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José L. Falguera • Concha Martínez-Vidal
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Abstract Objects

For and Against

 Springer

Chapter 15

Moral Folkism and the Deflation of (Lots of) Normative and Metaethics

Mark Balaguer

Abstract In this paper, I do two things. First, I argue for a metaethical view that I call moral folkism. The two main subtheses of moral folkism are as follows: (A) if there are any wrong-like properties, then there's a vast plurality of them; e.g., there's a property of Kant-wrongness, and Mill-wrongness, and Moore-wrongness, and so on; and (B) which of these properties count as genuine kinds of wrongness (i.e., real moral wrongness)—if any of them do—is determined by facts about us, in particular, our usage, intentions, and practices concerning moral words. Second, I discuss the consequences of moral folkism. In particular, I argue that (i) moral folkism leads us to the deflationary conclusion that many of the normative and metaethical questions that philosophers discuss are settled by empirical facts about what ordinary folk happen to mean by their words—and so they're not settled by mind-independent facts about reality. In addition, I also argue that (ii) moral folkism does not imply that applied ethical questions are settled by facts about folk meaning, and (iii) moral folkism does not imply moral anti-realism (i.e., moral folkism is perfectly compatible with a robust sort of moral realism).

Keywords Moral pluralism · Moral realism · Deflationism · Platonism · Ordinary language

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15.1 Introduction

In this paper, I'll argue for a view of moral properties—a view I'll call *moral folkism*—that leads to a deflationary view of many normative and metaethical questions (but not applied ethical questions).¹ I'll provide a complete formulation of moral folkism in Sect. 15.5; for now we just need the first two parts of the view:

- (A) If there are any wrong-like properties, then there's a vast plurality of them; e.g., there's a property of *Kant-wrongness* (i.e., *violating the categorical imperative*, or some such thing), and *Mill-wrongness* (i.e., *not maximizing happiness*, or some such thing), and *Moore-wrongness*, and so on; we can call these properties *wrongness*₁, *wrongness*₂, *wrongness*₃, etc.
- (B) Which of these properties counts as *wrongness* (i.e., *real moral wrongness*)—if any of them do—is determined by facts about *us*, in particular, our usage, intentions, and practices concerning moral words like 'wrong' (or what we *have in mind* when we use these words). E.g., if it's built into our usage, intentions, and practices that 'wrong' expresses *wrongness*₁, then that makes it the case that 'wrong' *does* express *wrongness*₁ (and, hence, that *wrongness*₁ counts as *wrongness*); and if it's built into our usage, intentions, and practices that 'wrong' expresses *wrongness*₂, then that makes it the case that 'wrong' *does* express *wrongness*₂ (and that *wrongness*₂ counts as *wrongness*); and so on.

I'll argue for (A) and (B) in Sects. 15.2 and 15.3—or, more precisely, I'll argue for (B) and explain how I would argue for (A) if I had more space. To simplify things, I'll assume in Sects. 15.2 and 15.3 that the following two claims are true:

- (i) We use 'wrong' in a property-ascribing way, so that it's *supposed to* express a property; and (ii) our usage and intentions concerning 'wrong' zero in on a *unique* property, as opposed to *no* property or *many* properties. (I'm aware that (ii) is implausible; but assuming it will simplify things, and no harm will come of this.)

In Sect. 15.4, I'll drop these two assumptions, and I'll point out that arguments similar to the one I use to motivate thesis (B) can be used to show that the question of whether (i) and (ii) are true is *also* determined facts about us. In Sect. 15.5, I'll argue that if the arguments of Sects. 15.1, 15.2, 15.3, and 15.4 are correct, then we're led to the deflationary result that many of the normative and metaethical questions that philosophers discuss are settled by empirical facts about what ordinary folk happen to mean by their words—and so they're *not* settled by mind-independent facts about reality. In Sect. 15.6, I'll argue that my view *doesn't* imply that applied ethical questions are settled by facts about folk meaning. And in Sects. 15.7 and 15.8, I'll argue that my view doesn't imply moral anti-realism.

¹Moral folkism is similar in certain ways to Frank Jackson's (1998) view, but it's also different in important ways.

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15.2 The Vast Plurality of Wrong-Like Properties

In this section, I'll indicate how I would argue for thesis (A) if I had more space. Let an *abstract object* be a non-physical, non-mental, non-spatiotemporal object. Let *platonism* be the view that there are abstract objects. And let *plenitudinous platonism* (or for short, *PP*) be the view that there's a plenitudinous realm of abstract objects; i.e., it's the view that there exist abstract objects of all possible kinds, or that all the abstract objects that could exist actually do exist. Given this, the argument for (A) proceeds as follows:

(A1) If there are any wrong-like properties, then they're abstract objects (and, hence, platonism is true); but (A2) if platonism is true, then PP is true; and (A3) if PP is true, then there's a vast plurality of wrong-like properties. Therefore, (A) if there are any wrong-like properties, then there's a vast plurality of them.

The argument for (A1) is based on the empirical claim that our talk of wrong-like properties (i.e., things like *wrongness*, *Kant-wrongness*, *Moore-wrongness*, etc.) is best interpreted as being about (or at least purporting to be about) abstract objects. I think there are extremely strong arguments for this claim, but I don't have the space to rehearse them here; I'm just going to take it as a working assumption that (A1) is true.

(Let me make two disclaimers. First, I don't think ordinary moral claims like 'Eating meat is wrong' are about abstract objects; I'm claiming only that sentences about *wrong-like properties*—e.g., '*Wrongness* is a non-natural property'—are about abstract objects. Second, I'm not claiming that abstract objects actually exist; I'm just claiming that sentences about wrong-like properties *purport* to be about abstract objects—so that if wrong-like properties exist at all, then they're abstract objects. But despite this, I think there are ways to avoid endorsing platonism. I don't think this is very important here, though, because the anti-platonist views I have in mind lead to all the same conclusions about morality that platonism leads to. But I can't get into this here.)

The argument for (A2) is based on the claim that PP is the only tenable version of platonism. There are multiple arguments for this. One quick argument is based on the claim that non-plenitudinous versions of platonism involve unacceptable kinds of metaphysical arbitrariness—e.g., they entail claims like '*Blueness* exists, but *redness* doesn't.' But the best argument for (A2) is based on the fact that PP is the only version of platonism that can be given an acceptable *epistemology*. I've argued elsewhere (1998) that if platonists endorse PP, then they can explain how we humans—naturalistic, spatiotemporal creatures that we are—could acquire knowledge of (acausal, non-spatiotemporal) abstract objects. If we focus on mathematical objects, the explanation proceeds roughly as follows:

Since PP says that there are abstract objects of all possible kinds, it entails that every purely mathematical theory that *could* be true—i.e., that's internally consistent—accurately describes some collection of actually existing abstract objects. Thus, it follows from PP that in order to acquire knowledge of abstract objects, all we have to do is come up with a consistent purely mathematical theory (and know that it's consistent). This is because,

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again, according to PP, *every* consistent purely mathematical theory accurately describes a collection of abstract objects. But if all we need to do to acquire knowledge of abstract objects is come up with a consistent mathematical theory (and know that it's consistent), then we *can* do this. For (a) we *are* capable of formulating consistent mathematical theories (and knowing that they're consistent), and (b) being able to do this doesn't require us to have any information-gathering contact with the abstract objects that the theories in question are about. (Here's an example of how this works: if anti-platonists ask how we could know that, e.g., every natural number has a successor, the PP-ist response is that while there *are* structures in which some number-like things don't have successors, we just *stipulate* that we're not talking about such structures when we do arithmetic; we stipulate that we're talking about a structure in which every number just *does* have a successor. In short, we stipulate that we're talking about a structure that just *is* characterized by the standard axioms of arithmetic—or by our full conception of the natural numbers.)

This is very quick, and there are obvious objections you might raise. I say more about this in my (1998); I also argue there that *non-plenitudinous* platonism *can't* be given an adequate epistemology. But I can't develop the argument in any more detail here; I'm just going to assume that PP is the only tenable version of platonism and, hence, that (A2) is true—but I'll say more about the PP-ist epistemology in Sect. 15.3.

Finally, (A3) is trivial—because PP just straightforwardly entails that there's a vast plurality of wrong-like properties. According to PP, every property that we can dream up (or that *could* exist) actually *does* exist. So, e.g., there are ordinary properties like *redness*, but there are also weird properties like *being a car* or *a mouse*, and uninstantiated properties like *being a polka-dotted skyscraper*, and indeed, there are even properties that *couldn't* be instantiated, like *being a round square*. So, obviously, according to PP, all of the wrong-like properties that we can dream up—e.g., *Kant-wrongness* and *Mill-wrongness* and so on—exist.

It's important to note that properties of the kind I'm talking about have internal structure, or *decompositional* structure, and they're individuated in a very fine-grained way; so, e.g., *being a round square* is different from *being a round triangle*.

Now, of course, you might think that *wrongness* is a *primitive* property—i.e., that it doesn't have any decompositional structure (or definition, or whatever). That's fine. According to PP, this is just another wrong-like property—i.e., it's one of the properties that's a candidate for being identical to *wrongness*.

You might wonder whether all of the wrong-like properties are *normative*. PP provides an answer to this question. Consider, e.g., the property *not maximizing happiness*. According to PP, this property exists, and so do the following “normativized” versions of it: (i) *not maximizing happiness and, because of this, being such that it ought not to be done*; and (ii) *not maximizing happiness and, because of this, being such that people have a reason not to do it*. According to PP, there's a property corresponding to every way of normativizing the original (un-normativized) property. And whether the original property counts as “wrong-like” won't matter here. (Likewise, PP entails that there's a plurality of *non-natural* wrong-like properties.)

(Disclaimer: while PP implies the *existence* of these properties, it doesn't imply that they're all *instantiated*. It's obvious that *not maximizing happiness* is instantiated, but it's not obvious that normativized versions of it are.)

15.3 Conceptual Analysis

In this section, I'll assume that we use 'wrong' in a property-ascribing way (and that our usage and intentions zero in on a *unique* wrong-like property), and I'll argue for thesis (B)—i.e., roughly, for the following claim:

Which of the various wrong-like properties counts as *wrongness* is determined by facts about *us*—about our usage, intentions, and practices concerning words like 'wrong', or about what we have in mind when we use these words.

We can think of thesis (B) as an answer to a certain metaphilosophical question. To see what I've got in mind here, consider the following two questions:

The what-is-wrongness question: What is *wrongness*? I.e., assuming that 'wrong' expresses a property, which wrong-like property does it express? Or, since it's trivial that 'wrong' expresses *wrongness*, we can put the question like this: Which of the various wrong-like properties counts as *wrongness*?

The metaquestion: What kinds of facts determine the answer to the what-is-wrongness question?; more precisely, if we assume that 'wrong' expresses a property, what kinds of facts determine which property (or properties) it expresses?

Thesis (B) is an answer to the metaquestion: it tells us that the answer to the what-is-wrongness question is determined by facts about *us*—about what we mean by 'wrong'. Let's call this view, or this answer to the metaquestion, *the ordinary-language view*. I want to argue for this view—and, hence, for thesis (B)—by arguing that no other answer to the metaquestion is plausible. Other answers to the metaquestion say that other kinds of facts—aside from facts about folk meaning—are relevant to determining the answer to the what-is-wrongness question. (Presumably, the idea here is that there are moral or metaphysical facts—that are independent of us—that make it the case that one of the wrong-like properties is *privileged* in some way.) In this section, I'll argue that there are no such facts.

You might think I'm conflating two different questions here, namely,

The semantic question: What property is expressed by 'wrong'?; and

The metaphysical question: What is the nature (or the decompositional structure) of *wrongness*?

And you might object to my stance by saying something like this:

The *semantic* question is obviously settled by facts about us; after all, we might have used 'wrong' to express some other property. But this is irrelevant to the *metaphysical* question; that's a question about the nature of a certain abstract object, and it has nothing to do with us.

My response to this objection will emerge in Sect. 15.3.1.

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15.3.1 Metaphysical Privilege I—Platonistic Privilege

Picking up on the objection just articulated, you might endorse the following view:

The platonistic answer to the metaquestion: When we acquire the concept *wrongness*, and learn to apply the term 'wrong', we so to speak "grab hold" of a certain property; and we do this without learning the exact nature (or decompositional structure) of that property—i.e., without learning a definition of 'wrong'. If we want to figure out the nature (or decompositional structure) of *wrongness*—whether it's a utilitarian property or a Kantian property or whatever—we need to do some conceptual analysis. And when we do this, we're uncovering facts about a certain abstract object—namely, *wrongness*. And these platonistic facts (about the nature of *wrongness*) are the facts that settle the what-is-wrongness question—or at any rate, the metaphysical (i.e., non-semantic) half of that question. This is analogous to mathematics, where platonistic facts about mathematical objects determine the answers to mathematical questions.

This view is misguided. Given PP, we know that *all* of the various wrong-like properties exist. Moreover, given the PP-ist epistemology described above, we can know what these properties are like without doing any conceptual analysis. E.g., we can know what *Mill-wrongness* is like because when we talk about *Mill-wrongness*, we're just *stipulating* that we're using '*Mill-wrongness*' to denote the property that just *does* have the nature (or structure) that Millians have in mind. And the same goes for *Kant-wrongness* and *Foot-wrongness* and every other wrong-like property that we might be interested in.

So, given PP, we can know what all of the relevant wrong-like properties are like. But this leaves the what-is-wrongness question *open*; after we describe the decompositional structures of the various wrong-like properties we're interested in, there's still the question of which of these properties counts as *wrongness*. So the platonistic answer to the metaquestion is implausible because we can know what all the relevant abstract objects are like—via the PP-ist epistemology outlined above—without having any clue how to answer the what-is-wrongness question. To answer that question, we need to determine which of these abstract objects—whose decompositional structures we already understand perfectly well via the PP-ist epistemology—counts as *wrongness*. And the problem is that the platonistic facts seem entirely *irrelevant* to this question. Indeed, *prima facie*, these considerations seem to lead us right back to the ordinary-language view; they seem to suggest that the answer to the what-is-wrongness question is determined by facts about *us*—about which of the various abstract objects (or decompositional structures) we have in mind when we think and talk about *wrongness*. If, e.g., we have *wrongness*₁₇ in mind when we talk about *wrongness*, then that *makes it the case* that that's the property that we've "grabbed hold of"—and, hence, it's the one that counts as *wrongness*.

You might object as follows: "We can't know what *all* the relevant properties are like in this way because we can't know what *wrongness* is like in this way."

My response: We, in fact, *can* know what all the relevant properties are like in this way; for *wrongness* isn't an *extra* property, on top of all the other wrong-like properties—it's just identical to one of them. The thing we *can't* know in this way

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Objection: “But after we answer the semantic question—after we figure out which wrong-like property is picked out by our word ‘wrong’—we can go on to ask what that property is *like*; and *that* question is a metaphysical question about the nature of an abstract object.”

My response: (i) the only way to answer the semantic question (i.e., the only way to specify which wrong-like property is expressed by ‘wrong’, or which wrong-like property counts as *wrongness*) is to characterize the decompositional structure of the relevant property (e.g., we’d have to say, “‘Wrong’ expresses the property *violating the categorical imperative*,” or some such thing); and (ii) once we’ve done this, there’s no metaphysical question left to answer—we will already have specified the decompositional structure of *wrongness*.

Here’s another way to think about this. The *metaphysical* fact behind the right answer to the what-is-wrongness question is a trivial identity fact. Suppose, e.g., that the right answer is that *wrongness* is *Kant-wrongness*. This is just an identity fact. It’s interesting to us only because we have two different expressions that denote this property—namely, ‘*wrongness*’ and ‘*Kant-wrongness*’ (or ‘*violating the categorical imperative*’, or whatever). So this is analogous to sentences like ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’; the metaphysical facts behind these sentences are trivial; they’re interesting only because (a) we have two different names of the relevant object, and (b) it can be non-obvious that the two names denote the same object. So it’s only because of *us*—because we have multiple ways of denoting and expressing the same property—that the sentence ‘*Wrongness is Kant-wrongness*’ is interesting (if it’s true). And the fact that’s non-obvious here—the fact that we need to discover—is a semantic fact.

Note, too, that *all* of the wrong-like properties are identical to themselves. This, of course, is obvious; but it helps bring out the point that the identity fact that we’re concerned with isn’t *special*; and it isn’t interesting *in itself*; it’s only interesting because we have multiple ways of picking out the property of *wrongness*.

The overall point, then, is that, *vis-à-vis* the platonistic facts, there’s nothing special about *wrongness*—nothing that makes it stand out from the other wrong-like properties as privileged in a platonistic way. Moreover, the task of uncovering the decompositional structure of this property just collapses into the task of discovering which decompositional structure we have in mind when we talk about *wrongness*. In other words, the so-called metaphysical question collapses into the semantic question.

There’s an analogy with mathematics here. We can know what certain mathematical structures are like by just stipulating which kinds of structures we’re talking about and appealing to PP to obtain the result that structures of the given kind actually exist. E.g., we can know what standard and non-standard models of arithmetic are like by stipulating that ‘standard models of arithmetic’ and ‘non-standard models of arithmetic’ denote structures of certain specific kinds. But this doesn’t tell us which of these structures counts as *the natural numbers*. According

to the version of PP I favor, this is determined by facts about *us*—about what *we have in mind* when we talk about the natural numbers.

This is related to an important point about mathematical truth. I pointed out above that PP implies that all consistent purely mathematical theories accurately characterize collections of abstract objects. But it doesn't follow that all such theories are *true*, and according to the PP-ist view that I favor, they're *not*. Consider, e.g., the following theory:

NSA: Some natural numbers have infinitely many predecessors.

NSA accurately characterizes certain kinds of abstract objects—namely, non-standard models of arithmetic; but if NSA is put forward as a theory of the natural numbers, then it's *false*, not true. This is because mathematical truth is defined in terms of truth in *intended* structures; NSA isn't true because it's not true of the *intended* objects—i.e., the natural numbers.

So the PP-ist epistemology for mathematics is a bit more complicated than I let on above. There are actually two different kinds of things we can know here. First, we can know what specific abstract objects are like by just stipulating which objects we're talking about and appealing to the plenitudinous nature of the platonic realm (and the consistency of our stipulations) to give us the result that objects of the kinds we're talking about actually exist—and then, if we like, by proving theorems about those objects. And second, we can know which abstract objects count as *the natural numbers* (or *the sets*, or whatever) by getting clear on what's implied by our own intentions, i.e., by what we have in mind when we use expressions like 'natural number' and 'set'. Finally, it's worth noting that the most obvious way to proceed on this second task is to rely on our *intuitions*; this is reliable because our intuitions are generated by our intentions, or by what we have in mind, and so they're windows into what's implied by our intentions. Thus, e.g., the fact that we have an intuition that every natural number has finitely many predecessors is evidence that we have standard (and not non-standard) models in mind when we do arithmetic.²

Analogous remarks can be made about conceptual-analysis questions—i.e., questions like 'What is free will?', 'What is knowledge?', and 'What is *wrongness*?' According to PP, we can know what specific wrong-like properties are like by just stipulating which properties we're talking about and appealing to the plenitudinous nature of the platonic realm to get the result that these properties actually exist. And we can know which wrong-like property counts as *wrongness* by figuring out which one we have in mind when we use expressions like 'morally wrong'. And the most obvious way to proceed on this second task is to rely on our *intuitions*—which,

²Our intentions might sometimes be imprecise. E.g., our intentions concerning 'set' might not be precise enough to zero in on a unique structure up to isomorphism. If so, there will be some set-theoretic sentences that are true in some intended structures and false in others; on my view (see, e.g., my (2009)), these sentences would be indeterminate—i.e., neither true nor false.

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of objects—namely, non-abstract objects—as a theory of the natural world. Platonic truth is defined in terms of what is true of the world because it's not true of the

world more complicated than I let you know here. First, by stipulating which objects count as platonic, the nature of the platonic realm is defined. The result is that objects of the world, like, by proving theorems about abstract objects count as *the* platonic objects on what's implied by our use of expressions like 'natural world'. An obvious way to proceed would be to stipulate that objects count as platonic because our intuitions tell us so, and so they're windows into the world that we have an intuition about. This is evidence that we have done arithmetic.²

Analysis questions—i.e., questions about what 'What is wrongness?' means—properties are like by just stipulating that the platonic properties actually exist. And the result is that we figure out which objects are *really* wrong. And the most important part of our intuitions—which,

concerning 'set' might not be settled. If so, there will be some settling in others; on my view (see, for example, Balaguer 2000), neither true nor false.

again, is a reliable way of proceeding because our intuitions are generated by what we have in mind when we use expressions like 'wrong'.³

I don't mean to suggest that there are no important differences between mathematics and conceptual analysis. One obvious difference is that whereas mathematicians are more centrally concerned with the first task (i.e., discovering the nature of specific abstract objects), conceptual analysts are more centrally concerned with the second task (i.e., determining which abstract objects are picked out by our intentions). My point is just that the epistemologies of the two practices are analogous. In both cases, there are two sorts of things we can know—facts about abstract objects and facts about *us*, about which abstract objects we have in mind when we use certain expressions.

You might object as follows: "On your view, *wrongness* could have been completely different; if we'd just had different thoughts, it could have turned out that, e.g., playing chess was wrong." But this is false; the problem with this objection is that predicates like 'red' and 'wrong' are *rigid*—they express the same properties in all worlds (or all worlds in which those properties exist). So while we could have used 'wrong' to express a different property, it's not true that *wrongness* could have been a different property, or that it could have had a different decompositional structure.

Before moving on, I want to consider one more way in which you might think that platonic facts are relevant to the what-is-wrongness question. You might think that one of the wrong-like properties is "glowing" somehow in platonic heaven. In other words, you might think that in addition to the kinds of platonic facts I've been talking about, there are other kinds of platonic facts that privilege certain abstract objects. E.g., you might think that standard models of arithmetic are "glowing" somehow, or metaphysically privileged, in a way that non-standard models aren't; and you might think that one of the wrong-like properties is "glowing" or privileged in a way that the others aren't.

There are multiple problems with this view. First, it's totally unclear what the "glow" could consist in. (Imagine someone saying that one of the red-like properties, in the spectrum of color properties, is "glowing"; it's entirely unclear what this could mean, and I think it's equally unclear what it could mean to say that one of the wrong-like properties is "glowing".) Second, PP entails that if it's even *possible* for *Mill-wrongness* and *Kant-wrongness* and so on to "glow" in the relevant way, then there are versions of these properties that *do* "glow" in this way; but if this is true, then the facts about which properties are "glowing" won't do the work they're supposed to do. These considerations suggest that what "glow"-platonicists are really doing is abandoning PP, and this brings out another problem with the view—it can't be given an acceptable epistemology (in particular, we wouldn't have any way of knowing which abstract objects were "glowing"). Finally, why should we think that the relevant "glow" would be morally relevant? What if

³As with the mathematical case, our intentions concerning 'wrong' could be imprecise and, hence, fail to zero in on a unique property. I'll say more about this in Sect. 15.4.

some monstrous kind of *egoist-wrongness* was the one that was “glowing”? Would that mean that that property was *wrongness* and that we should endorse egoism? I don’t see why we should think that.⁴ Analogy: if it turned out that non-standard models of arithmetic (and not standard models) were “glowing”, it wouldn’t follow that they were the natural numbers; instead, it would follow that the “glow” was arithmetically irrelevant. And the same seems true in the moral case; if the “glow” didn’t line up with our concept of *wrongness*, then it would be morally irrelevant (i.e., it wouldn’t be a *moral glow*)—which suggests that what’s really doing the work here is our concept of *wrongness*.

15.3.2 Interlude

The remarks of Sect. 15.3.1 suggest that the metaphysical question (i.e., ‘What is the nature of *wrongness*?’) collapses into the semantic question (i.e., ‘Which property does the word ‘wrong’ express?’). This suggests that facts about *us*—about what we have in mind when we talk about *wrongness*—are at least *among the facts* that determine the answer to the what-is-wrongness question. But it doesn’t follow that these are the *only* facts that are relevant here, and you might think that other facts—aside from facts about *us*—are also relevant. However, I will now argue that this is not the case. I’ll do this by running through the most obvious facts that one might appeal to here and arguing that they’re not relevant to the what-is-wrongness question.

15.3.3 Metaphysical Privilege II—Rigidity and Semantic Externalism

You might think that ‘wrong’ is a rigidly designating natural-kind term that expresses whatever wrong-like property is actually instantiated in our environment (or whatever wrong-like property causally regulates our usage of ‘wrong’).⁵ Thus, you might think that facts about which wrong-like properties are instantiated in our environment (or which ones causally regulate our usage) are relevant to the what-is-wrongness question.

I’ve argued elsewhere (2016) that environmental facts of this kind are never relevant to conceptual-analysis questions, but in the present context, this doesn’t matter. For there are obviously *lots* of wrong-like properties instantiated in our environment (e.g., there are actions that violate the categorical imperative, and that don’t maximize happiness, and so on). Moreover, which of these properties causally

⁴Dasgupta (2017) makes a similar point.

⁵See, e.g., Boyd (1988) and Brink (1989).

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15.3.4 Metaphysical Privilege III—Naturalism

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regulate our usage depends on facts about *us*, about which of them we focus on and respond to. (It's not as if one of these properties reaches out from our environment and forces us to respond to it in the appropriate way; we can presumably focus on and respond to any wrong-like property that's instantiated in our environment.) So the only thing that environmental facts of this kind could do in the present context is to rule out wrong-like properties that are uninstantiated.

15.3.4 *Metaphysical Privilege III—Lewis-Sider-Style Naturalness*

One way to respond to what I just said in Sect. 15.3.3 is to claim that the wrong-like property that's the most *natural*, or that does the best job of *carving reality at the joints*, counts as *wrongness*.⁶ Elsewhere (2016) I've argued for the general claim that facts about naturalness, or joint-carvingness, are not relevant to conceptual-analysis questions. But in the present context, it doesn't matter whether this general claim is true because in the specific case we're concerned with, it's implausible to suppose that one of the wrong-like properties stands out as more natural than the others.

This, anyhow, is true if we think of naturalness in the way that Lewis (1986) and Sider (2011) do—as having to do with *resemblance*—and if we focus on properties that are plausible candidates for being *wrongness*. Consider, e.g., *Kant-wrongness* and *Mill-wrongness*; it seems obvious that actions that violate the categorical imperative resemble each other to roughly the same degree that actions that don't maximize happiness do; and the same goes for actions that are Foot-wrong and Moore-wrong and so on.⁷

Now, I suppose you might think that there are moral joints in reality that somehow sit on top of the natural facts and make one of the wrong-like properties metaphysically special. But I would respond to this in the same way that I responded to "glow"-platonism: it's unclear what these supernatural joints could consist in; it's unclear how we could know anything about them; and it's unclear why they would be morally relevant.⁸

⁶Dunaway and McPherson (2016) endorse a view like this, and McDaniel (2017) endorses a related view. Williams (2018) argues against views of this kind.

⁷Remarks in this vicinity have been made by Schroeter and Schroeter (2013) and Eklund (2017).

⁸Dunaway and McPherson (2016) claim that the most natural (or "elite") moral properties are the ones that feature in our best moral theories; I'll respond to the appeal to theoretical role in Sect. 15.3.7.

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15.3.5 *Metaphysical Privilege IV—Exemplars*

You might think that some of our property-ascribing terms—most notably, natural-kind terms like ‘water’ and ‘gold’ and ‘tiger’—are defined in terms of exemplars. E.g., you might think that the proper way to define ‘tiger’ is to point at a bunch of tigers and to make some stipulation about the word ‘tiger’. And you might think that ‘wrong’ should be defined in some such way as well. E.g., you might think that the proper way to define ‘wrong’ is to point at some specific bunch of actions—e.g., a bunch of actions that includes actions in which a person is pushed off of a bridge to stop a trolley but doesn’t include actions in which a lever is pulled to switch a trolley onto a different track—and to say that ‘wrong’ expresses the wrong-like property (or perhaps the most natural wrong-like property) that applies to precisely *that* bunch of actions.

Given these remarks, you might think that facts about *what the wrong actions have in common* are relevant to the what-is-wrongness question. But this is confused. If we help ourselves (just for a moment, and just for the sake of simplifying things) to Lewisian realism about possibilia, we can bring this point out very clearly. The problem is that for every answer to the what-is-wrongness question—i.e., for every wrong-like property—there’s a set of actions of the relevant kind, i.e., a set of (actual and possible) actions that have the given wrong-like property in common.⁹ Consider, e.g., a dispute between a Millian and a Kantian about what wrongness is. It’s completely unhelpful to say that this dispute is settled by facts about what the wrong actions have in common because (a) there’s a set of (actual and possible) Mill-wrong actions (and what they have in common is being Mill-wrong); and (b) there’s a set of (actual and possible) Kant-wrong actions (and what they have in common is being Kant-wrong); and (c) there’s not an independent fact of the matter about which of these sets (if either) is the set of *wrong* actions. Or to put point (c) slightly differently: questions like ‘What do the wrong actions have in common?’ and ‘Which set of (actual and possible) actions is the set of *wrong* actions?’ are essentially *equivalent* to—or, better, they’re *settled by the same facts as*—the what-is-wrongness question. So, if you like, you can say that the answer to the what-is-wrongness question is settled by the answer to the what-do-the-wrong-actions-have-in-common question (or the which-actions-are-the-wrong-actions question); but (i) the opposite claim—that the answers to the latter two questions are settled by the answer to the what-is-wrongness question—actually seems more apt (because the what-is-wrongness question seems to be the most basic of these questions); and more importantly in the present context, (ii) we can’t make any progress by moving from the what-is-wrongness question to the what-do-the-wrong-actions-have-in-common question (or the which-actions-

⁹Of course, if an analysis picks out a property that *couldn’t* be instantiated, then the relevant set will be the *empty* set—i.e., there won’t be any (actual or possible) actions that instantiate the given property—and you might think that facts like this could be relevant to the what-is-wrongness question. I’ll consider this suggestion below, in Sect. 15.3.8.

are-the-wrong-actions question) because there aren't independent facts that settle the latter two questions. On the contrary, these questions are all settled together, by the same facts.

15.3.6 Moral Privilege

You might object that while I've been taking the central question to be a *semantic* question, it's actually a *moral* question; in other words, you might think the question isn't what we *do* mean by 'wrong' but what we *ought* to mean by 'wrong'. But there's an obvious problem with this proposal—moral theories are package deals. Put differently, the problem is that for each wrong-like property, there's a corresponding *ought*. So, e.g., we ought₁ to use 'wrong' to express *wrongness*₁; and we ought₂ to use 'wrong' to express *wrongness*₂; and so on. So the question now becomes: 'Which of these ought-like things is the *real* ought?' And the meta-ought-question becomes: 'What sorts of facts determine the answer to the what's-the-real-ought question?' But this is exactly analogous to the situation we were in before, and so no progress has been made.¹⁰

15.3.7 Theoretical Role

Some people think that when we ask questions like 'What is free will?', 'What is knowledge?', and so on, one desideratum for an adequate answer is that the concept (or property, or whatever) that we zero in on has to be capable of doing the work that it's supposed to do in our best theory. But in the present case, this is no help. The problem is that for each wrong-like property, there's a corresponding moral theory. Theory₁ says that an action is wrong iff it's wrong₁, so if this theory is true then *wrongness* is *wrongness*₁; and theory₂ says that an action is wrong iff it's wrong₂, so if this theory is true then *wrongness* is *wrongness*₂; and so on. But now the question becomes: 'Which of these theories is true?' And the meta-theoretical-question becomes: 'What sorts of facts determine which of these theories is true?' And so, again, no progress has been made.

¹⁰A related view, suggested by Eklund (2017), is that the word 'wrong' has a certain *normative role*, and this role fixes the reference of '*wrongness*'. But this just seems to push the problem back a step. For if normative role really determines reference (and that's a big *if*, for it seems that all of the wrong-like properties could be employed in normative ways), then it would seem that there are *many* normative roles (or normative-like roles), and we can ask what determines which of these roles is the role of 'wrong', and so we'll be right back where we started.

15.3.8 Coherence and Arbitrariness

You might think that when we ask conceptual-analysis questions like ‘What is free will?’ and ‘What is *wrongness*?’, we’re not just trying to report what the ordinary-language meanings of the relevant expressions are; we’re also trying to, in some sense, *clean up* ordinary usage—by, e.g., eliminating incoherence and arbitrariness. I don’t think this is true—and I’ve argued as much in my (2016)—but that doesn’t matter here. For even if we grant that facts about coherence and arbitrariness are relevant to determining what *wrongness* is, this won’t change anything important about the present dialectic. This is because there are coherent/non-arbitrary versions of *all* of the wrong-like properties we might be concerned with here. In other words, there’s a vast plurality of *coherent and non-arbitrary* wrong-like properties. And we’ll still need to say what determines which of these properties counts as *wrongness*. And we’ll still be left with the view that this is determined by facts about us.

15.4 Pushing the Argument Further

So far I’ve argued that (a) if there are any wrong-like properties, then there’s a vast plurality of them, and (b) which of these properties counts as *wrongness* is determined by facts about folk meaning. But in arguing for these claims, I assumed that (i) we use ‘wrong’ in a property-ascribing way, so that it’s *supposed to* express a property, and (ii) our usage and intentions concerning ‘wrong’ zero in on a *unique* property, as opposed to no property or many properties. I now want to drop these two assumptions and make the following two claims:

- (C) Whether we use ‘wrong’ in a property-ascribing way depends on facts about *us*—about our usage, intentions, and practices concerning ‘wrong’.
- (D) Assuming that there are wrong-like properties (and that we use ‘wrong’ in a property-ascribing way), whether our usage and intentions concerning ‘wrong’ zero in on a unique property, or many properties, or no property at all, is determined by facts about us.

I don’t have the space to argue for (C) and (D) here, but the arguments for these two claims are deeply analogous to the section-15.3 argument for thesis (B), and I think it’s pretty obvious that if the latter argument is cogent, then the former arguments are cogent as well. Moreover, it’s worth noting that (C) and (D) are both fairly obvious—much more obvious than (B). Indeed, (C) strikes me as more or less trivial. (D) is perhaps a bit less obvious than (C), so let me just make two quick points about (D)—one about the possibility that ‘wrong’ doesn’t express any property at all, and one about the possibility that it expresses many properties.

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First point: as long as we don't use 'wrong' to express a property that *couldn't* exist—e.g., a property that both is and isn't identical to *Kant-wrongness*¹¹—then it expresses at least one property (assuming that there *are* properties and that we use 'wrong' in a property-ascribing way).

Second point: whether 'wrong' picks out a unique property or many properties depends on whether our usage and intentions here are perfectly precise. If they are, then 'wrong' picks out a unique property; if not, it picks out many properties—in particular, all the properties that are consistent with our usage, intentions, practices, and so on.¹² (You might think that even if we're not perfectly precise, other facts—e.g., facts about joint-carvingness—could come in to provide a unique referent for 'wrongness'; but I already argued against this suggestion in connection with thesis (B).)

15.5 Deflationary Consequences for Normative and Metaethics

Let *moral folkism* be the conjunction of (A)-(D) together with the claim that similar theses hold for other moral properties, e.g., *moral goodness*. I obviously haven't given a complete argument for moral folkism, but I think I've said enough to make it seem plausible. I now want to discuss what follows from this view.

The first point I want to make is that if moral folkism is true, then many normative and metaethical debates are settled by facts about folk meaning—i.e., by empirical facts about what we mean by our words. For example, (i) the question of whether some non-cognitivist or expressivist view is true is settled by facts about folk meaning; and (ii) questions about the nature of *wrongness*—e.g., whether it's a natural or non-natural property, and whether it's a normative or descriptive property—are settled by facts about folk meaning; and (iii) normative ethical disputes about what the right moral system is—whether it's Kantian or utilitarian or whatever—are settled by facts about folk meaning.¹³ If moral folkism is true, then there's nothing about the nature of objective non-linguistic reality at issue in connection with any of these debates; they're all settled by empirical facts about the heads of the folk.

¹¹Note that this is different from scenarios in which we use 'wrong' to express a property that *couldn't be instantiated*. According to PP, properties like that *do* exist.

¹²Suppose that *wrongness*₁ and *wrongness*₂ both fit with our usage and intentions concerning 'wrong' and that type-T actions are wrong₁ but not wrong₂. Then on my view, there's no fact of the matter whether type-T actions are wrong. This is exactly analogous to what happens when mathematical and physical predicates are imprecise.

¹³This, at any rate, is true if we interpret this debate as being about the nature of moral properties like *wrongness* and *goodness* and so on. If we interpret the debate as being out the *extensions* of moral predicates, then it's *not* settled by facts about meaning. In this case, the debate is analogous to *applied*-ethical debates—which I'll discuss in Sect. 15.6.

Note, however, that if we use 'wrong' in a property-ascribing way, then the question of whether moral realism is true is *not* settled by facts about folk meaning; for if 'wrong' expresses some specific property, then the question of whether that property is instantiated (and, hence, whether moral realism or error theory is true) is determined by objective facts about reality, not by facts about us.

15.6 Why Moral Folkism *Doesn't* Entail That Applied-Ethical Disputes Are Settled by Facts About Folk Meaning

Consider an ordinary dispute between two people—two ordinary members of our culture—about whether actions of some kind K (e.g., meat-eating actions, or whatever) are wrong. Moral folkism does *not* imply that disputes like this are settled by facts about folk meaning. On the contrary, if we use 'wrong' in a property-ascribing way, then on the view I'm putting forward, applied-ethical disputes like this are settled by objective facts about the nature of kind-K actions—about whether these actions instantiate the property of *wrongness*, i.e., the property expressed by the English word 'wrong'.

Now, if we *don't* use 'wrong' in a property ascribing way, then applied-ethical disputes might be misguided in some way; but this is irrelevant to the point I'm making here—that *moral folkism doesn't imply* that applied-ethical disputes are settled by facts about folk meaning.

Also, even if we use 'wrong' in a property-ascribing way, it's unlikely that our usage and intentions are precise enough to zero in on a *unique* wrong-like property, and given this, it could be that some applied-ethical disputes are indeterminate—i.e., there could be no fact of the matter whether actions of the relevant kind are wrong because they count as wrong on some legitimate precisifications of 'wrong' but not others (for more on this, see Sect. 15.4). But this doesn't undermine the claim I'm making here—that ordinary disputes about whether kind-K actions are wrong are settled by facts about the nature of kind-K actions and not by facts about meaning.

It's important to remember in this connection that ordinary people don't usually endorse theories of what *wrongness* is; and when they argue about whether things like eating meat are wrong, they're not usually in agreement that eating meat is wrong₁ but not wrong₂, so that what they're "*really debating*", in some sense, is whether *wrongness* is identical to *wrongness*₁ or *wrongness*₂; they're just arguing about whether eating meat is *wrong*—period.

(It may be that *some* applied-ethical disputes are merely verbal. For it may be that (a) some people use moral terms in idiosyncratic ways and/or (b) there are sub-communities within our culture in which words like 'wrong' express different properties. My own view is that this is less common than you might think and that *most* applied-ethical disputes are *not* merely verbal. But I can't argue for this here, and it's not relevant to the point I'm making in this section.)

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15.7 Why Moral Folkism Doesn't Undermine Moral Realism (or Error Theory)

Consider the following view:

Moral Pluralism: Moral folkism is true, and we use moral predicates like 'wrong' and 'good' in property-ascribing ways. Thus, on this view, there's a vast plurality of moral systems (e.g., Kantianism, Millianism, and so on), and which of these systems is true is determined by facts about us—about what properties we have in mind when we talk about morality.

If the arguments of this paper are correct, so that moral folkism is true, then moral realists (and error theorists) are committed to moral pluralism. But you might think we have good reason to reject moral pluralism, and so you might think that if moral folkism is true, then moral realism (and error theory) are false. But I'm not so sure that we have good reason to reject moral pluralism. In this section, I'll consider a few arguments against pluralism and argue that none of them is cogent.

One might argue against moral pluralism by claiming that (a) pluralism implies that all moral disputes are either merely verbal or settled by facts about meaning, and (b) this isn't true.¹⁴ But as we already saw in Sect. 15.6, pluralism is perfectly compatible with the claim that ordinary applied-ethical disputes are *not* merely verbal or settled by facts about meaning.

But anti-pluralists don't need to claim that pluralism implies that *all* moral disputes are merely verbal or settled by facts about meaning. All they need to do, in order to undermine pluralism, is locate a *single* moral dispute—call it "MD"—that satisfies the following two conditions:

- (I) Moral pluralism implies that MD is merely verbal or settled by facts about folk meaning.
- (II) We have good reason to think that MD is *not* merely verbal or settled by facts about folk meaning.

Here are three different disputes that one might think satisfy these two conditions:

The twin dispute: Suppose that (a) we use 'wrong' to express *wrongness*₁; and (b) there's a community of Twin Earthlings who use 'wrong' to express *wrongness*₂; and (c) eating meat is *wrong*₁ but not *wrong*₂. Now suppose that we get into a dispute with the Twin Earthlings about whether eating meat is wrong (we say it's wrong, and they say it isn't); call this "the twin dispute".

The what-is-wrongness dispute: This is just the dispute about the what-is-wrongness question—i.e., the question of which wrong-like property counts as *wrongness*.

The dispute in which we know all the non-meaning facts: Suppose we're wondering whether actions of some kind K are wrong, and suppose that for every wrong-like property *wrongness*_i, we (somehow) know whether kind-K actions are *wrong*_i—e.g., we know whether they're Kant-wrong, whether they're Mill-wrong, and so on. Now suppose that

¹⁴Clarke-Doane (forthcoming) puts forward an argument like this, but his argument is a bit different; his point isn't that moral pluralism is false; it's that questions about moral facts aren't the important questions surrounding deliberation.

in this scenario we get into a dispute about whether kind-K actions are wrong; call this "the dispute in which we know all the non-meaning facts".

Each of these disputes gives us a different argument against moral pluralism—an argument that's generated by taking (I) and (II) to be about the dispute in question. I want to argue that none of these arguments is good. I'll start with the argument that's about the dispute in which we know all the non-meaning facts—i.e., the argument based on the following two claims:

(M) Moral pluralism implies that the dispute in which we know all the non-meaning facts is settled by facts about folk meaning.

(MM) We have good reason to think that the dispute in which we know all the non-meaning facts is *not* settled by facts about folk meaning.

I want to argue that (M) is false. To get at the central issue here, let's distinguish two different kinds of settling:

A fact F *metaphysically settles* a question Q iff it's the truthmaker of the correct answer to Q, or F makes it the case that that answer is correct, or some such thing.

A fact F *epistemically settles* a question Q for agent A iff, given A's epistemic situation, A can figure out the answer to Q by discovering F—or some such thing.

According to moral pluralists, the question of whether kind-K actions are wrong is not *metaphysically* settled by facts about what we mean by 'wrong'. Rather, it's settled by objective facts about whether kind-K actions actually possess the property of *wrongness*—i.e., the property expressed by the English word 'wrong'. Now, in some very weird situations (e.g., situations in which we somehow know all the non-meaning facts), this question is *epistemically* settled—for us—by facts about folk meaning; in other words, given what we know in this situation, we can discover whether kind-K actions are wrong by determining which property is expressed by 'wrong'. But it doesn't follow that that question is *metaphysically* settled by facts about folk meaning, and in fact, it *isn't*.

We can put the point here as follows. If we read the word 'settling' as meaning *metaphysical settling*—and I take it that this is the reading that's needed for the (M)-(MM) argument to be even initially promising—then (M) is false; moral pluralists don't have to say (and *shouldn't* say) that the dispute in which we know all the non-meaning facts is metaphysically settled by facts about folk meaning. (Also, if we read 'settling' as meaning *epistemic settling*, then I think it's pretty easy to argue that (MM) is false; but I won't bother with this here because I don't think many anti-pluralists would endorse the epistemic-settling version of the argument.)

Notice how different this is from the what-is-wrongness dispute. On the view I've argued for here, that dispute is *metaphysically* settled by facts about us. If it's built into our usage and intentions and practices that 'wrong' expresses *wrongness*₁₇, then that *makes it the case* that 'wrong' *does* expresses *wrongness*₁₇. Before we came along, *wrongness*₁₇ wasn't singled out as special in any way; it was just sitting there in platonic heaven, alongside the other wrong-like properties. It wasn't until we

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came along and started focusing on this property that it became correct to say that it was the property of *wrongness*.¹⁵

This leads us naturally to the anti-pluralist argument based on the what-is-wrongness dispute; i.e., it leads us to the following argument:

(W) Moral pluralism implies that the what-is-wrongness dispute is settled by facts about folk meaning.

(WW) We have good reason to think that the what-is-wrongness dispute is *not* settled by facts about folk meaning.

I want to discuss this argument together with the argument based on the twin dispute—i.e., this argument:

(T) Moral pluralism implies that the twin dispute is merely verbal.

(TT) We have good reason to think that the twin dispute is *not* merely verbal.¹⁶

I think that (W) and (T) are both true. But I think that (WW) and (TT) are both false. Indeed, I think we have good reason to think that (i) the twin dispute *is* merely verbal, and (ii) the what-is-wrongness dispute *is* settled by facts about folk meaning. I've already argued for claim (ii)—the arguments of Sect. 15.3 suggest that we should *all* say that the what-is-wrongness dispute is settled by facts about folk meaning, regardless of whether we endorse moral pluralism. And claim (i) strikes me as more or less trivial. To appreciate this, just look at what's built into the description of the twin dispute; we're supposed to assume that (a) we use 'wrong' to express *wrongness*₁, and (b) the Twin Earthlings use 'wrong' to express *wrongness*₂; and (c) eating meat is wrong₁ but not wrong₂. It seems altogether obvious that if all of this is true, then the twin dispute *is* merely verbal. Of course it is—this is just what a verbal dispute *is*. (If we don't assume that (a)–(c) are all true—if we just assume that we're in a dispute with a community of Twin Earthlings about whether eating meat is wrong—then it won't follow that the dispute is merely verbal. But in this case, moral pluralism won't imply that the dispute is merely verbal, and so the anti-pluralist argument won't go through for that reason.)

But why might one think that (WW) and (TT) are true? What "good reason" might one think we have to believe that the twin dispute *is not* merely verbal and the what-is-wrongness dispute is *not* settled by facts about meaning? The only response to this I can think of is that we have an *intuition* that the twin dispute isn't merely verbal and the what-is-wrongness dispute isn't settled by facts about meaning. (This, I think, is the driving idea behind the argument in Horgan and Timmons (1991); they claim that we have an intuition that the twin dispute isn't verbal and that this undermines certain kinds of realism.)

¹⁵We have to be careful how we put this point. If the question at issue is 'What is the decompositional structure of *wrongness*?', then facts about us don't metaphysically settle the question in the sense at issue here. But as we saw in Sect. 15.3.1, once we've answered the question "Which wrong-like property is expressed by 'wrong'?"—which *is* metaphysically settled by facts about us—there's nothing left to discover.

¹⁶This is essentially equivalent to the argument in Horgan and Timmons (1991)—although they were arguing against Cornell realism, not moral pluralism.

I don't want to deny that some people—perhaps even most people—have these intuitions. But so what?; if the arguments of this paper are right, then these intuitions are just mistaken. Moreover, I think it can be argued that we shouldn't trust intuitions of this kind anyway. Indeed, I think some people would say that the knee-jerk beliefs we're talking about here—i.e., the belief that the twin dispute isn't merely verbal and the belief that the what-is-wrongness dispute isn't settled by facts about folk meaning—aren't *intuitions* at all. But the way I want to put the point is as follows: regardless of whether these knee-jerk beliefs count as "intuitions", they're not intuitions of the kind that we should trust and take as data points in our reasoning. I can't argue for this point in depth, but I'd like to say a few words about it. It seems to me that the kinds of intuitions that we should trust, and that we should take as data points, are intuitions about the applicability and non-applicability of our concepts in real and imagine scenarios. The reason we should trust intuitions of this kind is that we have a story to tell about why they're reliable—it's because we're competent users of the relevant predicates, and the intuitions in question here are just judgments about how to use these predicates. But "intuitions" about whether the twin dispute is merely verbal, and whether the what-is-wrongness dispute is settled by facts about meaning, aren't like this at all, and we don't have any account of why these intuitions are reliable. Indeed, appealing to "intuitions" of this kind seems every bit as illegitimate as appealing to the "intuition" that moral realism is false—these just aren't the kinds of things we can know by intuition. But I can't say any more to motivate this view here.

You might respond to all of this as follows:

You've missed the point of the twin dispute. With non-moral disputes, once we realize that a dispute is merely verbal, we stop arguing; but with the twin dispute, we don't—we still feel that there's an important dispute to be had.

My main response to this is that it doesn't matter whether we "feel" that there's an important dispute to be had with the Twins; for, to repeat, we have no reason to treat this feeling as providing good evidence for the claim that the Twin dispute isn't merely verbal. But there's a second point worth making here. Moral pluralists don't have to say that there's "no important dispute to be had" with the Twins. All they have to say is that the *twin* dispute—i.e., the dispute between us and the Twins about the specific issue of whether eating meat is wrong—is merely verbal. But (a) pluralists can claim that we could have *other* disputes with the Twins (e.g., about which moral system is pragmatically (i.e., non-morally) better, or about the pragmatic (i.e., non-factual) question of *what to do*)¹⁷; and (b) pluralists could appeal to recent work on metalinguistic negotiation¹⁸ to argue that even if the twin dispute is merely verbal (and even if the what-is-wrongness dispute is settled by facts about meaning), they could still be *important*.

¹⁷Clarke-Doane's (forthcoming) position is that non-factual pragmatic questions of this kind (and not moral questions about what we *ought* to do) are the really important questions. And Gibbard (2003) thinks that questions about what we *ought* to do just *are* questions about what to do.

¹⁸See, e.g., Plunkett and Sundell (2013), Thomasson (2016), and Belleri (2017).

15.8

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15.8 Is This *Real* Realism?

You might claim that since pluralistic moral realism implies that the twin dispute is merely verbal and the what-is-wrongness dispute is settled by facts about meaning, it's not a genuine version of *realism* at all—or at any rate, it doesn't give us what we *wanted* out of moral realism. (Claims in this general vicinity have been made by Horgan and Timmons (1996), Street (2006), Eklund (2017), Clarke-Doane (forthcoming), and many others.)

One response to this is to point out that the sort of realism that I'm talking about here—roughly, the view that there are some actions (or people or whatever) that possess the property of *wrongness* (or *goodness* or whatever)—is exactly analogous to ordinary kinds of realism about things like electrons and planets. E.g., realists about planets have to say that (a) which planet-like property counts as *planethood* is determined by facts about what we have in mind when we use the term 'planet', and (b) if Twin Earthlings used 'planet' slightly differently from the way we use it, then we could have a verbal dispute with them about whether Pluto is a planet.

But you might counter this by claiming that *moral* realism is different from other kinds of realism; you might claim that unlike planet realism, moral realism is *supposed* to deliver the result that disputes like the twin dispute and the what-is-wrongness dispute are *not* merely verbal or settled by facts about meaning.

Whether this is true depends on what 'moral realism' means, and it's not clear why this should matter. I think we should just distinguish two different kinds of moral realism. We can define *weak moral realism* as the view that some actions (or people or whatever) possess some moral properties (e.g., *wrongness*, *goodness*, etc.); and we can define *strong moral realism* as weak moral realism plus some extra thesis—e.g., that there are objective facts (independent of us) that make moral properties like *wrongness* and *goodness* stand out from other moral-like properties (i.e., wrong-like properties and good-like properties and so on) as special, or privileged (perhaps because *wrongness* and *goodness* are "glowing", or because there are supernatural moral joints in reality). Given this, we can say that pluralistic realism is a version of weak realism but not strong realism and leave it at that.

For whatever it's worth, I think there are multiple problems with strong moral realism. I've already pointed out that views of this kind are problematic in metaphysical, epistemological, and moral ways. But I also think that (i) strong realism fails to deliver the things that strong realists *want* (i.e., the things that we don't get from weak realism), and (ii) these extra things aren't actually desirable (i.e., weak realism already gives us everything we should want out of moral realism). But I can't argue for these claims here.

Finally, I'd like to emphasize that I'm not claiming here that weak moral realism is true. For all that I've argued, it could be that (a) we don't use 'wrong' in a property-ascribing way, so that some sort of non-cognitivism or expressivism is true, or (b) we use 'wrong' to pick out a property that isn't instantiated, so that error theory is true. Both of these views are compatible with moral folkism.

most people—have these right, then these intuitions shouldn't trust intuitions that the knee-jerk beliefs dispute isn't merely verbal settled by facts about folk at the point is as follows: "intuitions", they're not a points in our reasoning, a few words about it. It t, and that we should take non-applicability of our ould trust intuitions of this able—it's because we're ions in question here are ntuitions" about whether t-is-wrongness dispute is ve don't have any account "intuitions" of this kind ion" that moral realism is y intuition. But I can't say

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