ESSAY 9.4
Reply to Critics

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Schurz's and Pigden's commentaries on my essay 'Moral Conclusions from Nonmoral Premises' give me a welcome chance to clarify my position, raise some objections of my own, and advance the debate between us.

Reply to Schurz

The major insight claimed by autonomists such as Schurz, Pigden, Humberstone, and Karmo is that the taxonomic status of a proposition (for example, its classification as moral or nonmoral) is *extrinsic* to the proposition in a surprising way: on their view, the classification of a proposition depends not only on the classification but also on the truth-value of *other* propositions that (i) are logically independent of it and (ii) belong to a category to which it can fail to belong. So, for instance, the classification of the disjunction (P) 'No moral propositions are true, or meat-eating is immoral' allegedly depends on the truth-value of the different proposition (Q) 'Some moral propositions are true', in spite of the fact that P doesn't entail Q, Q doesn't entail P, P and Q are compatible, and (according to these autonomists) Q can be moral even when P isn't.

For reasons I give in section 5 of my essay, and for further reasons I'll give presently, this taxonomic 'contingency thesis' strikes me as wrongheaded, but I think it should strike even its defenders as at least *initially* implausible. Why think we're barred from even *classifying* a proposition until we know both the classification and the truth-value of logically independent other propositions? Surely no plausible taxonomy makes a proposition's classification as moral or nonmoral depend on the proposition's *own* truth-value: say, 'moral if true, nonmoral if false'. Still less, then, should its classification depend on the truth-value of other propositions to which it bears no logical relation. Granted, semantic holists claim that the *meaning* of a proposition depends on its role in a network of propositions, and semantic externalists claim that the *content* of mental states depends on factors in the subject's environment. But even these camps needn't claim – because it doesn't follow – that whether a proposition with settled meaning belongs to mathematics, or to ethics, or to astrology depends on whether some logically unrelated

proposition is *true*. Autonomists who insist that it does so depend should admit that their battle is at least initially uphill.

Schurz takes the contingency thesis even further, emphasizing his agreement with Pigden that the classification of a proposition 'depends on the *argument* in which [it] occurs' (Schurz's emphasis). Neutral observers of the Is/Ought debate might therefore reasonably accuse Schurz and Pigden of begging the question in favor of their side of it. If you make a proposition's classification as moral or nonmoral *depend*, in just the way these autonomists do, on the proposition's role in a putative Is/Ought argument, then folks won't be surprised if you can rule out valid (or valid and non-vacuous, or sound, or sound and non-trivial, or...) Is/Ought arguments. Nor will they be impressed if you can.

Schurz fears that the argument in my essay has inconsistent consequences, but his fear stems from a misinterpretation of my position. According to my reasoning, he writes, 'a disjunction $D \vee N$ of a descriptive statement D and a normative statement N is (i) non-moral in worlds in which D is true and N is false, and (ii) moral in worlds in which D is false and N is true.' First a quibble: the just-quoted sentence should use the more specific term 'moral' throughout, rather than the less specific term 'normative', since nobody thinks that a proposition can be moral just in virtue of containing a *normative* (for example, aesthetic) disjunct. But even then Schurz has my reasoning wrong. In case I wasn't clear enough the first time, let me emphasize that it's my *opponents* who embrace the contingency thesis, who think that a proposition can be moral in one world and nonmoral in another.

Granted, my essay does sometimes talk in terms that might suggest I also think so. In the course of arguing that premise (2) of my first derivation is an essentially nonmoral proposition, I establish that (2) is nonmoral 'in at least one possible world', but let me stress here that I do so only as an *ad hominem* move: that is, even my opponents must concede that (2) is possibly nonmoral, nonmoral in at least one world. I myself think it makes no sense to talk of a proposition's classification 'in a world', as if it could have a different classification in a different world. But my opponents believe it does makes sense, so I take advantage of their belief in arguing for the essentially nonmoral status of (2). Contrary to Schurz's interpretation, I don't think that a disjunction having one moral and one nonmoral disjunct, such as (2), is 'moral in worlds in which [its nonmoral disjunct] is false and [its moral disjunct] is true'. Indeed, as Pigden observes in his commentary, I regard such a disjunction as nonmoral in *every* world in

which it exists, because it fails to attribute a specific moral property (or relation) to at least one thing, i.e., it doesn't entail that at least one thing instantiates some specific moral property or relation. So my reasoning avoids the inconsistent result that Schurz claims to find.

Schurz closes his commentary by suggesting that his inference (I-2**) 'is an even better example for Maitzen's purposes' than the examples I give in my essay. It isn't. My goal is an Is/Ought derivation that's not only valid and nontrivial but also *sound*, and Schurz's (I-2**) contains the highly implausible premise 'Either Susan is already married or Susan should marry'. Schurz doesn't tell us who Susan is, but in any case it's an odd take on the duties of unmarried people to imply that they all ought to marry. (What if Susan is a toddler, or a nun?) My disjunctive premises (2) and (2a) are both much less contentious. Because nontrivial soundness is the goal, my Is/Ought derivations improve on both Schurz's and Prior's.

Reply to Pigden

Once you get past its distractingly flamboyant rhetoric, Pigden's commentary makes five points that I think merit a reply. First, he counts it 'a very big claim' for me to assert that, as he puts it, 'Logic permits us to move from premises which lack substantive content of a certain kind to conclusions which possess it'. I suspect that the claim looks very big only because of a presumption, no doubt encouraged by a certain brief passage in Hume, that logical barriers simply *must* exist between domains of discourse. But what justifies that presumption? As Mark T. Nelson has observed (in correspondence), not many people 'would be tempted to think that there are, on purely logical grounds, barriers to inferences between, say, the "psychological" and the "humorous", so why presume that there are, on purely logical grounds, barriers to inferences between the "descriptive" and the "moral"?' Why indeed. Yet Pigden evidently regards it as nothing short of miraculous that one might derive the moral from the nonmoral '*by logic alone*' – a phrase he twice italicizes, as if to suggest that using logic alone to pull off the derivation is especially magical. How *else* but by logic alone does one deductively derive a conclusion from premises?

Second, Pigden apparently shares the view of other autonomists, such as Scott Hill (to whom I reply in Maitzen 2008), that Is/Ought derivations can't be *easy* and must be difficult or rare if they're possible at all. At any rate his sharing that view would help account for the time he spends belaboring his 'theological' and 'Presidential' derivations, as if to say

'Counterexamples to Hume's Law can't be *this* easy to produce!' As Pigden himself seems to suspect, his two derivations aren't very interesting; for starters, his theological derivation has a false first premise and a highly contentious second premise. But I concede that each derivation does breach a 'barrier' between domains (even if the domain of 'Presidential' propositions is an odd one). Still, why should it be *hard* to breach the barrier if it's possible in the first place? Any kind of derivation, as long as it's possible, is easy if you know the trick. Why then, aside perhaps from Humean prejudice, has it seemed to some that such derivations shouldn't be easy? It has seemed that way in large part because of four false assumptions that both sides of the Is/Ought debate often make, as I explain in Maitzen 2008 (pp. 573–574). Once we abandon those false assumptions, breaching the barrier will no longer seem impossible or even hard.

Third, Pigden criticizes my explanation of how my taxonomy allows universally quantified conditionals, such as 'Every citizen ought to vote', to count as moral propositions. In particular, he strangely objects to my assuming the existence of action-types, including complex action-types, calling it 'a desperate remedy'. But surely Pigden isn't so pure a nominalist as to deny the type/token distinction in general: surely he doesn't balk at the claim that the typescript of his commentary contains multiple tokens of the word-type 'logic'. He also frequently talks as if he accepts the existence of properties, in which case he shouldn't have ontological scruples about accepting that distinct action-tokens can belong to the same action-type, and once we admit the existence of action-types we have no reason to think they can't be complex. Pigden also seems especially bothered by my having to classify as nonmoral the conditional (GW) 'If catastrophic global warming is a genuine threat, then we ought to do something about it', while admitting that his own taxonomy *allows* it to come out nonmoral. Notice, however, that moral nihilists like Mackie can consistently accept GW if they regard it as trivially true for having a false antecedent, and nothing *they* can consistently accept is a moral proposition. Hence GW is nonmoral, provided we reject my opponents' contingency thesis for the reasons I've already mentioned.

Fourth, Pigden echoes Schurz's erroneous charge that my taxonomy has inconsistent consequences, and for the same mistaken reason: he confuses his own position with mine. He claims that my premise (2) is moral 'at a world at which...(2) is made true...by a moral fact', but again that follows only according to the contingency thesis that I explicitly reject. On my view, (2) is noncontingently nonmoral because (2) doesn't entail that at least one thing instantiates a

specific moral property or relation. Pigden then complains that, on this view, a disjunction whose disjuncts belong to two 'radically different semantic kinds' will fail to belong to either kind. But I *welcome* that result. Why should the disjunction (CM) 'Goldbach's Conjecture is true, or meat-eating is immoral' have to count as mathematical or else count as moral? Any plausible taxonomy has CM belong to *neither* kind, whereas Pigden and company can't classify CM without knowing which disjunct (if either) makes CM true (or whether both disjuncts overdetermine its truth). Pigden fallaciously reasons that my taxonomy makes CM fail to be *about* mathematics and fail to be *about* morality, but as I emphasize in my essay a proposition can be about a domain without *belonging to* the domain: 'Morality is controversial', for example. CM, then, can be about mathematics, about morality, or about both without belonging to either domain.

But, Pigden then wonders, what about a lopsided disjunction such as his example (S) 'Sidewinder will win the 3:30 or the Pope's a Jew!', where the second disjunct is purposely absurd? On my taxonomy, S doesn't belong to the 'domain' of racing predictions, which Pigden apparently finds troubling. He shouldn't. As I've emphasized elsewhere (Maitzen 2008: 573), it's crucial to distinguish (a) the taxonomic status of the *proposition* S from (b) the pragmatic or conversational function served by an utterance of the *sentence* 'Sidewinder will win the 3:30 or the Pope's a Jew!', namely, to express a *different* proposition, the racing prediction that Sidewinder will win the 3:30. Again, distinguishing (a) from (b) doesn't imply that proposition S (though failing to belong to the domain of racing predictions) isn't *about* racing or *about* the Pope. It only reminds us of a familiar fact: the pragmatic function of an utterance can be other than to assert the literal semantic content of the sentence uttered.

Fifth, having (in my judgment) failed to show that troubling consequences follow from my classifying (2) as nonmoral, Pigden turns his sights on (2a), the disjunctive premise in my analytic derivation. He invokes Gillian Russell's idea that analytic truths are 'fully' made true by their meanings but also 'redundantly' made true 'by the way the world is'. Whatever one thinks of that idea, Pigden's use of it does nothing to show that (2a) is a moral proposition. Indeed, he repeats two of his earlier mistakes. First, he argues that (2a) will count as moral 'in worlds where the first disjunct is false', as if that made a difference to the nonmoral classification that my taxonomy says (2a) essentially has; to repeat, the contingency thesis isn't *my* bad idea. Second, he commits a particularly blatant instance of the fallacious inference from

a proposition's *being about* a domain to its *belonging to* the domain: '[E]ven if we concede that its meaning fully determines its truth-value, it does not follow that in worlds where the first disjunct is false...(2a) is not *about* the wrongness of setting fire to children, and therefore substantively moral' (emphasis his). If that reasoning is any good, then 'Morality is controversial' is substantively moral – and the Pope's a Jew.

To be fair, my taxonomy and those of my opponents all have consequences that one might find worrisome. I have to explain, for instance, why the proposition 'Slavery is unjust or nothing is unjust' counts as nonmoral even though the sentence expressing it may *look* moral and can pragmatically *serve* to express a moral proposition. My opponents have to explain, for instance, why we may always be barred from classifying – as moral, mathematical, or neither – the proposition 'Goldbach's Conjecture is true, or meat-eating is immoral' (for we may never know which if either disjunct is true). Which overall set of consequences is easier to swallow? We should answer that question without tendentiously classifying propositions according to their *role* in putative Is/Ought inferences and without prejudice as to the impossibility of breaching 'inference barriers'.