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Grounding the Autonomy of Ethics

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8.1 INTRODUCTION

In their disputes with nihilists, subjectivists, revisionary expressivists, and other disreputable characters, metaethical realists and quasi-realists often employ arguments that appeal, perhaps implicitly, to certain theses about the autonomy or isolation or distinctness of the ethical domain. T. M. Scanlon, G. A. Cohen, Derek Parfit, Simon Blackburn, and Ronald Dworkin have all employed arguments of this sort. Much is at stake. Scanlon and Parfit assume that the defence of non-naturalism depends upon a proper understanding of autonomy. Cohen argues that the debate between liberals and socialists turns on an issue closely related to autonomy. Dworkin argues, from a premise about the autonomy of the ethical domain, that ethical nihilism is not merely false, but incoherent.¹

Oddly, these theorists rarely pause to engage directly with the literature on ethical autonomy—beyond a passing reference to A. N. Prior’s famous paper. Were they to do so, they would find, for the most part, theorists vigorously debating various logical autonomy theses.² Such theses maintain that certain logical relations do not obtain between ethical and non-ethical sentences, for instance that no non-ethical sentences logically entail an ethical sentence.

I think this focus on logical autonomy is a mistake.³ The thesis so important to our metaethicists is not a logical thesis but a metaphysical one.

¹ Cf. Scanlon’s discussion of A. N. Prior and Mark Schroeder in his (2014); Cohen’s argument against Rawlsian constructivism in his (2008); Parfit’s argument against Frank Jackson’s reductionism in his (2011); Blackburn’s arguments against the charge of revisionism in his (2006) and elsewhere; Dworkin’s (1996) and (2012).
² For example: all of the twenty-seven papers in the most recent volume on ethical autonomy (Pigden (2010)) defend or oppose some logical autonomy thesis.
³ Moreover it is a mistake encouraged by a misreading of Hume. In the famous passage in the Treatise, he insists: ‘… that a reason should be given; for what seems altogether
Roughly, the relevant metaphysical autonomy thesis maintains that ethical facts are not fully grounded in non-ethical facts.

I motivate this shift from logical to metaphysical autonomy in two main ways. Firstly I show that the specific metaphysical characterization that I favour both avoids and also helps to explain the success of the counterexamples to logical autonomy theses. Secondly I show that this characterization has fruitful upshots in ethics, metaethics, and ethical methodology.

We can distinguish two different goals that one might have when defending an autonomy thesis. One goal is to defend some characterization of autonomy as a characterization of autonomy, i.e., as an interesting and plausible articulation of the thesis that theorists are, or are often, or perhaps should be, arguing about when they are arguing about autonomy. This is what we are up to here. Another goal is to argue that this characterization is true. I’m strongly inclined to believe that ethical autonomy on this metaphysical characterization is true. However I will not defend this here. Most of the objections to the characterization of autonomy that I will consider are objections to the characterization as a characterization, rather than objections that assume that it is a good characterization of autonomy, but insist that it is false. In fact, since some challenges of the latter sort presuppose something like the characterization I will defend, they provide further indirect support for this characterization.

This chapter has five main sections. All autonomy theses, just like all nihilistic theses, make certain background assumptions about which facts and propositions count as ethical—that is, they presuppose certain taxonomic theses. We begin in section 8.2 with some preliminaries about the relationship between taxonomy and autonomy. In section 8.3 we discuss logical autonomy theses and a host of problematic counterexamples. In section 8.4 we introduce our metaphysical autonomy theses, spend some time on some details, and present some of their advantages. In section 8.5 we consider some apposite challenges to our metaphysical autonomy theses, using these challenges to draw out various further implications of this conception of ethical autonomy. In section 8.6 we discuss various implications of this metaphysical conception of autonomy for some of the debates mentioned above. In particular, we gain insight into the the ethical domain itself, which appears to be (at least partly) structured by various grounding relations. Moreover the account of autonomy I propose would provide us
with an expansive conception of the ethical, and correspondingly minimal conception of the ‘metaethical’—insofar as this refers to a domain that does not overlap with the ethical. This lends support to the idea that many putatively ‘metaethical’ disputes—e.g., about the explanatory direction between different kinds of normative facts—are simply abstract ethical disputes. In turn this lends support to various kinds of opposition to revisionary metaethical theses.

8.2 PRELIMINARIES: AUTONOMY AND ETHICAL TAXONOMY

Autonomy theses maintain that there is some specific relation such that facts or propositions from two different categories do not stand in that relation to each other. More strongly, they maintain that there is some relation such that facts or propositions from some category do not stand in that relation to facts or propositions from any other category. An autonomy thesis requires some specification of the relation in question, for instance whether classical entailment, metaphysical grounding, epistemic justification, or whatever, and some minimal account of the categories with which it is concerned.

We have these two tasks in the theory of ethical autonomy. One concerns closure: figuring out which operations and relations preserve ethicality. This is our topic, and we will turn to it shortly. Another is to distinguish ethical from non-ethical facts or propositions by distinguishing ethical from non-ethical constituents of facts and propositions. We don’t need to take much of a stand on this issue, but a few words will make things clearer as we proceed.

There are various different kinds of ethical constituent. We won’t be concerned much with differences between normative (e.g. ‘ought’, ‘impermissible’) and evaluative notions (e.g. ‘good’, and ‘bad’), or between thin (‘right’, ‘required’) and thick notions (‘dumpy’, ‘graceful’). It is not easy to draw the line between thin and thick notions or between thick notions and non-evaluative notions. These difficulties blur the distinction between the ethical and non-ethical in one sense. For today, this is somebody else’s problem.

One simple method for distinguishing ethical and non-ethical facts is unavailable. Not all facts with ethical constituents are ethical facts. Foot-binding was considered obligatory for court dancers during the Song Dynasty. This fact has an ethical constituent but it is not an ethical fact. It is a fact about what was considered to be ethical at the time.
However, clearly some facts with ethical constituents are ethical facts. The least controversial often consist in some act-token or state of affairs instantiating some ethical property or falling under some ethical operator, such as <Ariel Castro’s treatment of the girls was impermissible> or <you should donate 10% of your pre-tax income to charity>. Since we are not directly concerned with this part of ethical taxonomy, we’ll help ourselves to the ethicality of such uncontroversially ethical facts and propositions.

A final preliminary. Logical and metaphysical autonomy theses most likely concern different categories of relata. Logical connectives relate sentences or statements, grounding relates objects or facts or perhaps propositions. It will be convenient to pick something such that it is plausible that that thing can stand in both logical and metaphysical relations. To save words, I’ll default to talk about ethical and non-ethical propositions.

8.3 LOGICAL AUTONOMY THESES AND SOME COUNTEREXAMPLES

Almost all of the literature directly concerned with ethical autonomy focuses on the attempt to defend or reject different logical autonomy theses.4

Start with simple logical autonomy, the thesis that no non-ethical propositions entail an ethical proposition. Take any non-ethical proposition—that Susan Rumplebottom won the 2009 Gloucestershire Cheese Rolling competition—and call it R. Let M be the ethical proposition that Castro’s treatment of the girls was impermissible. (R & ~R) entails M, our ethical proposition. So simple logical autonomy is false.

A more interesting counterexample to simple logical autonomy is due to Arthur Prior (1960). He argued as follows:

1. R entails (R ∨ M)
2. ((R ∨ M) & ~R) entails M
3. Either (R ∨ M) is ethical or not.
4. If so, then 1 constitutes a counterexample to simple logical autonomy.
5. If not, then 2 constitutes a counterexample to simple logical autonomy.
6. Therefore simple logical autonomy is false.

Premises 1 and 2 are incontestable. If (R ∨ M) is ethical, premise 4 follows directly from 1. If (R ∨ M) is not ethical, then (so long as we assume that a

4 I stick with classical logic throughout. For an interesting discussion of relevance logic in connection with some of our topics, see Samuel (n.d.).
conjunction with non-ethical conjuncts is non-ethical) premise 5 also follows. Hence it seems we should reject simple logical autonomy.\(^5\)

In response to this argument, various theorists opt to modify the autonomy thesis. Charles Pigden (1989, 2010) has argued that we get a problem with explosion and disjunctive syllogism because in such cases the ethical expressions in the conclusions are contingently vacuous.\(^6\) (This is easiest to see with premise 1 in the Prior argument as presented above.) Pigden then defines an alternative principle, namely non-vacuous logical autonomy: no non-ethical propositions entail a non-vacuous ethical proposition.\(^7\) M in premise 1 of Prior’s argument occurs vacuously, since R entails the disjunction of R and any proposition you like. Assuming R is true, the disjunction will be true. Similarly with explosion. \((\text{R} \& \sim \text{R})\) entails any proposition whatsoever. Hence neither constitutes a counterexample to non-vacuous logical autonomy.

There are two problems with Pigden’s alternative principle. Firstly, as Pigden freely admits, it does not capture anything interesting about ethics. Non-vacuous logical autonomy ‘is commonplace and not confined to ethics’ (1989: 7). Propositions about hedgehogs are also autonomous in this same sense. No non-hedgehog-involving proposition non-vacuously entails any hedgehog involving proposition. Pigden says that ‘logical autonomy is,

\(^5\) In subsequent work Lloyd Humberstone (1982, 1995) and David Lewis (1988) have shown that if one accepts certain logical taxonomic principles, one ends up committed to the view that all propositions are in every category. The argument is as follows. Let \(C\) be a putatively isolated subclass of propositions. \(S\) is any proposition. Now suppose:

- **equivalence:** if \(S\) and \(S^*\) are classically equivalent, and \(S\) is in \(C\), then \(S^*\) is in \(C\).
- **converse-implication:** if \(S\) entails \(S^*\) and \(S^*\) is in \(C\) then \(S\) is in \(C\).
- **disjunction:** if \(S_1, \ldots, S_n\) are in \(C\), then the disjunction of \(S_1, \ldots, S_n\) with any other proposition is also in \(C\).
- **negation:** if \(S\) is in \(C\), then \(\neg S\) is in \(C\).

Now the proof. Suppose that \(S\) is in \(C\), and that \(S^*\) is some arbitrary proposition. By **negation**, \(\neg S\) is in \(C\). Hence by **converse-implication**, \((S \& S^*)\) and \((\neg S \& S^*)\) are in \(C\). Then by **disjunction** \((S \& S^*)\) or \((\neg S \& S^*)\) is in \(C\). This is equivalent to \(S^*\), so \(S^*\) is in \(C\). Since \(S^*\) is arbitrary, it follows that all propositions are in \(C\).

If one were to accept all these taxonomic principles for the ethical domain, then if any proposition were ethical, all propositions would be ethical. It would follow that both ethical autonomy and ethical nihilism were trivially false. So any full ethical taxonomy will need to reject at least one of the Humberstone/Lewis principles.

\(^6\) Here is Pigden’s account of contingent vacuity (for sentences): ‘An expression \(E\) is contingently vacuous in the conclusion of a valid inference if the inference would remain valid if \(E\) were replaced by any expression whatsoever of the same grammatical type’ (1989: 134).

\(^7\) It is unclear whether Pigden holds the view that ethicality is a relation a conclusion bears to premises—and hence that no non-ethical propositions logically entail an ethical proposition, or whether he thinks that some non-ethical propositions logically entail an ethical proposition, but none do so non-vacuously. The former is problematic, for reasons that will emerge later.
in itself, rather trivial’ (1989: 21). But this gives us some reason to doubt that we have finally captured the important thesis that so many philosophers have taken Hume to have brought to our attention.

More pertinently, non-vacuous logical autonomy faces several potential counterexamples. There are valid arguments from seemingly non-ethical premises to seemingly ethical conclusions.

Consider first the following argument, due to Toomas Karmo (1988: 253):

1. Everything that Alfie says is true.
2. Alfie says that it is impermissible to starve the Irish.
3. Therefore it is impermissible to starve the Irish.

The conclusion seems ethical. The second premise is non-ethical. We’ll shortly discuss whether the first premise is ethical. But for now it is worth noting that here we clearly have a valid argument with arguably non-ethical premises and a non-vacuous ethical conclusion.8

Now consider the following argument from Stephen Maitzen (2010: 293):

1. At least one ethical proposition is true.
2. If at least one ethical proposition is true, then torturing innocent children is impermissible.
3. Therefore torturing innocent children is impermissible.

Again clearly the conclusion is ethical and the argument is valid. Maitzen argues that the two premises are both non-ethical. The point for now is that the move from simple logical autonomy to non-vacuous logical autonomy doesn’t help with this putative counterexample. Moreover the reason why not is fairly clear. The premises intuitively and non-vacuously guarantee the conclusion. There is nothing logically problematic with these arguments. What is ‘wrong’ is that their premises don’t explain their conclusions. These are promising counterexamples to logical autonomy theses, but they don’t get a foothold on metaphysical autonomy theses—or so I’ll argue.

8.4 METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY THESES

I’ll now suggest that there is a version of Hume’s principle which is plausible, and which not only avoids all these counterexamples, but also helps to explain which counterexamples work and why.

We start with some remarks about the character of relations within the ethical domain. Here’s Ronald Dworkin (2012: 31):

… someone asking herself whether it would be wrong to leave an unhappy marriage might reflect on more general issues about what people owe other people they have asked to trust them, for instance, or about the moral responsibilities children bring.

One natural interpretation here is that facts about it being wrong to leave an unhappy marriage would obtain in virtue of facts about what one owes to someone who trusts one, and in virtue of facts about the moral responsibilities children bring—together with various non-ethical facts about the circumstances of the marriage, the ages of the children, and so forth.

G. A. Cohen suggests a similar explanatory structure in ‘Facts and Principles’:

Suppose someone affirms the principle that we should keep our promises (call that P) because only when promises are kept can promisees successfully pursue their projects (call that F). Then she will surely agree that she believes that F supports P because she affirms … that we should help people to pursue their projects.

The idea, construed as a metaphysical thesis, is that particular ethical facts obtain in virtue of more general ethical facts together with pertinent non-ethical facts. The ‘in virtue of’ or equivalently the ‘grounding’ relation is an explanatory relation between metaphysical entities. We can use this characterization of the relations that distinguish the structure of relations between facts within the ethical domain, to characterize the sense in which facts within the ethical domain are autonomous. This gives us the following metaphysical characterization of the ethical autonomy:

**Metaphysical autonomy**: No ethical fact is fully grounded just by non-ethical facts.

**Metaphysical autonomy** is a plausible characterization of the important sense in which ethics is autonomous, if it is. Consider a few contentious is—ought transitions:

1. The invasion of Iraq contravened international law, therefore the invasion of Iraq was wrong.10
2. Individuals are motivated by personal gain, therefore the principles of justice allow inequalities so long as these improve the positions of the worst off.11

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9 Cohen (2008: 234). We’ll ignore the epistemological gloss that Cohen and Dworkin often give these claims. For more on epistemic or methodological autonomy and its relationship to metaphysical and logical autonomy, see my (forthcoming).

10 This is the motivating example in Campbell Brown’s (2014).

11 This is a mock-up of the case central to Cohen’s objection to Rawlsian constructivism.
3. Jones uttered the words ‘I hereby promise to pay you, Smith, five dollars’, therefore Jones has an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.\textsuperscript{12}

4. Ronnie wants to dance, therefore Ronnie has a reason to dance.\textsuperscript{13}

**Metaphysical Autonomy** diagnoses the error that all four disputants would intuitively be making, if ethics were indeed autonomous. Their premises may partially ground their conclusions, but they do not fully ground their conclusions. Moreover **metaphysical autonomy** offers some guidance: we should look around to see whether any plausible principles underlie these arguments, for instance some principle of the form ‘It is wrong to violate international law,’ or, ‘One ought to keep one’s promises.’

For completeness I also propose a companion principle, namely:

**Converse Metaphysical Autonomy**: Any fact partly grounded by an ethical fact is an ethical fact.

The first principle rules out the metaphysical possibility of any view according to which some ethical fact is fully grounded just by non-ethical facts. This ensures that if ethical facts are grounded at all, they are grounded by at least one ethical fact. Consequently there will be ethical facts of some kind (presumably ethical principles) that ground other facts but that are not themselves grounded. (It is common to say of facts with this profile that they are fundamental.\textsuperscript{14}) The second principle is more contentious. To borrow a metaphor from Hartry Field, the idea is that ethical fluid flows unceasingly upwards, from ethical grounds to whatever they ground or partly ground.

But before I clarify some of the details in these theses, and present a more general defence, let me discuss the notion of ‘ground’ in some more detail.

### 8.4.1 On the Grammar, Logic, and Nature of Ground

We can formulate grounding claims by means of an operator like ‘because’ that takes sentences to make a sentence. For instance we would say ‘The triangle is equilateral because its three sides are the same length.’ As Kit Fine has argued (2001, 2012) this operational approach has the advantage of ontological neutrality. It does not commit to an ontology of facts, propositions, or relations. On an alternative predicational approach, ‘grounds’ is a relational predicate that takes designators for facts or propositions to make sentences. This is my preferred approach. For instance we would say that

\textsuperscript{12} This is a truncated version of Searle’s argument (1964).

\textsuperscript{13} Schroeder (2007). For critical discussion, see Scanlon (2014).

\textsuperscript{14} For instance see Bennett (2011).
‘The fact that the triangle is equilateral obtains in virtue of the fact that the triangle’s three sides are all the same length.’ Or equivalently we can say ‘The fact that the triangle’s three sides are all the same length grounds the fact that the triangle is equilateral.’ The scrupulous are invited to translate what follows into operational language.\(^{15}\)

The next question concerns the category of the relata of the reasons relation. According to the intuitive notion, grounding is a metaphysical relation between worldly items rather between linguistic or representational or theoretic entities. We assume that the relevant worldly items are facts or true propositions rather than objects. We will remain agnostic about the relations between objects instantiating or exemplifying properties, states of affairs, facts, and true propositions.\(^{16}\) I use the word ‘fact’ in such a way as to allow that principles are facts, for instance universal facts of the form ‘necessarily (for some specified kind of necessity) for any \(x\), if \(x\) is \(F\) then \(x\) is \(G\)’.\(^{17}\)

We will assume that grounding is factive. Non-obtaining facts cannot ground anything. False propositions cannot ground anything. However, it will be useful to have a way of talking about what would have grounded what if things had been different. For instance we can compare two epistemically possible situations, in one of which utilitarianism is true and in the other of which some simple deontological theory is true, and ask whether the fact that doing something would maximize net pleasure in the world would together with the relevant ethical principles ground the fact that you ought to do that thing. For at least some actions, these different principles will yield different results. Or more simply we can change different features of the consequences of the action itself. We will allow ourselves to talk freely about such counterfactual grounding. However, we do not allow inter-world grounding: a would-be fact in one possible world cannot ground a would-be fact in another possible world.\(^{18}\) Statements about what

\(^{15}\) For instance, non-cognitivists articulating a conception of autonomy may prefer to avoid the predicationalist approach. I’m borrowing this terminology from Fabrice Correia (2010: 253). Compare the choice between operator and predicational approaches in tense logic.

\(^{16}\) If you prefer to have propositions as the relata of the grounding relation you will need to ensure that propositions are rather finely grained, for instance to allow that the glass contains water obtains in virtue of its containing \(H_2O\). The propositionalist about grounding may also have to heed the remarks about factivity to come in the main text; see Fine (2012: 16).

\(^{17}\) Cohen assumes that principles are not facts. This is a terminological difference. He also thinks that grounding is a relation between representational items of some kind. We part ways on this. For an excellent characterization of principles as facts attributing properties to kinds, see Knut Skarsaune (this volume).

\(^{18}\) Compare Fine (2012: 16).
grounds what are implicitly relativized to some world or set of worlds in which the grounds and the grounded facts obtain.

I will assume that grounding is strongly irreflexive, strongly asymmetric, and transitive. Neither A nor any list of facts including A grounds A. If A on its own or with any other facts grounds B, then neither B nor any list of facts including B grounds A.\textsuperscript{19} Transitivity is a little more controversial, given the fact that the grounding relation is an explanatory relation. But transitivity still seems plausible, and it will usefully allow us to appeal beyond immediate to mediate grounds,\textsuperscript{20} so we will assume it in what follows.

The most essential feature of the grounding relation is the fact that it is an explanatory relation. When A grounds B, the fact that A obtains explains the fact that B obtains. Since explanation in the relevant sense is non-monotonic, grounding is non-monotonic.

\subsection*{8.4.2 On the Modal Status of Ground}

The explanatory connection between grounds and what they ground is the most distinctive feature of the grounding relation. It is common to add a modal claim, that grounds necessitate what they ground.\textsuperscript{21} But there remain different views about what kind of necessitation is involved.

Let’s start with a common way of speaking, which I think we should reject. Some philosophers talk about natural facts ‘grounding’ ethical facts, when they really mean that the relevant natural facts together with relevant ethical principles ground the ethical facts. For instance in one context T. M. Scanlon says that ‘the fact that a resort is pleasant is a reason to visit it … and the fact that a discovery casts light on the causes of cancer is a reason to applaud it and to support further research of that kind. These natural properties provide a complete explanation of the reasons we have for reacting in these ways’ (1998: 97; my italics). However when Scanlon is attending to our question directly he insists that these natural facts only ground ethical facts together with further ‘pure’ ethical facts. In Scanlon’s view these pure ethical facts are not grounded by any non-ethical facts (see his 2014: 41 and following). Scanlon’s considered view is that given that certain pure ethical

\textsuperscript{19} For challenges, see Ichikawa-Jenkins (2011) and Fine (2012).
\textsuperscript{20} For the mediate/immediate grounds distinction, see Fine (2012: 19).
\textsuperscript{21} This principle about ground is extremely widespread (e.g. see Rosen (2010) and Fine (2012)). For a helpful discussion of different kinds of conditionality to which grounding facts (facts of the form A grounds B) might be subject, see Bader (forthcoming), especially the distinction between enablers and grounding principles. See also Chudnoff (2013).
facts obtain, certain natural facts will 'explain' (in a more colloquial sense) certain 'mixed' ethical facts.

This brings us to the word 'fully' in the METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY principle. Clearly ethical facts are often partly grounded by non-ethical facts. The fact that it is impertinent to slurp my noodles obtains partly in virtue of the fact that I am having dinner with the Queen. But this non-ethical fact only partly grounds the ethical fact. We additionally need some facts about conventions (perhaps themselves also non-ethical facts) and some fact about the impertinence of ignoring these conventions (an ethical principle or more general ethical fact).\textsuperscript{22}

There is a further question about the modal status of the 'pure' ethical facts, or what are more naturally thought of as ethical principles. The necessity involved must be more than a mere contingent generalization. We can follow Kit Fine in distinguishing normative necessity and metaphysical necessity.\textsuperscript{23} It is a theoretically open question whether, when some ethical grounding facts obtain—for instance <the fact that \(x\)-ing would maximize pleasure and that you ought to do whatever would maximize pleasure grounds the fact that you ought to \(x\)>— such grounding facts obtain with normative or metaphysical necessity. This modal distinction provides us with more precise versions of our autonomy theses. We have two main options: an autonomy thesis based on normative necessity and an autonomy thesis based on metaphysical necessity, perhaps even understood in terms of essences. I will leave both options on the table for current purposes.

Let me close this discussion of modal issues with a remark about supervenience, by which I mean the (metaphysical, rather than conceptual) supervenience of mixed ethical facts on non-ethical facts.\textsuperscript{24} Suppose we

\textsuperscript{22} There is an interesting question about what distinguishes principles that are part of the grounds, from principles that provide grounds for the fact that the grounds ground what they ground. For instance what distinguishes the following two views. (i) The fact that \(x\)-ing causes pain grounds the fact that it is wrong to \(x\), and that fact, the grounding fact, is grounded by the fact that it is always wrong to cause pain. (ii) The fact that \(x\)-ing causes pain together with the fact that it is always wrong to cause pain together ground the fact that \(x\)-ing is wrong. (See also Bader (forthcoming).) This difference won't matter much to us, since we assume that grounding is transitive, and our autonomy theses are not restricted to immediate grounds. Notice that naturalistic analyses seem to play the role of principles in some explanations. This suggests that either the principles expressing the naturalistic analyses are themselves ethical principles (cf. Scanlon’s (2014: ch. 2) claim that desire-based theories of reasons can be plausibly construed as substantive ethical principles) or else METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY (though a good characterization of autonomy) is false.

\textsuperscript{23} Fine (2002). See also Rosen (n.d.).

\textsuperscript{24} Here I have in mind the so-called explanatory challenge posed by supervenience. Cf. Blackburn (1971, 1985).
maintain quite generally that grounds necessitate what they ground. And suppose we argue specifically that certain ethical principles obtain, either with normative or metaphysical necessity. These principles are precisely in the business of grounding mixed ethical facts when combined with pertinent non-ethical facts. These theses entail the supervenience of the mixed facts on the non-ethical facts, with either normative or metaphysical necessity. Consequently, on this (sensible) view, there is no puzzle about how to explain supervenience.  

8.4.3 Extending to Other Autonomy Theses

Firstly we are in a position to state various more specific ethical autonomy theses. For instance perhaps you are a naturalist about value, thinking that facts about value are fully grounded in facts about well-being, which are in turn fully grounded in social scientific facts. But you are not a naturalist about deontic facts, since you don't think that deontic facts are fully grounded in facts about value. Then you would think that value facts are not autonomous but deontic facts are. Or what about the divine command theorist, who thinks that deontic facts are fully grounded in facts about God's will? Divine command theory is consistent with the thesis that no deontic facts are fully grounded just by natural facts, but clearly incompatible with the thesis that no deontic facts are fully grounded just by non-ethical facts.

Now notice that structurally analogous principles would also apply to other autonomy theses (in particular to some of those discussed by Gillian Russell 2010). It is plausible that no universal fact is fully grounded just by some particular facts. It is plausible that no necessity fact is fully grounded just by some contingent facts. It is plausible that future fact is fully grounded just by facts about the past.

As further support for metaphysical characterizations of autonomy theses, over logical characterizations, note that all of these autonomy theses would be trivially true if we were working with something like non-vacuous logical autonomy. We would be prevented, by suboptimal characterizations of the relevant theses, from engaging with interesting philosophical questions.

25 Hence the business of explaining supervenience is only problematic for hardcore particularism. It does seem consistent with hardcore particularism that ethical properties could be just scattershot around unsystematically; which is odd. I say more about particularism in section 8.5.4.
8.4.4 On the Counterexamples to Logical Autonomy

Metaphysical autonomy also provides us with a simple response to all the counterexamples to logical autonomy, since in those counterexamples the premises do not purport to provide grounds for their conclusions.

This is clearly the case with the argument from explosion. \((R \& \neg R)\) entails but does not ground \(M\).

Now think about Prior’s argument. Start with the first premise. \(R\) entails \((R \lor M)\). In this case, the premise entails and also grounds the conclusion. By hypothesis \(R\) is non-ethical and \(M\) is ethical. Is the conclusion ethical? We are not quite yet in a position to answer this, since there are two cases to consider: one in which \(M\) obtains and one in which \(M\) does not obtain. \((R \lor M)\) has two full grounds in the case in which both \(R\) and \(M\) obtain. This is quite common. The fact that there is at least one dog in the office is fully grounded in the fact that Tink the Bloodhound is in the office and also fully grounded in the fact that Maggie the Mastiff is in the office (they are friends).

Suppose that \(M\) does not obtain. Then \((R \lor M)\) is fully grounded just by \(R\), hence fully grounded just by a non-ethical fact, and hence, by metaphysical autonomy, \((R \lor M)\) is not ethical.

Now suppose that \(M\) does obtain along with \(R\). In this case \((R \lor M)\) has two full grounds, one ethical and one non-ethical. Is \((R \lor M)\) ethical or non-ethical? Notice that metaphysical autonomy is silent about this. Metaphysical autonomy is concerned with cases in which ethical facts have grounds. It says nothing about the converse case, in which an ethical fact is among the grounds of some other fact. In order to provide a more complete characterization of autonomy, we turn to the additional principle concerned with ethical facts as grounds:

**Converse metaphysical autonomy:** Any fact partly grounded by an ethical fact is an ethical fact.

By ‘partly’ here we have the usual idea in mind, that ethical facts are grounded by non-ethical facts together with ethical principles or more general ethical facts. This principle uses an expansive conception of ‘ethical’, which ranges over pure ethical facts, such as fundamental principles, ‘mixed’ ethical facts, such as facts explained by principles together with the natural facts which would figure in their antecedents, and also ‘partly’ ethical facts, such as conjunctions or disjunctions of pure or mixed ethical facts with non-ethical facts.

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26 One shortcoming with this terminology is that it suggests that a fact cannot be both ethical and non-ethical. This is misleading. A fact may be ethical and non-ethical, e.g., in precisely such a case as the one to which this note is appended. It would be clearer that this is unproblematic if we had used ‘descriptive’ rather than ‘non-ethical’ throughout. I avoid this to remain neutral about the nature of the non-ethical.
With this principle in place, we can say that if M obtains, then M grounds \((R \lor M)\) and hence that \((R \lor M)\) has an ethical fact among its grounds, and so we have no counterexample to our metaphysical autonomy theses. In this case our taxonomy vindicates this counterexample to simple logical autonomy, for it is still the case that R is non-ethical, and that R entails \((R \lor M)\). On the other hand, if M does not obtain, then \((R \lor M)\) is not ethical, and hence again we have no counterexample.

What about the second premise, that \(((R \lor M) \& \neg R)\) entails M? In any world in which \(((R \lor M) \& \neg R)\) obtains, \((R \lor M)\) is not grounded by R and so it is grounded by M. Since grounding is irreflexive, it is not also the case that \(((R \lor M) \& \neg R)\) grounds M. Hence the premise entails but does not ground the conclusion. Hence this is not a candidate counterexample to our metaphysical autonomy theses.

So disjunctive syllogism does not furnish counterexamples to metaphysical autonomy or converse metaphysical autonomy. We can add that in the Maitzen and Karmo examples it is not at all plausible that the premises provide grounds for their conclusions. The fact that at least one ethical proposition is true is not among the grounds for any particular ethical proposition—on the contrary, the grounding relation would go the other way. The fact that Alfie believes that some moral proposition is true doesn’t ground the truth of that proposition, unless some kind of divine command theory is true, and Alfie is divinely in command. Hence those counterexamples to logical autonomy theses are not counterexamples to these metaphysical autonomy theses. We’ll consider the ethicality of the various premises as we proceed.

It is worth mentioning that we are now entitled to reject one of the more innocuous of the Humberstone/Lewis principles, namely equivalence: if S and S* are classically equivalent, and S is [ethical], then S* is [ethical]. Compare R with \((R \lor (R \& M))\). They are logically equivalent. R is non-ethical. But in the world in which M obtains, M is one of the grounds of \((R \& M)\) and of \((R \lor (R \& M))\), which by converse metaphysical autonomy is ethical. This is an interesting upshot of the view.27

8.5 CHALLENGES TO OUR METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY THESES

We can now discuss some challenges to our metaphysical autonomy theses. These are challenges to our theses qua autonomy theses, not challenges that assume that our theses provide good characterizations of autonomy and challenge their truth. As against metaphysical autonomy we have

27 Thanks to Kit Fine for the example.
some facts that seem to be ethical but which have non-ethical and no ethical grounds. As against converse metaphysical autonomy we have some facts that have ethical grounds but which do not seem to be ethical. We’ll take them in turn.

8.5.1 Challenges to Metaphysical Autonomy

First we’ll consider challenges to metaphysical autonomy. These are cases in which we have some fact in some world which seems to be ethical, but that has no ethical grounds, and even though some ethical principles obtain in that world. We can consider two classes of such cases. First, we have facts which seem ethical but which obtain trivially in virtue of non-ethical facts, and not in virtue of the true ethical theory. Second, we have propositions which seem ethical but which are in fact false, and hence lack grounds altogether. We’ll take them in turn.

We can start with Stephen Maitzen’s second premise, that if at least one ethical proposition is true, then torturing innocent children is impermissible. Maitzen notes that ethical nihilists can consistently accept this premise if they regard it as trivially true for having a false antecedent. This is consistent with our metaphysical autonomy theses. We can continue to insist that this proposition is ethical in a world in which the antecedent obtains. This reply to this example is the same as our reply to Prior’s argument—which you might expect given the fact that the material conditional can be expressed with disjunction and negation.

A similar approach enables us to deal with a challenge from Peter Vranas. Suppose there are no police officers in the post office. The fact that there are no police officers in the post office grounds the fact that every police officer in the post office is morally required to accept bribes. Moreover the fact that there are no police officers in the post office plausibly fully grounds the latter fact in some world. (There will be some worlds in which this fact has an ethical ground, but this isn’t one of them.) The fact that there are no police officers in the post office is not an ethical fact. So if the fact that every police officer in the post office is morally required to accept bribes is an ethical fact then we have a counterexample to metaphysical autonomy. But it is clear how we should reply. We know from above that not all facts with ethical constituents are ethical facts. We cannot simply assume that

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28 He says the same about the following proposition: ‘if catastrophic global warming is a genuine threat, then we ought to do something about it’ (2010: 323).
29 There is a difficult question about how to classify the necessitated form of Maitzen’s conditional. I omit discussion for lack of space.
30 In discussion. See also Vranas (2010).
the latter fact—the fact about police officers being morally required to take bribes—is ethical. Moreover in cases like this, in which some fact is fully grounded trivially by some non-ethical fact, it is intuitively plausible that the fact is not ethical. (Later on we’ll say the same about facts of the form ‘it is not impermissible to x’ in worlds in which ethical nihilism is true.)

Here’s the second kind of case. Suppose that in the actual world the proposition that early stage abortion is impermissible is false. Grounding is factive. So since this proposition is false it doesn’t have grounds, and neither does it ground anything. So it doesn’t seem as though it will be classified as ethical according to our autonomy theses. But the proposition that early stage abortion is impermissible is plausibly ethical, both in general, and in our world.

The objector has changed the subject. Our metaphysical autonomy theses do not purport to provide a full ethical taxonomy, and in particular they do not purport to provide a taxonomy of ethical propositions.

Still, there are some things we can say about ethical propositions. Firstly some propositions have ethical constituents. These are ‘ethical’ in one sense—precisely in the sense that they have at least one ethical constituent, but this is not the sense of ‘ethical’ that we are working with. Secondly some propositions are ethical in every world in which they are true. Call such propositions essentially ethical. There is plausibly no world in which early stage abortion is impermissible, but in which this fact does not have ethical facts among its grounds. A weaker version of this thesis is that some propositions, had they been true, would (or the fact to which they correspond would) have obtained in virtue of some ethical fact. We can call such propositions ethical hereabouts. This is weaker because it is consistent with there being some distant possible worlds in which the proposition is true and not ethical. The important thing to notice is that a proposition might be essentially ethical or ethical hereabouts and yet not ethical in this world, since it is not true in this world.

31 Thanks to an audience at the Northern Institute of Philosophy for a discussion of this objection.
32 It is also worth noting that on some accounts of facts, negative facts can have ethical grounds. I discuss this further in section 6.1.
33 I beg for your patience here as we move between fact-talk and proposition-talk. It is simplest to assume that facts are true propositions. I’m optimistic that the general points to be made here can be translated into your preferred metaphysics of objects, properties, facts, propositions, and truth.
8.5.2 Challenges to converse metaphysical autonomy

Remember Alfie from earlier on. Everything he says is true. Suppose Alfie restricts his conversation to non-ethical matters. Perhaps he tells you about the distances between various planets. Then it is plausible that the fact that everything Alfie says is true is non-ethical. But suppose that later on Alfie pronounces upon many ethical matters, for instance that early abortion in cases of serious foetal abnormality is impermissible, that one ought to be sincere, that one should give 10% of one’s gross income to charity. Then, plausibly, the fact that everything Alfie says is true is ethical. For in the relevant case, the grounds for this proposition would include various ethical facts. This is all consistent with converse metaphysical autonomy.

The same seems to be true of the fact that there is at least one ethical fact. That latter fact obtains in virtue of any ethical fact. Hence by converse metaphysical autonomy it is ethical. This also seems plausible.

However, consider a related challenge. Any ethical fact will also ground the fact that there is at least one thing instantiating a property. Hence by converse metaphysical autonomy this latter fact would be ethical. But the fact that there is at least one thing instantiating a property doesn’t seem to be an ethical fact. We can generalize this worry. Nearly every fact is a ground for the fact that there is at least one thing instantiating a property. We could entertain a generalization of converse metaphysical autonomy that applies to any category, namely: for any category of fact K, no non-K fact is partly grounded by any K fact. It would follow from this generalized principle that the proposition that at least one proposition is true would belong to every category one proposition about which was true.

Perhaps you think this really is an objection to the generalized principle. But it strikes me as utterly harmless. The more specific the grounded proposition, the fewer the categories to which it will belong and the more plausible the generalized version of the principle will appear—and this generalized principle is much stronger than we need. Also bear in mind that we are employing a more expansive conception of ‘ethicality’ that includes ‘partly ethical’ and ‘mixed ethical’ facts.

I owe to Jack Woods a more worrisome objection. Imagine you are playing a game, in which the winner is the one who ends up with the most points. The way to score points is to do anything ethically impermissible between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. on the day of the game. Then it may be that kicking a cat between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. would win you a point in virtue of the fact that cat-kicking is ethically impermissible and the facts about the game just mentioned. And yet the fact that kicking a cat between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. would win you a point doesn’t seem like an ethical fact.
The premises here are ethical, and they certainly ground the conclusion. Here I have to dig in, and insist that this fact about the game is an ethical fact. We let the theory decide cases like these. This is similar to the fact that what Alfie said is true, when he says it is wrong to kick dogs. But here’s another example that might make this reply sound more plausible. Compare two theories about the nature of law, one of which maintains that ethical facts are always among the grounds of legal facts, the other which denies that ethical facts are always among the grounds of legal facts. Plausibly legal facts of the first kind are also ethical facts, and plausibly legal facts of the second kind are not.

8.5.3 Taxonomic Essentialism

The metaphysical autonomy principles involve a commitment to the following thesis: that the taxonomic category of a fact varies with its grounds (or rather, the category of an instance of a fact-type varies with its grounds). We have seen various examples of this:

- ‘All police officers in the post office are morally required to take bribes’ is ethical when it is grounded by some ethical theory and non-ethical when it is grounded fully and uniquely by the contingent fact that there are no police officers in the post office.
- ‘Everything that Alfie said is true’ is ethical if Alfie made some ethical claims and non-ethical if he did not.
- ‘Either it is permissible to abort in cases of serious foetal abnormality or Susan Rumplebottom won the 2009 Gloucestershire Cheese Rolling competition’ is ethical when it is grounded by the first disjunct, even if also grounded by the second disjunct, and non-ethical when grounded only by the second disjunct or not grounded by either disjunct.

We can break this thesis down into two claims. The first is the thesis that the taxonomic category of a proposition is contingent. The second is the specific thesis about what the taxonomic category of a fact is contingent upon, namely the grounding relations that it stands in.

Here is Stephen Maitzen characterizing the first claim (2010: 302):

the contingency thesis asserts that a given proposition’s classification as moral or non-moral can vary across possible worlds; the essentiality thesis, on the other hand, asserts that a proposition’s status as moral or non-moral is essential to it, invariant across the possible worlds in which it exists.

I owe this reply to Gideon Rosen.
Maitzen presents two arguments for the second option, which he calls taxonomic essentialism. 35 Here’s Maitzen’s first argument (2010: 302):

What we mean is up to us, but whether what we mean is true is up to the world. But if what we mean is up to us—if it’s determined by our communicative intentions, collective or otherwise—then surely the taxonomic status of what we mean is up to us too, since what kind of thing we mean depends on what it is, in particular, that we mean. But the contingency thesis makes the kind of thing we mean—not the wide content of our utterance (as semantic externalists already insist) but its very taxonomic category—depend on something besides our communicative intentions, namely, the way the world is.

Both premises are contestable. As Maitzen indicates, semantic externalists will reasonably reject the first premise. It is plausible that what we mean by ‘water’ is partly determined by what water is. Similarly it is plausible that what we mean by ‘right’ or ‘good’ is determined by what right is and what good is, for instance, perhaps to be good is to have properties that make positive responses appropriate; perhaps to be right is to be value maximizing. But more importantly, it wouldn’t obviously follow from the fact that what we mean is up to us that the taxonomic category of propositions is up to us. For as we have already seen, it is plausible that the proposition that what Alfie said is true is ethical when he said something ethical and non-ethical otherwise. But the meaning of this proposition doesn’t change. Similarly we can theoretically distinguish cases in which legal facts are or are not grounded in ethical facts, or mental facts are or are not grounded in physical facts, or mathematical facts are or are not grounded in logical facts. Unless we subscribe to some grand metaphysical idealism, these matters will not be decided by our communicative intentions. But it strikes me as plausible that legal facts are ethical facts if and only if they are partly grounded in ethical facts, and mutatis mutandis for psychological facts and mathematical facts.

Here’s Maitzen’s second argument (2010: 303):

The contingency thesis makes us implausibly ignorant of the correct classification of disjunctions such as (GR) Goldbach’s Conjecture is true, or Rothenberg’s setting his son on fire was morally wrong, since we don’t, and perhaps can’t, know the truth-value of one of the disjuncts.

Strictly speaking we are concerned with the grounds for the disjunction rather than its truth-value, though the two are related. It is true that according to our metaphysical autonomy theses, we won’t know the taxonomic category of something until we know its grounds. However, this

35 We can formulate a fact-analogue of taxonomic essentialism appealing to fact-types instead of propositions.
doesn’t seem so bad. We won’t know the taxonomic category of mental or mathematical facts until we do some philosophy. Plausibly we won’t know whether ethical facts are natural facts until we do some philosophy. So also plausibly we won’t know whether such a disjunction is mathematical or ethical until we do some philosophy. Perhaps we will never know. But I see no reason to accept that a fact or proposition has a taxonomic category only if we are in position to know that it has that category, unless one accepts some such thesis in the philosophy of language as the one mentioned above. Hence this objection relies upon the previous one, which anyone disposed to reject TAXONOMIC ESSENTIALISM would also be disposed to reject.

Let’s now turn to the more specific thesis that taxonomic category is contingent upon facts about grounding. Maitzen rightly notes that it would beg the question in the context of a dispute about SIMPLE LOGICAL AUTONOMY simply to insist that the ethical status of a conclusion is contingent upon the ethical status of its premises in the following way: a conclusion is ethical only if it is not logically implied by non-ethical premises. But it does not analogously beg the question to insist that the ethicality of a fact is contingent upon its grounds or what it grounds. For this further thesis has been motivated independently. Moreover the best putative counterexamples to the metaphysical autonomy theses (such as Mark Schroeder’s 2007) accept that these theses provide a decent characterization of autonomy. This vindicates rather than undermines the taxonomic status of these theses.

8.5.4 Particularism

A second worry about the idea that taxonomic category of a fact depends on its grounds has to do with ethical particularism. Recall that grounds necessitate what they ground. This has modal implications: if facts A ground fact B in one situation, then facts A will ground fact B in any other situation. Imagine a hardcore particularist who denies that ethical facts ever have grounds of this sort. Does this position put pressure on the grounding strategy?

No. We still distinguish the fact that x-ing would realize S, for some maximally specific x and S, from the fact that <the fact that x-ing would realize S> is a reason for you to x. The former fact doesn’t ground the latter fact. If hardcore particularism is true then there are no general principles relating these two kinds of facts, such as a fact of the form, whenever x-ing would realize S that fact is a reason for you to x. Instead the facts about reasons themselves (the latter facts) have no grounds. This is clearly compatible with METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY.
If hardcore particularism is true, our autonomy theses might also be true, but as it were they would have less work to do. They would still be doing some work, since there would still be various facts grounded by these facts about reasons. For instance it would still be the case that there is at least one ethical fact. Converse ethical autonomy would entail that this fact is ethical.

8.6 IMPLICATIONS OF METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY

8.6.1 Negation and Nihilism

Suppose you ask a reflective atheist whether the proposition that there is no God is a theological proposition. She might not be exactly sure what you are asking, but she might be willing to assent. Suppose you asked another reflective atheist whether there are any true theological propositions. He might not be sure exactly what you are asking, but he might be willing to deny that there are. Now imagine asking either one of these reflective atheists both of these questions at once. Clearly he or she would not assent to both of them together. Why? The two questions are determinate only if one implicitly presupposes certain taxonomic theses. But if we assume that the proposition that there is no God is a theological proposition, then no reflective atheist—indeed, no half-witted atheist—would insist that all theological propositions are false.

Similarly, there are some characterizations of nihilism that together with certain taxonomic theses entail that nihilism is trivially false. Consider the combination of:

negation: The negation of any ethical proposition is ethical.

And:

prima facie nihilism: there are no true ethical propositions.

If the negation of any ethical proposition is ethical, then for any uncontentiously ethical proposition M, the proposition that it is not true that M is ethical, by negation. But we assume either M is true or M is not true. So either way at least one ethical proposition is true. Hence prima facie nihilism is false. In fact we get the same result with weaker negation: for at least one ethical proposition, the proposition that that proposition is not true is an ethical proposition. Weaker negation also entails the negation of prima facie nihilism.

This argument is not likely to convince anyone of its conclusion. What it rather shows is that we need to reassess either the taxonomic thesis (negation) or the characterization of nihilism (prima facie nihilism).
We now have a reason to reject negation, or rather the fact-hood version, according to which the negation of any ethical fact is ethical. For if there are negative facts, and negative facts have grounds, clearly these grounds will be quite different from the grounds for the non-negated fact. Here’s a speculative suggestion. Suppose that some version of utilitarianism is true, i.e., some principle of the following form obtains: for all actions \(x\), one ought to \(x\) if and only if \(x\)-ing would bring about more net happiness than any available alternative to \(x\). Furthermore, suppose that this version of utilitarianism includes the following normative bridge principle: \(x\) is impermissible only if it is not the case that one ought to \(x\). Furthermore, suppose that in some case of serious foetal abnormality, an abortion will bring about more net happiness than any alternative. In this situation, given this ethical theory, it is not impermissible to perform this abortion. Importantly, the fact that it is not the case that it is impermissible to perform this abortion plausibly obtains in virtue of the facts about the ethical theory and the non-ethical facts about the bringing about of net pleasure. Hence, by converse metaphysical autonomy, this negative fact is ethical. In such a case, the fact that it is not the case that the abortion is impermissible is an ethical fact.\(^{36}\)

Nihilism logically entails the fact that it is not the case that abortion is impermissible. It is a separate question whether nihilism grounds this fact, and if not, what does. Nihilism is logically inconsistent with any ethical ground for this fact. But importantly the nihilist denies impermissibility by saying that this abortion has no ethical properties—it is neither impermissible, permissible, nor required. The nihilist is motivated by the idea that the world does not contain any ethical properties at all. To quote Richard Joyce: “The nihilist denies that there is anything morally permissible about [performing the abortion] with just as much gusto as she denies that there is anything morally wrong with doing so” (2013).\(^{37}\) So assuming that nihilism is true, in this case the fact that it is not the case that the abortion is impermissible is not an ethical fact. It is another example of a non-ethical fact with an ethical constituent.

\(^{36}\) J. S. Mill’s harm principle provides a nice case of a positive ethical ascription of permissibility.

\(^{37}\) This is from a recent review of David Enoch’s defence of ‘robust realism’. Here’s Gilbert Harman making this point: ‘According to the moral nihilist, “nothing is ever right or wrong, just or unjust, good or bad”’ (Harman 1977: 11). Here’s Michael Smith: ‘… [according to a nihilist] the world contains no moral features at all: not the feature of being obligatory, not the feature of being forbidden, and not the feature of being permissible either. This is all to say that external sceptics deny that any moral qualities exist, including the quality of permissiveness’ (2010: 512).
8.6.2 Characterizing Revisionary Metaethical Positions

In order to avoid the foregoing argument from negation, nihilists sometimes restrict their thesis to atomic nihilism: no atomic ethical propositions are true. However, there are problems with this option. Sometimes, even though atomic nihilism is plausibly true, there are some true propositions that are plausibly ethical, and hence nihilism is plausibly false. This suggests that atomic nihilism is not the best characterization of nihilism.

Imagine the following situation. The following proposition is true: it is impermissible to kick dogs. No other principles of this kind are true. However, there are no dogs. Alas, the last dog died two months ago. Were there any dogs, it would be impermissible to kick them. But there aren’t, so it isn’t. There is nothing such that it is impermissible to kick it. Hence in this world, at this time, there are no instantiated ethical properties, and hence there are no true atomic ethical propositions. However, we feel inclined to say that nihilism is not true in this world.

We can make the same move again. Suppose it isn’t impermissible to kick dogs in some world. Perhaps the dogs in this world are infertile unless they receive a stout kick. There are still no other high-level principles that obtain in this world. Still, a lower-level principle obtains, which says that it is impermissible to kick dogs unless it is in their best interest. This lower-level principle also seems ethical.

A naïve nihilist would want to deny that these dog-kicking principles are true, or that consequentialism is true, or that it is impermissible to break one’s promises, or that whatever causes pleasure without hard work is evil, with just as much gusto as she would deny that it is impermissible to break some particular promise or kick some particular dog.

We need further taxonomic principles to tell us which propositions are ethical. Here we have an argument to the effect that we should accept taxonomic principles that tell us that principles such as these—principles that would have been the grounds for atomic ethical propositions, if the non-ethical facts had been different—are ethical. These considerations suggest that such principles are ethical even if they do not in fact ground anything in some world. So let robust nihilism be the thesis that there are no atomic ethical facts and no ethical principles either. I submit that this is an interesting and plausible conception of nihilism.

It is plausible that any true principle that plays or would play this role of grounding atomic ethical facts is ethical. This provides support for Simon Blackburn’s well-known contention that subjectivistic principles relating

38 Charles Pigden is the main exemplar of this view, see his (1989) and contributions to (2010).
ethical claims to psychological facts are ethical as opposed to being non-ethical metaethical claims. Moreover this provides support for T. M. Scanlon’s interpretation of the ‘Humean theory of reasons’ as a substantive ethical theory (2014). Any principles that purport to provide grounds for ethical claims, whether or not they should be classified as ‘metaethical’ principles, are also ethical principles.

8.6.3 The Classic Argument for Nihilism

Now let’s turn to the classic argument for nihilism. It has two premises. Premise one maintains that there are ethical facts only if there are facts of type K, and premise two insists that there are no facts of type K. Perhaps K is ‘causally inert facts’, or ‘queer facts’, or ‘categorical facts’. This won’t really matter for our purposes. The conclusion is that there are no ethical facts. We can present the first premise in the form of a principle:

THE NIHILIST’S PRINCIPLE: for any x, x is impermissible only if there are facts of type K.

For simplicity we will assume that if there are no impermissibility facts then there are no other plausibly ethical facts (e.g. facts about right and wrong, virtue, moral requirements, etc.).

Ronald Dworkin’s provocative suggestion is that this principle is ethical. If that were true, then the argument for nihilism would undermine itself, since the conjunction of the premises and the conclusion would be inconsistent. Dworkin’s argument for the claim that THE NIHILIST’S PRINCIPLE is ethical is a burden-pushing, no-relevant-difference argument. The idea is that there is no relevant difference between the kicking-dog principle and THE NIHILIST’S PRINCIPLE. Since the kicking-dog principle is ethical, THE NIHILIST’S PRINCIPLE is ethical—or so Dworkin argues.

However there are various relevant differences.

Firstly, the dog-kicking principle states sufficient conditions. But THE NIHILIST PRINCIPLE is a necessity principle: it states necessary conditions for anything’s being impermissible. It is analogous to principles such as ought-entails-can.

39 Cf. Blackburn (1993: 4) and elsewhere—e.g., the review of Dworkin (Blackburn 1996). The ‘protected contexts’ strategy for carving out theoretical room to distinguish Blackburn’s view from a straightforward realist position accepts—or at least is consistent with—the thesis that dependency claims like these are ethical claims.

40 For versions of this argument, see Joyce (2001) and Smith (2010). Cf. also Mackie (1977: 48). His ‘argument from queerness’ has a metaphysical premise and an epistemological premise. We can characterize his epistemological premise as a separate sub-argument for the second premise in the classic argument presented in the main text.
Necessity principles cannot ground ethical facts with just non-ethical facts. They need some companion sufficiency principle. But now look at our Metaphysical Autonomy thesis. It maintains that whenever some ethical fact is grounded by some other facts, those facts include at least one ethical fact. Metaphysical Autonomy does not and cannot discriminate within these grounds. In the case of sufficiency principles we can work out that a principle is ethical by elimination. For example the principle that it is impermissible to kick dogs, together with the fact that this creature is a dog, grounds the fact that it is impermissible to kick this creature. Here the sufficiency principle is the only plausible ethical fact among the grounds. But since necessity principles never ground ethical facts without some sufficiency principle, our taxonomic principles underdetermine whether they are ethical. At best, further taxonomic principles would need to be articulated and defended, which are capable of drawing plausible distinctions.

However, there is a more serious problem with Dworkin’s proposal. Neither nihilism nor the nihilist’s principle was ever supposed to ground any positive or negative facts about impermissibility. The nihilist does not mean to suggest that the absence of queerness makes it the case that all atomic ethical propositions are false. For the nihilist may be quite open to there being other problems with ethics. She is not committed to the idea that ethical principles obtain by some kind of default. The nihilist’s principle simply logically entails that, for any \( x \), it is not the case that \( x \) is impermissible. This completely side-steps our autonomy theses.

8.6.4 Arguing Mooreanly Against Revisionists

Nihilism is not incoherent. But it is surely ethically objectionable. As Simon Blackburn has emphasized, highly revisionary theses which make facts about right and wrong dependent on contingent psychological states are also ethically objectionable.

There is one particularly interesting upshot of insisting upon characterizing autonomy metaphysically (and in particular with rejecting negation). All sorts of ethical and non-ethical propositions will be logically inconsistent with each other. In particular, any old nihilistic thesis is going to be logically inconsistent with very many extremely plausible ethical claims.

The nihilist’s principle is also what you might call a sledgehammer principle: it rules all of them out at once. This does seem like a relevant difference between the nihilistic premise and other non-nihilistic views like consequentialism and, importantly, subjectivism. However, it is important to note that the principle that unless God exists, nothing is impermissible, also has this feature. It is also a sledgehammer principle. But that divine command principle is plausibly ethical.
This picture fits well with the way in which Dworkin, Cohen, Scanlon, and Blackburn want to react to revisionary metaethical principles, that is, metaethical principles that entail substantive ethical claims which fail to cohere with our best ethical reflection. Consider the following characteristic passage from Ronald Dworkin (1996: 117):

Let us accept, for the sake of argument, that we are forced to choose between the following two propositions. (1) Human beings have a special though sometimes fallible faculty of judgment that enables us to decide which moral claims to accept or reject, a capacity whose malfunctioning may sometimes result only in moral misjudgement with no spillover impairment of other cognitive activity. (2) There is no moral objection to exterminating an ethnic group or enslaving a race or torturing a young child, just for fun, in front of its captive mother. Which should we abandon?

On these terms, clearly we should accept 1 and reject 2. Now consider a choice between, on the one hand, rejecting some extremely plausible ethical claim, and on the other hand rejecting the conjunction of the nihilist’s principle together with the metaphysical thesis that the relevant facts of kind K do not obtain. Clearly we should hang on to the extremely plausible ethical claim. This is another way to interpret what Dworkin was getting at in his abortion argument. When one is arguing for the negation of an ethical claim one might not thereby be arguing for an ethical claim. But one may nevertheless be arguing for a claim that is extremely implausible. Indeed, no matter what you think about the ethics of abortion in cases of serious foetal abnormality, you will probably agree that the interlocutor who maintains that abortion is not impermissible in such circumstances, because nihilism is true, has by far the least plausible position. This is because by committing herself to nihilism, she thereby commits herself to denying so many other extremely plausible claims.42

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