons.

What about ‘schmeason’? Since it plays the very same practical role (by hypothesis), Sepielli can employ the same method of working backwards:

“I am in a position to explain how it applies by appealing to my best first-order ethical theory. I’ll say, for instance, that I have a schmeason not to cause harm to innocents, that schmeasons partially depend on shared positive histories, and so on—i.e., just what I’d say about reasons. In this case, then, there can be no conflict.” (p. 205)

Hence, something is a reason iff it is a schmeason. It follows that when the Schmeasoners judge

(+P) I have schmeason to cause pain to innocents

they are simply *incorrect*. There just *isn't* any such schmeason, i.e., reason. Thus, the Schmeasoners aren't a community that uses a *different* normative concept 'schmeason' in place of our 'reason'; they're just a community with radically mistaken beliefs about *reasons*. As Sepielli puts it, the Schmeasoners are "misapplying 'schmeason', just as people who are in the grip of the wrong theory of reasons will misapply 'reason'" (p. 205).

This strikes me as exactly the right thing for Sepielli to say. But notice that the Schmeasoners will say precisely the same in reverse! After all, how will they determine the extension of 'schmeason'? If they're good quietists, they'll use Sepielli's method of "working backwards" and ask what considerations would leave *them* motivated to act. To this end they'll consult their ethical intuitions, their powers of empathy, etc., just like Sepielli did. But they have *different* ethical intuitions from us, *different* powers of empathy, and so on (this is baked into stipulation (1)). So, they'll conclude that they *do* have schmeason to cause pain to innocents. Moreover, when they look at us applying our concept 'reason' in strange ways, they'll determine the extension of our concept in the very same way, by "working backwards" on the basis of *their* ethical intuitions and so on. So they'll conclude, with Sepielli, that 'reason' and 'schmeason' are co-extensive; the difference is that they'll insist *we're* the community with radically mistaken beliefs about schmeasons (i.e., reasons), not them!

Sepielli will insist that they are *incorrect* about all that, of course, and (as I said) I think he's *right* to say that. The problem is that he apparently takes this to imply that symmetry is broken, and that is not so. This we know from the discussion of double-down dogmatic relativism, where there was normative symmetry *even though*  $C_U$  could establish that  $C_D$  acted wrongly and had false ethical beliefs. Thus, even if Sepielli can establish that the Schmeasoners are incorrect about all the above, that is *not* sufficient to show that symmetry is broken!

But can we go further and show that symmetry remains? We can. The symmetry is clear enough when we look at things "from the outside", treating Sepielli as one party to the symmetry and the Schmeasoners another. For then it's clear that each party's evaluation is a reflection of the other's and there is no further fact to privilege either one. But the question is whether a quietist is in a position to recognize the symmetry "from the inside". This was the lesson of section 2: that when accusing quietism of normative symmetry, we must show that the symmetry is intelligible from the perspective of a quietist inside the symmetry.

To that end, let us continue to take as our model the discussion of double-down dogmatic relativism. Transposing it over to the case of quietism, we would expect the symmetry to reveal itself from Sepielli's perspective in the following two judgments:

- (i) The Schmeasoners have *incorrect* (or *false*) beliefs about reasons.
- (ii) Nonetheless, the Schmeasoners will *with equal legitimacy* evaluate me (Sepielli) as having incorrect beliefs about reasons in return.

Sepielli has already established (i); the question is whether he can, *qua* quietist, make sense of (ii). To see that he can, remember that “equal legitimacy” is a *descriptive* claim, not a normative one. The claim is not that the Schmeasoners can with equal *reason* (or *justification*, or *rationality*) accuse Sepielli of being incorrect—Sepielli will reject that claim, for the reasons he explains above. Rather, the claim is that the Schmeasoners will accuse Sepielli as being incorrect *if they use normative concepts in the manner prescribed by Sepielli’s quietism*. This is what we showed three paragraphs back, when we saw that Sepielli’s method of “working backwards” will lead the Schmeasoners to say the very same thing about Sepielli as he said about them. As a *descriptive* claim, nothing in Sepielli’s quietism precludes him from recognizing this fact.

Sepielli may insist that if (ii) is descriptive, it cannot undermine normative claims such as (i)—that mantra lies at the very core of quietism. But that’s fine; I’m not suggesting otherwise. Remember, in the case of double-down dogmatic relativism there was no conflict between the analogues of (i) and (ii):  $C_U$  could coherently maintain that  $C_D$  have false ethical beliefs *while also* recognizing that if  $C_D$  were to apply their normative concepts in the manner prescribed by double-down dogmatic relativism, they will make a symmetrically negative evaluation of them ( $C_U$ ) in return. The latter claim did *not* undermine the former, in that case, and the same goes here: there is no contradiction in Sepielli maintaining that the Schmeasoners are incorrect, while *also* recognizing that by applying the concepts in the manner prescribed by his quietism (in particular, the method of “working backwards”) they will make a symmetrically negative evaluation of him in return. As before, this *would* be contradictory on an “objectivist” view on which normative concepts are to be applied so as to correspond with ethical reality. For on that view, for Sepielli and the Schmeasoners to apply their concepts with “equal legitimacy” would require that both their judgments correspond equally well with ethical reality, which is impossible. But on Sepielli’s quietism, there is no prescription that one’s application of the concepts must correspond with ethical reality—indeed, that is precisely the kind of metaphysical claptrap that quietism is designed to avoid.

To be sure, when “working backwards” from their ethical intuitions and powers of empathy, the Schmeasoners draw on intuitions and empathies that differ from Sepielli’s. Sepielli will say that their intuitions and empathies are *wrong*, and (as emphasized above) he is absolutely right to say that. But that is just to repeat the normative evaluation built into (i), and I’m not challenging that. Let us grant then that there will be asymmetry in Sepielli’s *normative* outlook, insofar as he evaluates the Schmeasoners negatively. The point is that—as we learned in section 1—sometimes a normative symmetry will reveal itself to participants of the symmetry not in their normative evaluations of the other, but in their descriptive recognition that the other will with “equal legitimacy” make the same negative evaluation about them in return.

In sum, I want to make two points here. First, that on Sepielli’s view there is room for him to hold claims (i) and (ii) in place at once. And second, that *this is normative symmetry in the relevant sense*. It’s the same situation we had with double-down dogmatic relativism, after all, wherein one community evaluates the others’ beliefs as incorrect while at the same time recognizing that the others will with equal legitimacy say the same in reverse. As the case of relativism clearly illustrates, merely insisting that the others are incorrect, *per* claim (i), does not suffice for meta-ethical objectivity.

What then *would* suffice for objectivity? The slogan, as Sepielli put it, was that “we’re responding to normative reality better than the members of Enoch’s alternative linguistic community are” (p. 202); what we’ve seen is that this must amount to something more than just that our beliefs are correct and theirs aren’t. I suspect this “something more” is a *very* big ask indeed—in fact, I doubt that even Enoch’s “Robust Realism” delivers it. (His view gives us “just more facts” by which to evaluate normative beliefs as correct or incorrect, and for reasons gestured at here I think this isn’t enough. But that’s a story for another time.) If that’s the case, the lack of objectivity in ethics may be something we must all learn to live with.<sup>8</sup>

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