Moral Realism Without Moral Metaphysics[[1]](#footnote-1)

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I'll present an explanation of we could accurately represent the world in moral thought that is metaphysically deflationist but still robust, non-quietistic. The view is deflationist in the way that many versions of expressivism, constitutivism, and quietism are: roughly, it has no truck with inquiries into the naturalness, constitution, or reducibility of moral properties or facts, and it purports to dissolve, rather than to solve, the so-called "placement problem".[[2]](#footnote-2) At the same time, it offers an general explanation from outside the ethical domain of how moral judgments could get the world right. This distinguishes it from some versions of expressivism and constitutivism, which conceive of moral thought and talk as "aimed" at solving practical problems rather than as (also) representing the world; and it distinguishes it from quietism, which abjures any attempt to vindicate the ethical domain from, as one prominent quietist puts it, "sideways on".[[3]](#footnote-3).

For what it's worth, I'm offering this view despite being more of a quietist myself. I think ethics can be perfectly objective in the senses we ought to care about even if there is no domain-external explanation of how ethical thoughts could accurately represent the world. Additionally, I think that the existence of such an explanation is not sufficient for ethical objectivity in these senses. (Later in this paper, I'll offer a glimpse into why it's not sufficient.) But of course many do think that the existence of such an explanation is a necessary or a sufficient condition for ethical objectivity. And many of this group seem to believe that such an explanation must advert to moral properties, and so would embroil the explainer in disputes about moral metaphysics. I'm not such a fan of moral metaphysics, and I'd like people to stop taking it so seriously. So consider this paper a pitch to the non-quietists out there: here is how you can vindicate ethics as against certain popular worries without getting into all this business about moral properties -- their place in the world as described by science, how we can "reach out to them" in thought and talk, and so on.

To get a feel for the view I wish to defend, it will help to consider the stances that various meta-ethical theories take towards what I shall call the "Representation Claim":

There are metaphysically possible conditions under which someone thinking

a thought like [A is morally wrong] accurately represents the world in so doing.

The side-characters, for our purposes:

The **error theorist** will reject the Representation Claim, for she believes that such thoughts represent the world *in*accurately*.*

The **non-cognitivist** will reject this claim, for she believes that such thoughts do not play a representational role in the first place.

***Some* constitutivists** will side with the non-cognitivist on the representation question, although they'll say that (a) we're rationally committed to such thoughts by constitutive features of, e.g., our agency or our participation in discourse, and (b) that's enough to vindicate any sort of moral objectivity worth caring about.[[4]](#footnote-4) (Other constitutivists are realists of some stripe or other.)[[5]](#footnote-5)

The key players, for our purposes:

The **traditional realist** will accept the Representation Claim, but see it as explanatorily posterior to facts about moral properties. She will offer us a substantial metaphysics of such properties, and then, if she is so inclined, attempt to ground facts about accurate moral thought by appealing to their distribution throughout the world. Traditional realists are either **naturalists** or **non-naturalists.** The naturalist realist will say that moral properties are identical to or reducible to natural properties; the non-naturalist realist will say that they are not.

The most common traditional-realist strategy for explaining accurate representation pairs (1) an account of the properties that wholly or partly constitute the truth-makers for moral propositions, with (2) a theory of *mental content* that explains when beliefs have such propositions as their content.

But there are other strategies open to the traditional realist. One way differs from the aforementioned only insofar as it takes moral *beliefs* rather than moral *propositions* to be the primary truth-bearers. Such an account would appeal to moral properties as truth-makers for moral beliefs, but would then "read off" facts about true propositions from facts about true beliefs.

Or a traditional realist may deny moral properties a truth-making role only to place them in *another* explanatory role. For imagine a view that says: "The concept [wrong] expresses the property of wrongness just in case it's causally regulated in the appropriate way by that property.[[6]](#footnote-6) That concept is correctly applied to a thing (an action, say) just in case that thing possesses the property that concept expresses. And finally, if the concept [wrong] is correctly applied to a thing, then it is true that that thing is wrong." This is still a form of traditional realism, since it appeals to properties in vindicating the Representation Claim. Only it does not appeal to them fundamentally as truth-makers (of whatever truth-bearers), but rather in a causal-regulatory role, as implicated in a theory of mental representation.

The **quietist** will accept the Representation Claim, but then decline to offer a general explanation from outside the moral domain of how it could be true. She may offer domain- specific, internal explanations -- for example, those that proceed by "representational ascent" ("X is wrong, so one accurately represents the world in thinking X is wrong"), or those that advert to the moral sensitivity of the representer. The quietist may also engage in so-called "philosophical therapy" with the aim of undercutting our sense that a domain-external or domain-general explanation is needed.

It is important to see that a view can be quietistic with regard to the Representation Claim even if it provides robust explanations of related claims. I have in mind a certain class of theories that privilege the notion of *inference* over that of representation. Such theories give robust explanations of the conditions under which an inference or other intra-mental/intra-linguistic *move* is licensed, but no further robust account of when the thoughts involved in any such move represent the world accurately in the first place. In other words, the theories I'm imagining offer robust accounts of accuracy-*preservation*, but not of plain old *accuracy*.

Some views trafficking under labels like "inferentialism" or "(short arm) conceptual role semantics"[[7]](#footnote-7) or "meaning as use" are arguably of this ilk. They ground facts about meaning and licensed inference in facts about — and here the options ramify greatly — the use of concepts, the use of words that express concepts, the propriety of accepting or sanctioning such use, and so on. Such a view will tell us why "Vixen" means "female fox", why it's rational to base the claim that X is colored on the claim that X is red, and even why it's rational to base the thought that there's a bear on some non-conceptual apprehension of a bear. But such a view will not give us a domain-external or domain-general account of how thoughts come to accurately represent the world — of what makes the aforementioned perceptual state veridical, or of why the thought that X is red is true.

Of the views in question, some offer *no explanation whatsoever* of representational accuracy. Their proponents typically either give reasons why no explanation is needed, or else offer something that they mistakenly *think* is such an explanation.[[8]](#footnote-8) Others offer a explanation of representational accuracy, but one that is quietistic rather than robust. Such an explanation does not take the form of a general account of accurate representation; rather, it straightforwardly draws on claims internal to the domain of the representing concepts. For example, a brazen quietist might say that the thought that X is right accurately represents the world just in case X maximizes utility. A stealthier quietist might offer an explanation in terms of what some writers have called a "feature-placing language"[[9]](#footnote-9) (e.g. "It's wronging here!"), or maybe reveal the meanings of words by ostension[[10]](#footnote-10) (e.g. by pointing to a bunch of utility-maximizing acts). But in using the feature-placing language or pointing her finger, she is expressing her moral judgments just as the brazen quietist was. For it is possible to express one's moral views by non-predicative speech acts, and indeed by non-speech acts. What she's not doing is providing an account of moral thoughts' accuracy that is external to the moral domain — an account that considers us as engaged in the practice of representing the world in moral thought, and says, as a very general matter, when we are doing that well, and when we are doing that poorly.

The view I'll offer is explanatorily robust like traditional realism, but with a reversed order of explanation. The traditional realist starts with an account of the nature of moral properties, and, after several steps, arrives at a defense of the Representation Claim (if she is even inclined to talk about representation at all). I start with an account of accurate mental representation, and after several steps, get to conclusions about propositions and properties. He starts with a robust theory of the way the world is, and tells you that a well-functioning mind is a mind that gets the world right; I start with a robust theory of a well-functioning mind, and tell you that the way the world is is just the way such a mind represents it as being.

I call my favored view ***neutral* realism** because it is neutral between naturalism and non-naturalism. I am willing to say that there are moral properties, but I don't think we need to say anything about what they are like in order to defend the truth of moral propositions or judgments. Rather, facts about properties can simply be "read off" of facts about true propositions, which can in turn be read off of facts about accurate mental representation.

This anti-metaphysical stance puts me in league with the quietist. Both of us have principled grounds for being unperturbed by placement problems, and for refusing to specify the metaphysical link between moral properties and natural properties that accounts for the supervenience of the former upon the latter.[[11]](#footnote-11) The difference, though, is that the quietist is a deflationist all the way down. She doesn't have a robust theory of what moral properties are like, but neither does she have a robust theory of the conditions under which a thinker accurately represents the world. By contrast, I try to *earn* the right to deflationism about properties by offering inflationary accounts of representation.

NEUTRAL REALISM AND REPRESENTATION

In this section, I'll offer two accounts of the truth of the Representation Claim that do not advert to moral properties, but that are nonetheless explanatorily robust -- that is, non-quietistic. While the two accounts differ in some important respects, they are united in their rejection of an idea that seems to me to be at the core of traditional realism. The idea is that **moral judgments are conceptual-representational *because* they are ascriptive — because, in thinking that X is F, one is ascribing the property of F-ness to X.** It then stands to reason that such judgments represent the world accurately just in virtue of objects possessing the ascribed properties.

This is how the traditionalist realist (and indeed, the error theorist) tend to distinguish their views from those of the non-cognitivist: The former pair understand the tokening of a moral judgment as the ascription of a moral property, and that's precisely why we can "go on" using moral language only if such a property exists. The latter does not think of moral judgment this way, and that's why she feels we are entitled to "go on" with moral talk regardless of whether there are explanatorily potent moral properties. (By contrast, we find the arch-quietist saying things like, "To my ears, we have locutions that are explicitly representational as soon as we have “that” clauses"[[12]](#footnote-12).)

The idea that ascription is at the root of conceptual representation is deeply entrenched. That is why a traditional, property-invoking approach seems so unavoidable for those who wish to be realists but demand more explanation than quietism can offer. To show that there are other options, it should be clear what we need to do: Provide accounts of what makes moral judgment conceptual-representational that don't appeal to its being ascriptive. This, I claim, will allow us to show how it can be *accurately* representational without appealing to moral properties. I think that such accounts are possible, and indeed, possible through the use of quite well-known philosophical resources. We need only redirect those resources.

*From Representation Generally to Conceptual Representation*

This first account has two parts. In part one, I present an account of representation *generally* -- that is, neither specifically conceptual nor specifically non-conceptual representation. This account is non-metaphysical in that it makes no mention of properties or their ascription. But of course, moral judgments *are* specifically conceptual representations, and it may be thought that it's this conceptual aspect that demands the invocation of properties or their ascription. So in part two, I suggest some ways of distinguishing specifically conceptual representations from the rest that do not appeal to properties or their ascription. What we'll end up with is a toy explanation of how it's possible for moral judgments to correctly represent the world that in no way depends upon the existence of moral properties.

The general theory of representation I want to start with is the classical Pragmatist one, which understands a representation as a general-purpose tool for navigating the world, and accurate representations as those upon which *successful* actions may be based. There may be other theories that will do the work required in this section; but of course not all of them will, and at any rate, this is an easy-to-explain theory that is close to my heart. It is familiar from James and Dewey, of course, but many contemporary philosophers may be most familiar with it in the guise of the "Success Semantics" program developed by Jamie Whyte and others.[[13]](#footnote-13) It is the going view of representation in many corners of cognitive science and artificial intelligence. It is also possible to read Heidegger and his followers as accepting something like a pragmatist view of representation.[[14]](#footnote-14) Whether it is true, it is surely not recherché or out of left field.

Now, it is true that many who call themselves "pragmatists" are hostile to what they term "representationalism" — Dewey in some voices; Richard Rorty; and certain strands of "anti-representationalist" artificial intelligence[[15]](#footnote-15) and cognitive science.[[16]](#footnote-16) It is not so much that they think there is no such thing as representation, but rather that representation is not a particularly useful notion. The only question of ultimate interest, from the pragmatist view, is how we can best cope with the world.

This privileging of action over everything else is common to all pragmatists. But the more *moderate* pragmatists would claim that, among the many things that can enable successful action -- happiness, Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger", a rich uncle, *in*accurate representations -- it is fruitful to carve out a set of them to count as accurate representations. One suggestion is that the mark of representation is the *systematicity* with which it, when accurate, enables our successful navigation of the world. As Andy Clark puts it:

"Representation talk gets its foothold, I suggest, when we confront inner states that...exhibit a systematic kind of coordination with a whole space of environmental contingencies. In such cases it is illuminating to think of the inner states as a kind of code that can express the various possibilities and which is effectively "read" by other inner systems that need to be informed about the features being tracked. Adaptive hookup [between a thing and its environment] thus phases gradually into genuine internal representation as the hookup's complexity and systematicity increase."[[17]](#footnote-17)

It seems to me that three kinds of systematicity serve to distinguish accurate representations from other enablers of successful action**.** One is systematicity in the *type of relation* that holds between the enabler and the actions enabled. As Clark's "read" talk suggests, it is characteristic of accurate representations as such that the successful actions they enable are *based* on them.[[18]](#footnote-18) By contrast, it is not clear that anything of the sort unifies the many different routes by which, say, a rich uncle or a generalized sense of happiness, as such, results in successful navigation of the world. Another is systematicity understood as *generality with which the enabler can be used* in enabling successful action. A map of Britannia is useful in guiding the actions of anyone who wants to get anywhere in Britannia, while something non-representational like a set of instructions that tells you “Go straight through Moonglow, make a left at the Skull of Mondain, etc." is useful only to those who want to go where the instructions lead. We might, then, think of items that systematically guide successful action in this sense as thereby having a mind-to-world "direction of fit". And finally, there is systematicity in the *conditions under which the actions* based upon a thing *are successful*. While inaccurate representations can enable successful actions on occasion, only accurate representations can enable it in a nomologically robust way. Newton's physical theory will get me home from work, for example, but it might foil my attempts to land a satellite on Mercury.[[19]](#footnote-19)[[20]](#footnote-20)

What's important is that this theory of accurate representation does not hearken back to the idea of property-ascription. Rather, the pragmatist account builds accurate representationout of two types of "raw materials" — successful action, and the various sorts of systematicity with which such action is produced.

Now, the anti-pragmatist may argue that an account of representation in terms of successful action is no way to avoid assigning an explanatory role to the property of F-ness, since F-ness is required for thoughts with the content *X is F* to systematically yield successful actions. Of course, like the traditional realist, I accept the biconditional *X has the property of F-ness if and only if the thought that X is F systematically yields successful action*. The interesting questions are about explanation. It does not seem to me that we must appeal to F-ness to explain why an action based on the thought that X is F came off successfully. For example, we needn’t appeal to numbers to explain the success of actions based on number-thoughts, or the production possibilities frontier to explain the success of those based on PPF-thoughts. We can instead advert to enumerated objects, or to the behavior of producers, respectively. More importantly, though, I do not think that we must causally explain actions’ success in order to accomplish our task of giving a domain-general account of the truth of the Representation Claim. If the pragmatist can (1) show that ethical thoughts are connected with successful action in the right way, and then (2) give an appropriately “external” account of what successful action *consists in* (rather than that what *causes* it to be successful), she has vindicated ethics from sideways-on. She can then go back, if she wishes, and if it is appropriate, and posit a causal link between the properties that serve as the "shadows" of her accurate thoughts, and the successes or failures of her actions.

This account will naturally prompt the question of what makes an action “successful”. Two answers come to mind — one that characterizes successful action in terms of aim- or value-fulfillment, and another that characterizes it in terms of alleviating "felt tensions" with the world.

Success semanticists like Whyte as well as the classical pragmatists count as successful those actions that bring about whatever it is that we aim at, value, or desire.[[21]](#footnote-21) This account of successful action gives us at least a *prima facie* appealing account of representation, on which an accurate representation is one that, when combined with a non-terminal aim, value, or desire, tends in a lawlike way to allow us to fulfill our terminal aims, values, or desires, considered in abstraction from what, exactly, those desires are.[[22]](#footnote-22) Knowing the location of a table in a room, for example, will help you to avoid it, if that gives you what you want; to place food upon it, if *that* gives you want you want; to find an object that you typically leave upon the table, if *that* gives you what you want; and so on. Similarly, it seems, knowing that Zelda acts like a jerk at parties can help me to avoid her, if that’s what I want; it can prompt me to bring her with me as I crash my nemesis’s snobby affair, if that’s what I want; it can prompt me to stick around a little longer at a party we’re both attending, just to catch the fireworks her behavior will surely cause, if that’s what I want; it can prompt me to engage with her out of sympathy, on the thought that her jerky behavior will push everyone else away, if that’s what I want.[[23]](#footnote-23)

One might reply that I needn't guide my behavior *vis a vis* Zelda with "jerk"-thoughts; I could get the same results by employing thoughts about her psychology, non-evaluatively described. But this does not seem to me to undercut my argument that "jerk"-thoughts can accurately represent the world. For one might say something similar about "table"-thoughts -- e.g. that I could navigate the world just as effectively by thinking about flat, supported surfaces, or "particles arranged tablewise", or some such. You may argue that the concept [table] carves up the world in a way that is particularly useful, such that it can't be replaced without loss by these other concepts. Perhaps. But: (1) we can say something similar about "jerk"; isn't that a way -- a pragmatism-inflected way -- of spinning the well-known "shapelessness" hypothesis?[[24]](#footnote-24); and (2) we could also give a pragmatist story of how thoughts involving highly "gerrymandered", awkward concepts represent the world; that we are unlikely to navigate the world using a concept does not mean that we *cannot*.

One might also reply that I'm ignoring the context of inquiry we have in mind when we think of a fundamental ethical dispute -- not one where an ethical thought is being made to carry the information that might be carried instead by other thoughts, but one where we ask whether, *given* some subvening non-normative P, Q, R, etc., whether some supervening normative S? For suppose I already believe that an action maximizes expected well-being. It does not seem as though I gain any ability to bring the world into line with my desires *generally* in virtue of believing that the action is *thereby* right. This doesn't seem to add to my mental map of the world, even if it changes the direction I take on the basis of this map.

But nor does it seem that forming a belief regarding supervening *non-normative* features would add to my ability to navigate the world, once I have a sufficient stock of (accessible) beliefs regarding subvening features. If I believe that there's a store at Bathurst and College that sells coffee and pastries and little else, and has tables at which people sit to work on their laptops, the further thought that there's a *coffee shop* at Bathurst and College doesn't seem to help me or hurt me. Now, it is true that we regard the "utiltiarianism" and "coffee shop" questions differently. Even if we are skeptics about ethics, we regard the former and its ilk as at least serious, substantive questions; they do not tend to elicit the response "Who cares?" or "You could go either way". By contrast, the latter gets labelled a "silly" or "terminological dispute"; we *are* inclined to ask, rhetorically, "who cares?", and insofar as it prompts inquiry, that inquiry is short-lived and readily forgotten. This, for what it's worth, is what I think ultimately explains why people worry that there's a "problem" with ethics: much ethical inquiry that we regard as serious happens in contexts in which the answers do not seem to afford much, if any, additional ability to navigate the world, while the non-ethical inquiry that we regard as serious happens solely in contexts in which the answers do.[[25]](#footnote-25) But this does not mean that ethical thoughts cannot accurately represent the world, nor that this cannot be grounded in their relationship with successful action.

But let us consider a second way of thinking about "success". Some of the literature on phenomenology and automatic action characterizes such action as prompted by "disequilibrium" or "felt tension" with the world. As Michael Brownstein and Alex Madva put it:

"[F]elt tensions are marked by either positive or negative valence , which acts like a physiological reinforcer of anticipated behaviors. The agent literally feels a (positive) attraction or (negative) repulsion to various available courses of action. [An agent] moves in such a way as to retrieve equilibrium between herself and her environment...[T]he valent tension makes an active contribution to phenomenal experience, together with an array of visceral ‘low-level’ bodily changes in an agent’s autonomic nervous system, including changes in cardiopulmonary parameters, skin conductance, muscle tone, and endocrine and immune system activities."[[26]](#footnote-26)

We might co-opt this notion for our purposes, and say that successful action — whether automatic or purposeful — is just action that moves us, over the long term, away from "felt tensions" and towards equilibrium. While such an account would have to be developed carefully to avoid some obvious problems, it strikes me as an promising way of vindicating categorical moral norms for two reasons — first, that tension and equilibrium can be specifically interpersonal or social (think of adjusting one's body to accommodate a seatmate, or the subtle give-and-take that constitutes ordinary conversation), and second, that it is more plausible that the conditions of tension and equilibrium are shared by all fully responsible agents, or at least all those who adopt what Strawson calls the "participant" rather than the "objective" attitude,[[27]](#footnote-27) or some such.

Now, these were accounts on which representation is characterized *sans* reference to property-ascription, and accurate representation is characterized *sans* reference to the instantiation of properties being ascribed. Let's now consider how we can, again without bringing in property-ascription, carve out the class of conceptual representations from amongst representations generally.

A pragmatist-friendly way of doing this is to say that S's mental representation is conceptual **with respect to the concept of an X** just in case S is able to systematically base upon that representation actions that implicitly discriminate between objects in a way reflective of the *sense* of the concept [X]. By contrast, her mental representation is non-conceptual — again, **with respect to the concept of an X** — when whatever actions she can base upon it do not implicitly discriminate in this way. (These actions may, as always, be *mentalistic* actions.) So while both my baby daughter and I are able to act on a cellular phone based upon our representations of it, only my actions implicitly discriminate between it and, e.g., non-phones, phones that are not cellular, and so on in a way that reflects the sense of the concept [cell phone]. I talk into the phone, continue talking on it as I walk out the door, stop using it as I get on elevators, stop using it so much when I read a "cell phones cause cancer" article, etc. She mostly just puts it in her mouth. And so only I am creditable with representing it *as* a cell phone.

There are other, perhaps more well-known ways of marking off specifically conceptual representation. Gareth Evans argues that only conceptual thought obeys what he calls the "generality constraint": To think that **a** is F and to think that **b** is G, one must also be able to think that **a** is G and **b** is F. This captures the idea that conceptualization is subsumption of indefinitely many instances under a generalcategory (e.g. "F" or "G") that is thinkable independently of those instances.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Jerry Fodor uses similar structural criteria to mark a distinction between what he calls "discursive" and "iconic" representations. Representations of the first sort, like sentences, "can decompose into syntactically and semantically *heterogeneous* constituents" and thus can have logical forms. But representations of the latter sort, like pictures and visual experiences, "decompose into syntactically and semantically *homogenous* parts" and therefore lack logical forms.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Finally, Fred Dretske conceives of conceptual representations as "digital" in form, and non-conceptual representations as "analogue". As Dretske characterizes this distinction, a representation in digital form represents **a**'s being F while carrying no information other than that **a** is F. By contrast, a representation in analogue form represents **a**'s being F, but necessarily carries information other than that **a** is F.[[30]](#footnote-30) (A picture is worth a thousand words, but a word is worth a word.)

Of course, there are many other views about how to draw this distinction. But this should be enough to give you a feel for the kind of thing that'd need to be done. Again, the important thing is that that none of the strategies we surveyed casts properties in a causal or constitutive role, or uses ascription to distinguish conceptual representations non-conceptual representations or from non-representational states. Traditional realism thinks of conceptual representation as ascription, and accurate representation as ascription of properties that are actually there. But the pragmatist version of neutral realism thinks of conceptual representation in terms of nothing other than action, systematicity, and at least one criterion of conceptuality like those just surveyed.

*From Nonconceptual Representation to Conceptual Representation*

Like the first strategy, this one unfolds in two stages, both of which are free from appeals to properties or their ascription. Stage one is an account of when a thinker accurately *non-conceptually* represents the world. Step two is the derivation from such an account of a theory of accurate *conceptual* representation. This strategy, then, purports to "construct" conceptual representation from non-conceptual representation, without at any point appealing to the characterization of representation as property-ascription or as otherwise assigning a philosophical-explanatory role to properties.

Let us say that a person represents the world non-conceptually in undergoing some event (having a perceptual state or an emotion, "comporting" oneself with respect to the world, etc.) just in case the best explanation of the accuracy conditions of that representation does not advert to her employing a concept.[[31]](#footnote-31) In the previous section, we offered a few different non-trivial characterizations of conceptual as opposed to non-conceptual thought.

We are familiar with the idea that some non-conceptual representations are accurate, or veridical, while some are not. I want to remain neutral on what, exactly, makes a non-conceptual representation accurate, although it is highly plausible that it has something to do with its phenomenal character — "what it's like" to undergo the representational episode. To say that phenomenology determines veridicality conditions is to remain neutral on other questions about non-conceptual representation. We may remain neutral on the "phenomenalist vs. representationalist" question.[[32]](#footnote-32) For this is a question of the *content* of non-conceptual states. It is consistent with saying the a state's phenomenology determines its veridicality conditions that the state's content is phenomenological or, very broadly, "subjective", or that the state's content is non-phenomenological or, very broadly, "objective". For a state's phenomenology may ground its content without *constituting* its content.

We may also remain neutral on the question of whether to assign a philosophical-explanatory role to content at all. On Christopher Peacocke's well-known account, an experiential non-conceptual state is veridical when the *scene* that surrounds the thinker is one way of filling out the *scenario* that is the state's content. The state's phenomenal character determines *which scenario* is the state's content.[[33]](#footnote-33) But it might also be possible to give a phenomenological account of the state's accuracy conditions directly, without going through the intermediate steps of specifying the kind of thing its "content" consists in, and then assigning content of that type. This accords with what Angela Mendelovici calls the "monadic" view of mental representation.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The important thing about non-conceptual representations is that they can't be understood as ascriptive, and hence, as committing the representer to any claims about what properties there are. They can't be ascriptive because they don't have a structure consisting of nouns, quantifiers, and most importantly, predicates, upon which ascription depends. Their structure is too homogenous. To return to Fodor on "iconic" representations:

"...iconic representations don't have logical forms….discursive representation being semantically and syntactically heterogenous, their various constituents can contribute in different ways to determining the content of their hosts.…[Iconic representations] can't even express predication, since that requires…distinguishing terms that contribute individuals from terms that contribute sets (or properties, or whatever).”[[35]](#footnote-35)

Relatedly, Fodor argues, iconic representations don't "carry ontological commitments", since a thought's commitments are determined by a quantificational and predicative structure that iconic representations lack.[[36]](#footnote-36) If it helps, consider once again the example of my baby daughter. She may visually non-conceptually represent a cellular phone, but she is not in so doing making a mistake by the lights of, say, mereological nihilists. Nor would she be if she drew a picture of what he sees.

Now, it may seem that we sometimes use ontologically-committing representations to explain when some non-conceptual representation is accurate. But I want to suggest that we're not best understood as stating the conditions under which it is accurate. Rather, it seems to me, we are doing one of two things: either (1) stating the accuracy conditions for a conceptual interpretation that is likely to be formed on the basis of the non-conceptual one; or (2) trafficking in ontologically-committing representations as a way of inducing non-conceptual ones in the minds of our listeners -- ones that will be roughly accurate when the target non-conceptual representations are accurate. In other words, I may be trying to use words to "paint a picture" in your head; I can paint the same picture with different words, and I can paint it without words at all -- e.g. by showing you a painting in response to the question "What would the world have to look like for Bob's visual experience to be veridical?"

Given an account of when non-conceptual representations are veridical, we can construct an theory of when *conceptual* representations are accurate. On the view I'll sketch, conceptual representations are accurate "by courtesy”, in virtue of their potential to preserve non-conceptual representational accuracy. That is, what makes a conceptual representation accurate is its ability to play a role in a process of thought that culminates in accurate non-conceptual representations when it is inaugurated by accurate non-conceptual representations.

This "instrumentalist" view is probably not the most popular view about the relationship between conceptual and non-conceptual representational accuracy. With that said, it is hardly obscure. Here is William James, from *Pragmatism*:

"...Ideas...become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience, to summarize them and get about among them by conceptual short- cuts instead of following the interminable succession of particular phenomena. Any idea which we can ride; so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other party....working securely, simplifying, saving labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true *instrumentally*."[[37]](#footnote-37)

And here is W.V.O. Quine, from that supposed standard-bearer of metaphysics, "On What There Is":

"As an empiricist I continue to think of the conceptual scheme of science as a tool, ultimately, for predicting future experience in the light of past experience. Physical objects are conceptually imported into the situation as convenient intermediaries — not by definition in terms of experience, but simply as irreducible posits..."[[38]](#footnote-38)

An example may help to illustrate this theory. Imagine that two physicists — an Aristotelian and a post-Newtonian — observe at t1 a ball travelling around a banked curve. Each undergoes a visual experience that accurately non-conceptually represents the event. Now, let us suppose, each is asked to visually imagine what will happen when the ball leaves the banked curve at t2. The Aristotelian applies his physical theory and so imagines the ball continuing along a curved path. The post-Newtonian applies his physical theory and so imagines the ball going straight. At t2, the ball of course exits the banked curve and goes straight. The Aristotelian's visual imagination was not veridical, while the post-Newtonian's was.

Now, we're all in agreement that the Aristotelian's theory is incorrect and the post-Newtonian's correct as regards the behavior of macroscopic objects. But what, we may ask as theorists of representation, *makes it the case* that the Aristotelian got things wrong in believing her theory and the post-Newtonian got things basically right in believing his? On the instrumentalist view, it is that the Aristotelian's "ending" visual image was inaccurate and the post-Newtonian's accurate despite the fact that they both started with accurate visual experiences. Nowhere in this account of accurate conceptual representation have we adverted to properties or their ascription. A conceptual representation here is understood as but a cognitive intermediary between non-conceptual representations, which, in turn, cannot be understood as ascribing properties for the Fodorian reasons detailed earlier.

To be sure, this is just a sketch of a theory of conceptual representation. A complete theory should include at least the following *addenda*:

1) To count as true, a belief would have to be capable of preserving non-conceptual representational accuracy across a variety of contexts, including contexts in which the part of the world represented (perhaps by a cloud chamber or other such device, in conjunction with the human eye) is micro- or sub-microscopic. Otherwise, we would end up with the result that Newton's own theory is *true*, which of course it is not.

2) These contexts must include ones in which the "ending" non-conceptual representations are sufficiently information-rich. Because information-poor representations "say" so much less about the world, it is easier for them to be accurate. For example, the conditions under which a color image is accurate are but a subset of the conditions under which a black-and-white image is accurate. The worry is that it will be too easy for beliefs to be true if we allow as their outputs information-poor non-conceptual representations.

3) While it eases exposition to speak of individual beliefs preserving the accuracy of non-conceptual representation, this task is really one performed by *collections* of beliefs. The truth of any given belief, then, would be a function of its contribution to the accuracy-preserving tendency of the collections to which it belongs. With apologies to Quine, we might say that conceptual representational states face the "tribunal" for preserving non-conceptual representational accuracy "as a corporate body".

4) There is also a question about whether the story we've given can help vindicate *ethics*. After all, we don’t ordinarily think of ethical inquiry as geared towards prediction — non-conceptual or otherwise. But I do find it plausible that ethical thoughts often figure in chains of thought as precedents for a certain kind of non-conceptual representation: emotions. Some philosophers and psychologists think emotions are representational; others do not. Of those who hold the former view, many claim that emotions are representational for the simple reason that they are *beliefs about value*s.[[39]](#footnote-39) This would make them conceptual representations, of course. But lately, some emotional representationalists like Christine Tappolet and York Gunther have suggested that **emotions are not beliefs about value, but rather non-conceptual representations.**[[40]](#footnote-40) To apply my story above to ethics, then, we may want to join something like the Tappolet-Gunther account to our instrumentalist view of conceptual representation.

Here is an example of how this might work: I’m at an Eagles vs. Cowboys game. A man just behind me has gotten drunk and is now screaming profanities at the Cowboys players. I apprehend this non-conceptually — i.e. I see him and hear him. This kicks off a chain of thoughts: “This man is screaming profanities”; “This is wrong”; perhaps some others. The thought that it is wrong prompts (or stokes, or sustains — it doesn’t much matter for these purposes) my anger at this lout. We can say that the normative thoughts involved represent the world accurately, by courtesy, just in virtue of helping to “carry” me from one accurate non-conceptual representation (the initial apprehension of the fan’s behavior) to another (my anger).

Now, you might say that the main function of moral thought is to prompt action rather than emotion. But this is beside the present point, for what makes a moral thought accurate is not its *actual* role *vis a vis* accurate emotion, but rather the role it *could* play. For example, the belief that it’s wrong to scream profanities at a family event is accurate just in virtue of the fact that it is *capable* of playing something like the aforementioned role, whether or not it ever does.

DOES THE NEUTRAL REALIST GIVE US WHAT HE PROMISES?

I've offered two explanations of how it is possible for moral thoughts to be accurate. And I've been claiming that, because these accounts do not understand conceptual representation in terms of property-ascription, they needn't advert to properties in accounting for when such representations are accurate. Basically, if thinkers in general aren't *implicitly* positing the property of wrongness when they think that something is wrong, meta-ethicists needn't *explicitly* posit this property to account for that thought's being correct.

But perhaps dispensing with properties is not as easy as I've supposed. For even if I needn't bring in *moral* properties to ground the accuracy of *moral* representations, it is arguable that I must advert to the property of *representational accuracy* to ground the accuracy of my beliefs in the two theories of representation introduced thus far. Similarly, it is arguable that I must appeal to the properties of being veridical, of being a successful action, and so on, to ground the accuracy of my beliefs that the *conditions* of accurate representation specified by these two theories are, in fact, met. This is a familiar charge -- that in switching focus from the "the represented world" to "the representing mind", I'm simply talking about another part of the world, and as such must confront the same metaphysical questions about *that specific* part of the world that the traditional realist confronts about the world very generally.[[41]](#footnote-41)

This is an important challenge, but one that we have ample resources to answer. Just as there are are traditional realist, quietist, expressivist, and neutral realist meta-*ethical* theories, our responses to this charge may take the form of traditional realist, quietist, expressivist, and neutral-realist meta-*representational* theories. Let us consider these in that order:

*(a) Traditional Realism in Meta-Representation Plus Neutral Realism in Meta-Ethics*

As I interpret the objector, this is the position that she sees as the neutral moral realist's only option. It would have us engage in the metaphysics of a few representational and representationally-relevant properties so that we may be freed from engaging in the metaphysics of properties more generally - and in our case, moral properties specifically.

While this combination of views is not inconsistent, its attractiveness is open to question. If we want to avoid assigning an explanatory role to moral properties because we want to avoid assigning such a role to *any* properties, this position will be unappealing. On the other hand, if we want to eschew a metaphysics of moral properties specifically because these are "mysterious" in a way that other properties are not, then we may be fine with appealing to these other properties so that we may avoid talking about the moral ones. Being inclined towards the former position, I think it is worthwhile to consider what other options the neutral moral realist has.

*(b) Quietism in Meta-Representation Plus Neutral Realism in Meta-Ethics*

This approach would have us explain the accuracy of moral thought by appealing to a theory like the two sketched earlier, but then abjure any attempt to explain the accuracy of our thoughts *about those theories* in either (i) the traditional realist manner -- by appealing to properties of accuracy, veridicality, success, etc., or (ii) the neutral realist manner -- by re-invoking a theory like the two sketched earlier. It would pair an external account of the accuracy of moral thought with an internal theory of the accuracy of thoughts about accurate conceptual representation, veridical perception, successful action, and so on.

Now, internal explanations may be quite robust in their own way. Just as we can say a lot about what makes an action right without engaging in metaphysics or the philosophy of mental representation -- i.e. *we can do normative ethics* -- so too can we say a lot about what makes a conceptual representation accurate or an experience veridical without doing so. We can simply say when an experience is veridical, without trying to "naturalize" or "reduce" the property of veridicality, and without giving a theory of when the thought that an experience is veridical is itself an accurate thought.

Whether a neutral realist will be attracted to this demi-quietist position will depend upon her reasons for rejecting quietism about *ethics* in the first place. If one's "anxieties" about ethics do not carry over to mental representation, then one will not feel the need for, say, a theory of mental representation to tell us when a thinker's veridicality-thoughts are accurate. But if one regards representational facts as philosophically problematic just like ethical facts, then one will want to offer a "sideways-on" vindication of the former no less than of the latter.

*(c) Non-Cognitivism in Meta-Representation Plus Neutral Realism in Meta-Ethics*

This peculiar view understands ethical thought as representational, but thoughts about accuracy, veridicality, successful action, and the like as *non-representational* and *eo ipso* as needing no account of how they can be accurate. It is the converse of standard-issue non-cognitivism, which thinks of ethical thought as non-representational, but most other thought as representational. I raise it mainly for taxonomical completeness; it is unclear what motivations there could be for holding it.

*(d) Neutral Realism in Meta-Representation Plus Neutral Realism in Meta-Ethics*

This view would have us apply our theories of representation to themselves. For example, if we explain the accuracy of moral beliefs by appealing to their role in preserving non-conceptual representational accuracy, then we ought to explain in like manner: (i) the accuracy of the belief that a belief's accuracy is, in fact, a matter of its preserving non-conceptual representational accuracy, and (ii) the accuracy of the belief that a belief indeed preserves non-conceptual representational accuracy under such-and-such conditions. *Mutatis mutandis* for the "successful action" theory of representation.[[42]](#footnote-42)

It is commonly thought that using theories to vindicate themselves will always satisfy those theories' defenders, but never satisfy their opponents. This is not quite right. For I may regard a vindication of my theory as satisfactory only if I can use that vindication to convince my opponent. And, from the other direction, someone may initially doubt a theory partly because she thinks that it cannot be vindicated *even by itself*. An auto-vindication can dispel at least this sort of doubt.

There is surely something right, though, in the idea that auto-vindications of theories are limited in their dialectical effectiveness. With that said, it's not clear that this tells against neutral realism more than against traditional realism. For it seems to me that the traditional realist, too, must use her theories to defend themselves, or else either (a) lapse, at some point, into what I would consider quietism, or (b) vindicate her own theories with her competitor's — i.e. with neutral realism.

For suppose the traditional realist tells us that the truth of propositions like *murder is wrong* is grounded in murder's having the property of being wrong. We might ask:

(1) What grounds the truth of the view you just presented — of *The truth of* ***murder is wrong*** *is grounded in murder's having the property of being wrong*?; and

(2) What grounds the truth of the claim that murder has the property of being wrong?

The ways in which the traditional realist may answer these questions mirror the ways in which the neutral realist may answer them.

One way stands to traditional realism just as (d) stands to neutral realism. It purports to answer both (1) and (2) in the traditional realist manner. In response to (1), it will answer: "What grounds the truth of this view is: the truth of *murder is wrong* having the *property* of being grounded in the property of being wrong." In response to (2), it will answer: "What grounds the truth of this claim is: murder's having the property of having the property of being wrong." This is just traditional realism vindicating itself (in response to 1) and explaining *via* appeal to itself why the truth-conditions it specifies are met (in response to 2).

Another option stands to traditional realism just as (b) stands to neutral realism. It mixes traditional realism about first-order claims like *murder is wrong* with quietism about the truths queried in (1) and (2). It does not advert to any further property to ground the truth of *the truth of murder is wrong is grounded in the property of being wrong*, nor any further property to ground the truth of *murder has the property of being wrong*. There is, on this approach, no philosophical-explanatory role for properties of having properties, or to properties of being grounded in properties.

Finally, the traditional realist might answer (1) and (2) by appealing to *neutral realism*. This is the converse of option (a) for the neutral realist. It is not difficult to see roughly how this would go.

I'm not trying to convince you that traditional realism is hopeless because it must either appeal to itself, adopt a quietist stance at some point, or appeal to its competitor. I merely want to convince you that *every* attempt to vindicate ethics from "sideways-on", by appeal to some theory that is not itself a first-order ethical theory, is going to face two meta-explanatory challenges — "okay, well vindicate *that* theory!" and "explain why the conditions posited by that theory are met!" — and it seems that everyone is going to be stuck with the same basic catalogue of choices in responding to those challenges.

A NEUTRAL REALIST ACCOUNT OF MORAL TRUTH AND MORAL PROPERTIES

I have suggested two ways to derive an account of accurate mental conceptual representation without appeal to properties. Now I want to show how we might "read off" claims about truth and properties from claims about accurate conceptual representation.

Let us begin with a more-or-less uncontroversial claim about mind and language:

1. The utterance "X is wrong" expresses the mental conceptual representation that X is wrong.[[43]](#footnote-43)

From here I want to develop a version of expressivism about such utterances. It has become common in the literature to regard expressivism as, most fundamentally, a position regarding *order of explanation*. Allan Gibbard writes: "The term ‘expressivism’ I mean to cover any account of meanings that follows this indirect path: to explain the meaning of a term, explain what states of mind the term can be used to express."[[44]](#footnote-44) Mark Schroeder usefully contrasts expressivism with what he calls the "standard" semantic program. On the standard approach, the meanings of sentences are explained by the propositions to which they are assigned, and the properties of beliefs by the propositions that are their contents. This, of course, prompts the question of what the world must be like for these propositions to be true, to which one often hears answers that advert to properties in either a truth-making or other role. But on the expressivist approach, says Schroeder, we explain the meanings of sentences by appeal to the mental states they're used to express, and assign propositions to sentences as merely "derivative"semantic values.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Now, when the expressivist talks about the "meanings" of sentences like "X is wrong", she typically has in mind what we might call their "(in)consistency conditions", which she purports to explain by appealing to (in)consistency among the *attitudes* the sentences are used to express. A typical expressivist move is to try to show that, e.g., "X is wrong" and "X is not wrong" are mutually exclusive because the former expresses an attitude, A1, and the latter an attitude, A2, which can't rationally be held together. Presumably, she will have some story about *why* these attitudes can't be held together.

On the other hand, the expressivist typically does not purport to explain the *truth*-conditions of sentences by appealing the *representational-accuracy*-conditions of the attitudes they're used to express. It's clear why not. For it would seem that any account of the accuracy conditions of a conceptual representational state would have to appeal at a deeper level to the truth-conditions of the *propositions* that are that state's contents, and at a deeper level still, to the truth-makers for those propositions. But that would just instantiate the "standard" rather than the expressivist direction of semantic explanation.

But I've been trying to suggest throughout that we can explain beliefs' accuracy conditions without first appealing to truth-conditions or truth-makers for the propositions they contain. If my suggestion is right, then we have the material for a version of expressivism that explains not only sentential (in)consistency, but also sentential truth, by appeal to the attitudes expressed. So let's say that:

2. "X is wrong" is true if and only if, and in virtue of the fact that, the state it expresses is accurate.

And then that:

3. "X is wrong" and "X is not wrong" are inconsistent because they cannot be true together. (This is, in turn, because the representational states they express cannot be accurate together.)

That my account of sentential *inconsistency* is grounded in a deeper account of sentential *truth* may help my expressivism to succeed where others have failed. For these other accounts tend to face rejoinders such as: *Why*, exactly, are the purportedly inconsistent attitudes inconsistent? Is it because they cannot both "get the world right"? If yes, then what does it mean for an attitude to get the world right, if it is not just having true content? If no, then why is this true *inconsistency* as opposed to mere psychological tension or mutual unrealizability? And is the purported inconsistency the right *type* of inconsistency to ground the type of inconsistency — namely, *logical —* that seems to obtain among the sentences? Specifically, are we able to capture within an expressivist framework the intuitive difference between the ways "X is not wrong", "Not-X is wrong", "X is right", "X is required", are each inconsistent with "X is wrong"?[[46]](#footnote-46)

But my account faces none of the standard problems for expressivism. It is a truth-functional account of sentential inconsistency, and is at that level no more problematic than any other truth-functional account. The heavy lifting is done in developing the theory of accurate mental representation that accounts, indirectly, for the truth-conditions of sentences.

Now, to get to claims about *propositional* truth, we may *either* start from claims about representational accuracy or from claims about sentential truth. For some will prefer to understand propositions in terms of sentences that *stand for* them; others will want to understand them in terms of the attitudes of which they are *contents*. In either case:

4. The proposition that X is wrong is true if and only if:

(a) the belief that X is wrong is accurate, and/or

(b) the sentential expressers of the belief that X is wrong (e.g. "X is wrong"; "X ist unrecht") are true.

Finally, we may move from (4) to a claim about properties:

5. X has the property of being wrong if and only if the proposition that X is wrong is true.

This is a kind of deflationism about properties. Rather than starting with a theory of moral properties and using those properties to ground moral truths, we are reading off property-claims from truth-claims. This is what quietists and some other expressivists do. But there is a crucial difference between my property-deflationism and theirs. Many other expressivists don't think that moral thoughts are representational at all. Quietists accept that moral thoughts are representational, but they're minimalists *about representation* as well. By contrast, I am most emphatically *not* a minimalist about representation. I am offering up substantial theories of representation, and then reading off truth and properties from representation so understood.

This helps me to avoid absurdities to which other minimalists are arguably committed. Consider Jamie Dreier's made-up predicate "...is hiyo", the meaning of which is given by the stipulated equivalence: "X is hiyo" =df. "Hi X!", and where "Hi X!" is used to accost.[[47]](#footnote-47) It would seem that many minimalists would be forced to accept not only that "X is hiyo" is truth-apt, but that there could be a property of being hiyo. This seems like an unwelcome result. But I am not forced to accept either of these. I can say that "X is hiyo" is not truth-apt because the state it expresses is non-representational, and I have a story about why it is non-representational. And I can say that there is no property of being hiyo since there is not a true proposition *X is hiyo,* and I have, again, a story about why there is not.

*CONCLUSION*

We can think of neutral realism as filling a lacuna in contemporary moral realism and as filling a lacuna in contemporary moral expressivism.

Realists claim that there is something informative to say about when moral judgments accurately represent the world. But they have assumed that this "something" must include mention of moral properties, likely because these realists have understood moral judgments' property-ascribing function as what makes them conceptual-representational states. We have seen, though, that there may be other ways of explaining how moral judgments could be conceptual-representational states, and other ways of explaining how they could represent the world accurately.

Expressivists purport to explain the (in)consistency of moral expressions by adverting to (in)consistency in the states-of-mind they're used to express. But most contemporary expressivists have not tried to explain the latter by appealing to the conditions under which these states accurately represent the world, likely because these expressivists think that, to do so, one would have to invoke truth-conditions and truth-makers, and that this would be incompatible with expressivism. But as I've tried to show, we might explain the accuracy conditions of moral judgments without appealing to the truth of their contents or to properties that make them true. We could then get truth, (in)consistency, and properties "out the back end", as it were, in standard expressivist fashion.

We can also think of neutral realism as a way of filling out the well-worn suggestion that properties are the “shadows” of concepts. It differs from certain other ways of filling this suggestion out in that it offers an explanation of how it is possible for moral concepts to cast “shadows” in the first place.

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2. On placement problems, see Jackson 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The expression is John McDowell's. See McDowell 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jurgen Habermas (1990) quite clearly adopts this posture. It seems to me that Christine Korsgaard (2003) does as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Because the core of constitutivism is compatible with both realism and anti-realism, some have suggested that constitutivism is not truly a view in meta-ethics. See Hussain and Shah 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This bit comes from Fodor 1987, Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For the "long arm" vs. "short arm" distinction and an endorsement of the long-arm version, see Harman 1987. See also Peacocke 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Robert Brandom's inferentialism, as developed in Brandom 1994, has attracted the charge of not *really* giving us the explanation of accurate representation that its author seems to think it provides. See Price 2011, section 6, and Rorty 1998. I don't wish to take sides here; Price's and Rorty's arguments are examples of the *kinds* of criticisms that *some* views of this general sort might fairly attract. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Strawson 1963 and Hawthorne and Cortens 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Both the feature-placing and ostension explanations are bruited in Thomasson (2008). Thomasson’s "easy ontology", as presented there and in Thomasson 2015, is probably the closest thing in contemporary metaphysics to the approach I adopt in this paper, and my later discussion of "reading off" owes much to her work. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. On the significance of this problem for the non-naturalist realist, see McPherson 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See McDowell 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See, e.g., Whyte 1990 and Blackburn 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, e.g., Christensen 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See, e.g., Brooks 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See. e.g., Chemero 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Clark 1997, p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I have nothing new to say about what basing is. But see Korcz 2015. Much of the work on epistemic basing is relevant to basing of the sort at issue here. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I think that something like these systematicity conditions can explain the other features we associate with representation — namely, that it is in some sense "supposed" to bear information about what's going on in the world. See, e.g., Clark 1997, p. 146:

    "The status of an inner state as a representation thus depends not so much on its detailed nature...as on the role it plays within the system...What counts is that it is supposed to carry a certain type of information and that its role relative to other inner systems and relative to the production of behavior is precisely to bear such information." [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. We should not commit ourselves regarding the *types* of things that may serve such a representational, or systematic guiding, role. Perhaps they are sense experiences, or other conscious mental episodes, or neural "emulations" of the surrounding environment. It doesn't matter much for our purposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. From Whyte 1990, p. 150: "A belief's truth condition is that which guarantees the fulfillment of *any* desire by the action which that belief and desire would combine to cause." [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. It strikes me as most promising to understand a desire’s or value’s content non-conceptually. (See the next section on non-conceptual content.) This helps us to avoid a well-known circularity worry for success semantics — that it is “simply a shell game that hides the problem of intentionality under belief while it explains desire, and under desire while it explains belief[.]” (Stalnaker 1984, p. 15) Additionally, it seems to better capture the satisfaction conditions of our desires. It is odd to suppose that my desires will turn out to have been thwarted in any interesting sense if it turns out that the nihilist about composite or abstract objects is correct. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. You’re right to be reminded of the examples Nicholas Sturgeon adduces in his 1988 and elsewhere. But while Sturgeon wishes to quiet worries about moral features of the world by showing that these features can be explanatorily potent, I think those worries can equally well be quieted by showing that moral *thoughts —* about unjust regimes, “no damned good” officers, and jerky partygoers — can help us navigate the world just as non-moral thoughts can. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See, e.g., McDowell 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I develop this idea in Sepielli (ms) and (forthcoming) . [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Brownstein and Madva 2012, p. 421. See also Reitveld 2008 and Irving 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Strawson 1960. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Evans, Chapter 4, section 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Fodor 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Dretske 1981, Chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. I prefer to speak primarily of non-conceptual *representation* rather than of non-conceptual *states* or non-conceptual *contents*, and to characterize representation as non-conceptual on the basis of the *explanation* of its accuracy conditions, rather than in virtue of either: (a) whether one must have the relevant concepts to undergo the representational event, or (b) whether having the relevant concepts is constitutive of undergoing the representational event. This is all to say: my non-conceptualism is neither "state non-conceptualism" or "content non-conceptualism" as distinguished by Heck 2000. It does seem to me that, if the tokening of a state is non-conceptual representation in my sense, then that state is non-conceptual in Heck's sense, and that -- if we're partial to the talk of "content" -- there are good reasons to say that its content is non-conceptual in Heck's sense. For further quite subtle distinctions along these lines, see also Speaks 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. On this question, see Harman 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See, e.g., Peacocke 1992, Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Mendelovici (ms) [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Fodor 2007, p. 109 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. James 1907, p. 512. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Quine 1948, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See, e.g., Solomon 1993 and Nussbaum 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See Günther 2003 and Tappolet 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Simon Blackburn, following on unpublished work by Robert Kraut, calls this the "No Exit" problem. See Price, et al. 2013, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Dewey 1917 writes: "Naturally, if he be logical, the pragmatist applies his own doctrine to his own doctrines; only in virtue of obtuseness to logic will he apply his opponent's doctrine”. p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For a nice discussion of what expression amounts to, see Schroeder 2008a. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Gibbard 2003, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Schroeder 2008b, pp. 32-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. On this problem, see Schroeder 2008b, Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Dreier 1996, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)