Minimalism threatens metaethical debate, or so many philosophers fear. Whilst this fear has so far been expressed in the problem of creeping minimalism, this talk draws attention to a further, equally serious minimalist challenge to metaethics which has hitherto gone unnoticed. This challenge consists of two components. Firstly, there are strong reasons to believe that minimalism turns metaethical accounts into substantive moral positions. I call this the problem of moral conversion. Secondly, whilst this threat of moral conversion appears to envelop moral realism, constructivism and error-theories, expressivism arguably is immune to it. By re-locating expressivism’s traditional opponents from metaethics into ethics, minimalism thus seems to leave expressivism as the ‘last metaethical position standing’. I call this second component the problem of metaethical hegemony. In this talk, I discuss various strategies to avert this minimalist challenge and, having found these strategies to be unsuccessful, conclude that minimalism entails a significant shift in our understanding of metaethics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Minimalism threatens metaethical debate, or so many philosophers fear. So far, this fear has found expression in the problem of creeping minimalism, which is said to level pivotal metaethical differences by deflating all those notions which would be required to engage in meaningful metaethical debate (Dreier 2004). In this talk, I will argue that minimalism mounts a further, equally serious challenge to metaethics which has hitherto gone unnoticed. This challenge consists of two components. Firstly, there are strong reasons to believe that minimalism turns metaethical accounts into substantive moral positions. I will call this the problem of moral conversion. Secondly, it seems that this threat of moral conversion does not apply equally to all metaethical competitors. Whilst arguably it envelops moral realism, constructivism and error-theories, expressivism seems to be immune to it. By re-locating expressivism’s traditional competitors from metaethics into ethics, minimalism thus appears to leave expressivism as the ‘last metaethical position standing’. I will call this second component of the minimalist challenge the problem of metaethical hegemony.

Save for rejecting minimalism altogether, corresponding to its two-pronged nature there are two strategies which can be used in response to this minimalist challenge. The first aspires to tackle the problem of metaethical hegemony by solving the problem of moral conversion. This strategy thus aims to revive the metaethical contest in its orthodox form by demonstrating that expressivism’s metaethical competitors can, after all, maintain their metaethical status against a minimalist background. The second strategy seeks to divert the problem of metaethical hegemony by showing that expressivism too falls prey to the problem of moral conversion. If successful, this response would thus entail a revision of our orthodox understanding of metaethics in that, contrary to philosophical lore, metaethics would have to be regarded as a moral discipline.

In this talk, I will concentrate on the first strategy only and argue that there are strong reasons to believe that this non-revisionary riposte to the minimalist challenge fails. I will conclude by asking what this result implies for our understanding of metaethics.
2. THE MINIMALIST CHALLENGE: MORAL CONVERSION AND METAETHICAL HEGEMONY

According to minimalism, there is no substantive difference between asserting a statement on the one hand and calling it true, or declaring that it represents a fact, on the other. Rather, facts and truth come in a handy double pack, where stating that it is a fact that \( p \) is simply another way of saying that \( p \) is true which, in turn, amounts to asserting that \( p \).

The problem of moral conversion builds on minimalism by pointing out that its deflations of truth and fact imply that theses which seem to stand outside of moral discourse are, indeed, further expressions of moral judgements. The argument supporting this conclusion is simple, but powerful: If calling the statement \( S \) true or describing it as depicting a fact boils down to asserting this very statement \( S \), then talk about truths and facts cannot transcend the realm to which \( S \) belongs. Applied to ethics, this means that when we assert that it is true, or a fact, that large inequalities in wealth are unjust, we are not adding anything on top of, or external to, this moral verdict. Hence, although theses about the existence or non-existence of moral truths and facts sound like external, starkly metaphysical positions, minimalism about truth reveals that they are substantive moral claims.

Yet, as stated by the problem of metaethical hegemony, this moral conversion does not appear to apply equally across all metaethical accounts. The reason why is again straightforward. Firstly, as has just been argued, minimalism entails that theses about moral truths and facts must themselves be understood as substantive moral judgements. Secondly, this implies that any account which bases philosophical positions on theses about moral truths and facts – or as I will say, any account which assigns a philosophically weight-bearing role to moral truths and facts – must be grounded on substantive moral commitments. Thirdly, within moral realism, constructivism and error-theories, moral truths and facts do shoulder such philosophical weight, whereas they assume no such weight-bearing role within expressivism. Consequently, minimalism entails that moral realism, constructivism and error-theories must be regarded as moral positions, whilst expressivism remains untouched by minimalism’s moral conversion. Minimalism seems to endow expressivism with full metaethical hegemony.

How can moral truths and facts be seen to bear philosophical weight within moral realism, constructivism and error-theories, but not expressivism? Starting with the realist position, moral realism has traditionally been defined by the two-pronged thesis that there are moral truths and that these truths are mind-independent (Brink 1989). On the minimalist reading, ‘There are moral truths’ is equivalent to the claim ‘Some moral proposition is true’. Assuming further that ‘\( X \) is mind-independent’ means ‘\( X \) holds, irrespective of whether or not anyone believes that it does’, minimalism thus implies that the realist thesis

\[(MR) \quad \text{There are mind-independent moral truths and facts.}\]

must be understood as a generalisation over propositions such as

\[(P_1) \quad \text{Eating meat is wrong, irrespective of whether or not anyone believes that it is, or}\]
\[(P_2) \quad \text{Eating meat is not wrong, irrespective of whether or not anyone believes that it is, or}\]
\[\ldots\]
\[(P_{n-1}) \quad \text{Joshua is generous, irrespective of whether or not anyone believes that he is, or}\]
\[(P_n) \quad \text{Joshua is not generous, irrespective of whether or not anyone believes that he is.}\]

\[(P_1) \text{ to } (P_n)\], though, are moral judgements. Accordingly, by subscribing to (MR), the realist is committed to the truth of at least one moral judgement (even if she does not know which one this is). (MR) is, therefore, moral in nature. On the minimalist reading, then, moral realism is a moral position.

Since the positions of constructivism and error-theories can be construed in opposition to the realist account, the same thoughts apply to them. Starting with the former, constructivists agree with the first realist sub-thesis, but reject the second by advocating a mind-dependent conception of moral truths (Harman 1977). Since the negation of the moral thesis about the mind-independence of moral truths is just as moral as its affirmation, constructivism is also based on substantive moral commitments. Error-theories, in turn, suffer an even worse fate. Error-theorists reject the first realist sub-thesis by maintaining that there are no moral truths (and further, that we are mistaken to believe that there are any) (Mackie
Yet, we have seen that the thesis about the non-existence of moral truths is a moral claim which, if true, itself states a moral truth. Consequently, minimalism not only shows that error-theories are moral doctrines, but also demonstrates that they are self-defeating: By opposing the existence of moral truths, error-theories reject what they themselves presuppose.

In contrast, expressivism’s distinctive thesis does not contain any reference to moral truths and facts. Instead, it proclaims that the primary function of moral vocabulary is to enable us to co-ordinate our lives, deliberate our way into actions and to discuss our decisions (Gibbard 2003). Talk about moral truths and facts does not feature within the expressivist account, but stands at the end of it: It is one of the explananda, not an explanans. Hence, since moral facts and truths do not assume any philosophically weight-bearing role in expressivism’s central thesis, minimalism appears to have no purchase on it. Prima facie, then, expressivism remains the only account that can maintain its non-moral, metaethical status against the minimalist background.

3. REBUTTING THE PROBLEM OF MORAL CONVERSION

For the remainder of the talk, I will scrutinise several attempts to rebut the problem of moral conversion. I will do so by concentrating on moral realism only and ask if the problem of moral conversion can be resisted by modifying our understanding of moral realism so as to ensure its non-moral status against the minimalist background. I will examine four such modified definitions which have been developed in response to the problem of creeping minimalism:

The first and second modifications focus on explanation and belief respectively. More precisely, James Dreier (2004, pp. 36-37) suggests that moral realism should be defined by the claim that “the best explanation [of normative thought and talk] must be in terms of ... normative properties”. Neil Sinclair (2006), in turn, proposes that the decisive thesis of moral realism should be the claim that moral statements express robust, rather than minimal beliefs, where I will count a belief as robust if and only if it stands in a causal relation to the facts or properties that it represents. The third and fourth modifications to the understanding of moral realism shift focus from explanation and belief to moral language. In this vein, James Lenman (2003, p. 48) suggests that moral realists should claim that moral statements are “irreducibly truth-apt” in that they are not equivalent to any non-truth-apt sentence, where two sentences are equivalent, roughly, if everything that is conveyed by one sentence is also conveyed by the other in virtue of the discipline that governs both. Finally, Matthew Chrisman (2008, pp. 352, 351) proposes that realists should adopt an inferentialist approach to moral realism so as to declare that “ethical statements express theoretical commitments and some of them are true”, where theoretical commitments are “commitments about what reality is like”.

I will demonstrate that all four suggestions to replace the traditional definition of moral realism with more sophisticated understandings thereof crucially rely on claims about moral truths and facts and are, therefore, imbued with substantive moral commitments. As a result, all four attempts to rebut the problem of moral conversion fall short. Of course, rejecting these four suggestions does not prove that the non-revisionary response to the minimalist challenge is necessarily unsuccessful. However, the failure of the array of attempts considered here, ranging from more traditionally metaphysical approaches in terms of causation and explanation to linguistic, non-representational considerations in terms of inferential roles, provides strong reason to believe that this non-revisionary strategy fails.

4. CONCLUSION

I will conclude by considering what failure of the first, non-revisionary strategy implies for our understanding of metaethics. One such implication is obviously that the second response to the minimalist challenge is brought back into view, which aspires to thwart the problem of metaethical hegemony by showing that expressivism too must be regarded as a moral doctrine. However, I will argue that no matter what the fortunes of this second strategy may be, failure of the first, non-revisionary approach entails that minimal-
Minimalism leads to a significant shift in our understanding of metaethics. At best, it implies that the traditional, non-moral conception of metaethics would have to be abandoned; metaethics would have to be regarded as a moral enterprise. This would be the case if the second path of response was successful in rebutting metaethical hegemony by showing that expressivism is also a moral position. At worst, the second path of response also fails. In this case, the minimalist challenge would remain unmet. Minimalism would grant expressivism full metaethical hegemony and thus dissolve meaningful metaethical debate. Hence, if we seek to avoid either of these results, we had better find a way of meeting the minimalist challenge head-on.

References


Contact

Dr Christine Tiefensee
Chair of Political Theory
University of Bamberg
Feldkirchenstr. 21
96052 Bamberg
Germany
Phone: +49 (0)951 863 3024
Email: christine.tiefensee@uni-bamberg.de
URL: http://www.uni-bamberg.de/poltheorie/