

The Amoral Predicate Defense

Non-Realist Evaluation, Pragmatic Language, and the Projection of Moral Weight

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Central claim

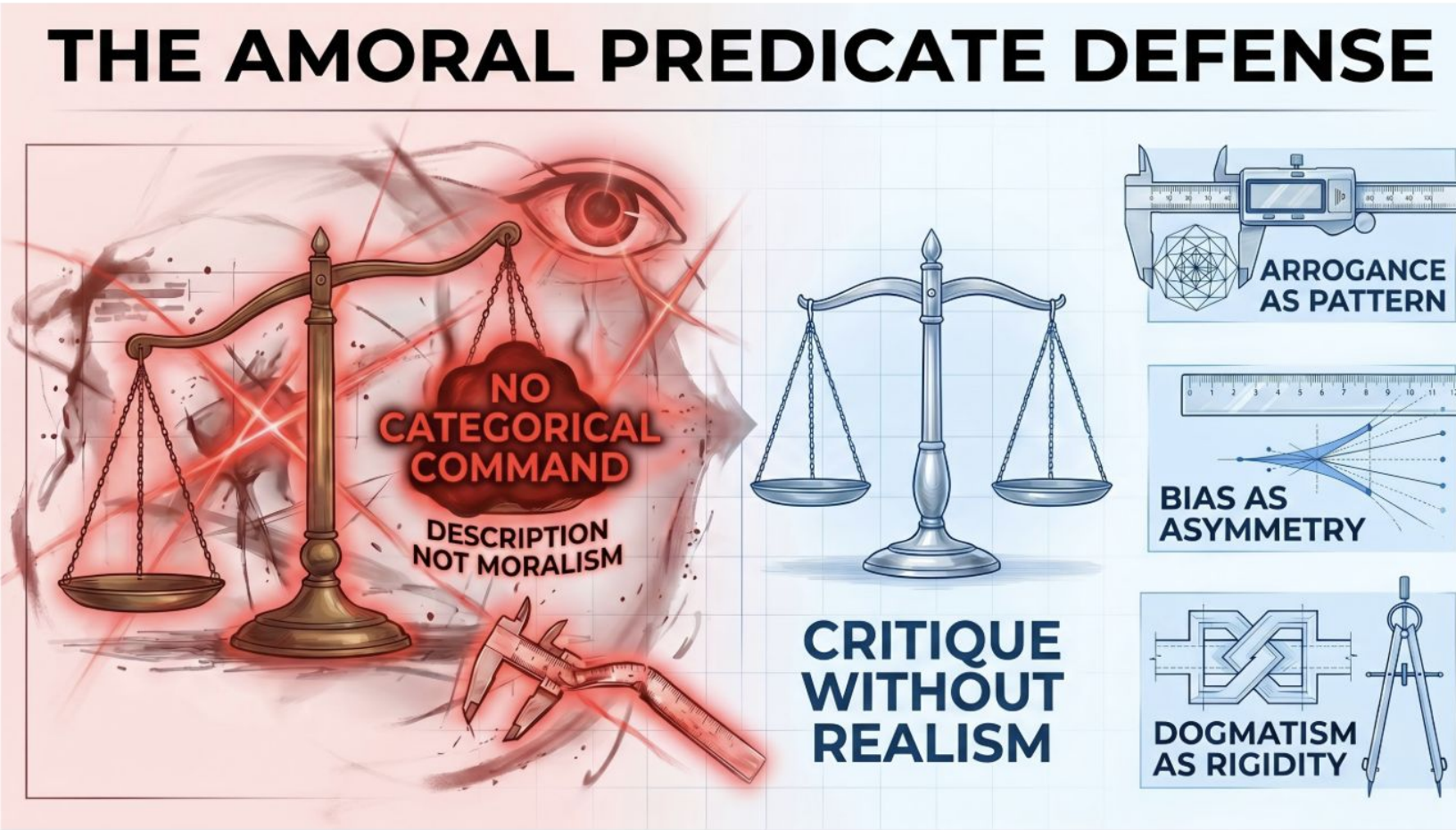
A moral non-realist does not concede moral realism merely by calling conduct arrogant, biased, dogmatic, harmful, or self-defeating. The listener must show that the particular utterance asserts stance-independent moral authority rather than describing a pattern, assessing means relative to an end, expressing a plan, or speaking within a practice. Because coherent uses of each kind retain genuine critical force without realist ontology, the inference from criticism to moral realism—much less to theism—is invalid; this does not erase realist commitment when another speaker explicitly asserts it.

Preview:

Critical utterance	Available non-realist use	Missing semantic bridge	Warranted verdict
"That claim is dogmatic, biased, harmful, or self-defeating."	Describe conduct, predict effects, assess it against an end, express opposition, or reason within a shared practice.	Show that this token use asserts categorical moral authority and thereby commits its speaker to stance-independent moral facts.	Practical seriousness is not ontological surrender. The vocabulary alone does not establish moral realism or a theistic ground.

The paper argues from moral non-realism, but its conclusion is deliberately bounded: vocabulary alone does not prove the whole stance, erase an explicitly realist utterance, or settle which standards people should endorse. It blocks an inference from a word's critical force to an ontology its speaker has not asserted.

Visual preview:



The red side depicts the moralizing interpretation that places critical language under categorical command; the blue instruments recast arrogance, bias, and dogmatism as patterns that can be measured and criticized. The balanced center states the limited point: critique can be practically forceful without, by that fact alone, committing its speaker to moral realism.

Abstract

Moral non-realists are often charged with inconsistency when they call conduct arrogant, biased, dogmatic, cruel, harmful, or self-defeating. The charge assumes that sincere critical language already asserts stance-independent moral facts. This paper argues from a moral non-realist stance that the assumption is false; no stance-independent moral property is used to explain why criticism can be sincere, accurate, or practically forceful. The main result is semantic before it is metaphysical: a word's negative force does not by itself determine the content asserted by a particular use, the standard against which an evaluation is made, the speech act performed, or the ontology to which the speaker is committed.

The argument distinguishes four coherent routes by which a non-realist can criticize: describing and predicting patterns; evaluating means relative to ends; expressing attitudes and practical plans; and speaking fictionally or within a local practice. It then offers a five-question commitment test that asks what the utterance literally says, which standard supplies its direction, what act it performs, whether its force survives a change of standards, and what ontological claim is actually made. These distinctions show why the inference from criticism to moral realism is invalid. They also expose a further apologetic overreach: even moral realism would not by itself entail theism, since naturalist and non-theistic realist accounts remain live.

The conclusion does not establish error theory, show that every evaluative predicate has a nonmoral meaning, or deny that context can carry categorical moral commitment. Its bounded scope is not metaethical neutrality. Anyone who treats a critic's vocabulary as an ontological confession bears the argumentative burden of supplying the missing semantic and metaphysical bridges rather than commandeering the words by stipulation.

Keywords: moral non-realism; evaluative language; expressivism; error theory; moral fictionalism; thick concepts; categorical reasons; moral apologetics

1 Introduction: The Argument by Vocabulary

A familiar reply to moral non-realism begins not with a theory of moral properties but with the non-realist's own speech. The critic condemns cruelty, warns against bias, calls an interlocutor arrogant, praises intellectual humility, or says that a tactic hurts its cause. The reply is immediate: "Then you do believe in morality after all." Ordinary criticism is treated as an involuntary confession. The non-realist may deny moral facts in theory, but every serious adjective is said to give the game away.

This reply has rhetorical force because the language is not emotionally neutral. Calling a posture arrogant normally communicates opposition. Calling a procedure biased often recommends correction. Saying that a practice causes needless suffering typically carries urgency. The speaker is not merely cataloguing shapes and colors. Yet a further conclusion is quietly added: because the utterance matters, it must assert a stance-independent moral property; because it asserts such a property, moral realism is vindicated; and, in some apologetic uses, because moral realism is vindicated, a theistic explanation has gained support.

Each step requires an argument. None follows from the heat of the word.

The target of this paper is the first shortcut: the claim that sincere use of critical or evaluative language by itself commits a speaker to moral realism. The paper calls the reply *commandeering* because it assigns every critical token to a realist grammar before asking what the speaker said or did with it. The reply confuses at least four questions: what pattern a word describes, what standard gives an assessment its direction, what practical act the speaker performs, and what kinds of fact the speaker accepts. A single sentence can answer those questions differently.

The analysis proceeds from moral non-realism, not from neutrality between non-realism and realism. It assumes no stance-independent moral facts and asks what critical speech can do without them. Its central thesis is nevertheless narrower than a general proof of moral non-realism. A non-realist can coherently use many critical predicates while describing observable patterns, assessing means against ends, expressing opposition, coordinating plans, or reasoning within a practice. If at least one such

interpretation preserves the utterance's genuine force without realist commitment, the utterance alone cannot entail that commitment. This counterinterpretation does not prove the whole non-realist position from one linguistic failure; it defeats an argument that tries to extract a realist ontology from vocabulary without supplying the semantic bridge.

This matters beyond a verbal dispute. The shortcut often converts shared human stakes into proprietary metaphysics. Two people may agree that a deception ruins trust, a dogmatic method blocks correction, or an abusive practice produces fear. Those agreements are real. They do not settle whether the relevant judgment represents a stance-independent moral fact, expresses a plan, reports a relation to adopted ends, or does several things at once. Treating practical agreement as ontological capitulation makes substantive metaethics disappear behind a linguistic trick.

2 The Strongest Form of the Inconsistency Charge

The vocabulary argument should not be dismissed as though it were merely a pun. Its strongest form appeals to sincerity and practical commitment:

- V1. When a speaker sincerely applies a genuinely moral predicate, the speaker presents the target as categorically disfavored, not merely disliked or inconvenient.
- V2. Moral non-realists sincerely apply predicates such as *cruel*, *unjust*, *arrogant*, *biased*, and *dogmatic* while expecting others to take the criticism seriously.
- V3. Presenting conduct as categorically disfavored commits the speaker to stance-independent moral facts.
- V4. Therefore, moral non-realists who speak this way are inconsistent, or their non-realism is only verbal.

This version improves on the crude claim that every negative word is moral. It focuses on sincere assertion and the authority a speaker appears to claim. It also raises a real problem for some positions. An error theorist who says that all ordinary positive moral judgments are false cannot simply continue making those judgments in precisely the same assertoric mode and decline to explain the practice. Error theory has generated extensive debate about conservation, abolition, fictionalism, and reform for this reason (Joyce 2001; Olson 2014; Kalderon 2005; Nolan, Restall, and West 2005).

But the improved charge still builds its conclusion into its first premise. Before a token use can count as “a genuinely moral predicate” in the commitment-bearing sense, its content and force must be established. Some word types have familiar moral uses without every token carrying the same commitment. “Wrong answer” need not mean morally wrong; “bad knife” can mean defective relative to cutting; “cruel technique” may report both a pattern of deliberately inflicted suffering and a categorical evaluation, or may be used by a speaker to express opposition without representing a non-natural property. The disputed issue is not whether the sound was uttered. It is what the utterance commits its speaker to.

The charge also moves too quickly from categorical language to realism. Expressivist theories are designed to explain how moral discourse can be action-guiding, disagreement-producing, and apparently categorical without treating moral judgments as ordinary reports of stance-independent properties (Gibbard 1990; Blackburn 1993; Ridge 2014; Sinclair 2021). One may reject those theories, but their existence means that categorical practical force cannot simply be identified with realist representation. The shortcut must defeat the rival semantics rather than assume it away.

3 Minimal Moral Realism and the Actual Target

Rejecting moral realism does not license defining it as another name for supernatural command. The paper's non-realist stance remains explicit, while its target is stated in the strongest minimal form:

at least some moral judgments purport to represent moral facts and some such judgments are true. In this paper, *stance-independent* means that their truth is not created merely by what a particular person or group happens to approve, choose, or enforce. Realists disagree about the nature of those alleged facts. Non-naturalists defend irreducible normative truths; naturalists identify or ground moral facts in natural features; other realists build more complex accounts of reasons, flourishing, or idealized response (Railton 1986; Shafer-Landau 2003). This paragraph defines the view under challenge; it does not adopt its ontology.

The paper therefore does not define moral realism as belief in a transcendent realm. That definition would hand naturalist realists an easy objection and would allow an apologetic argument to hide two bridges inside one word. Even if stance-independent moral facts exist, their existence does not by itself show that they are supernatural, grounded in a personal mind, issued as commands, or explained by any particular theism. Peter Railton’s influential naturalist realism is enough to make the logical point: realism and theism are not equivalent positions (Railton 1986).

Likewise, *moral non-realism* names a family rather than one semantics. Error theorists generally accept that ordinary moral assertions aim at objective authority but deny that anything satisfies the aim (Mackie 1977; Joyce 2001; Olson 2014). Expressivists understand central moral judgments partly or primarily through attitudes, plans, or practical commitments rather than ordinary representation (Gibbard 1990; Ridge 2014; Sinclair 2021). Fictionalists propose using moral discourse without literal belief in its apparent ontology (Kalderon 2005; Nolan, Restall, and West 2005). Contextual or end-relative approaches analyze at least some normative terms through relations to standards, goals, or contexts (Finlay 2014). These views are not interchangeable. The fact that each offers a route to serious evaluative speech, however, defeats any argument that declares such speech unintelligible without realism.

The target claim can now be stated exactly:

$$\text{critical force} \implies \text{categorical moral assertion} \implies \text{moral-realist commitment.} \quad (1)$$

Plain-English annotation. The arrows mark two alleged bridges. The first says that forceful criticism must assert categorical moral authority. The second says that such authority must be represented as a stance-independent fact. This paper argues that neither bridge is supplied merely by hearing a critical word.

The paper need not show that the bridges always fail. It need only show that their success depends on contextual and theoretical facts not contained in the vocabulary itself. A token utterance may carry realist commitment. The word type does not own that commitment in every use.

4 Words Do Not Own Their Ontology

Four layers of an evaluative utterance are often compressed into one.

First is *classification*: what pattern is attributed? “Dogmatic” may identify resistance to counterevidence; “biased” may identify asymmetric evidence processing; “arrogant” may identify inflated self-assessment or dismissive treatment of others’ competence. Each classification can be contested, refined, or measured without first deciding whether the pattern is morally wrong.

Second is *standard-relativity*: relative to what end, rule, or practice is the pattern assessed? Dogmatism is a failure relative to inquiry that values correction. A contemptuous tone can be self-defeating relative to persuasion. A breach of an agreed procedure can be defective relative to that procedure. The structure is conditional: if this is the end or rule, then the conduct impedes or violates it. Debates about hypothetical and categorical imperatives have long made this distinction central (Hare 1952; Foot 1972), and end-relational theories explain how normative language can depend on contextually supplied ends (Finlay 2014).

Third is *speech-act force*: what is the speaker doing? A sentence may warn, protest, condemn, advise, coordinate, demand, or express refusal. These acts matter socially even when they do not represent a special property. “I will not cooperate with that practice” can be sincere, public, and consequential

without pretending to report a stance-independent moral fact. Expressivist programs attempt to explain moral discourse from precisely this practical side (Gibbard 1990; Blackburn 1993; Ridge 2014; Sinclair 2021).

Fourth is *ontological commitment*: what must exist for the asserted content to be true or the act to be felicitous? A speaker who says only that a method suppresses contrary evidence is committed to the method and its evidential behavior, not thereby to a moral property of dogmatism. A speaker who adds that everyone has a stance-independent moral reason not to use it makes a further claim. This paper does not endorse that realist addition. Its immediate point is that the addition cannot be smuggled into the earlier description.

This layered account avoids an opposite mistake. The non-realist cannot stipulate that every apparently moral sentence is purely descriptive. Context, conventional meaning, and speaker intention constrain interpretation. Thick evaluative concepts such as *cruel*, *lewd*, and *rude* raise serious questions about whether description and evaluation can be separated, and about whether evaluation is encoded or pragmatically conveyed (Väyrynen 2013). The amoral predicate defense is therefore a defense of available *uses*, not a decree that entire dictionaries are nonmoral.

5 Four Non-Realist Routes to Serious Criticism

The smallest useful taxonomy has four routes. They can overlap in one utterance, but each shows why practical force does not uniquely identify realist representation.

Table 1: Four coherent non-realist routes to critical speech

Route	What the utterance contributes	Source of practical force	What does not follow by itself
Descriptive or predictive	Attributes a psychological, social, or causal pattern	Accuracy, explanation, warning, and anticipated consequences	That the pattern instantiates a stance-independent moral property
End-relative or instrumental	Assesses conduct against a goal, rule, or chosen standard	Commitment to the end and the means that serve it	That every agent has categorical reason to adopt the end
Expressive or planning	Voices opposition, endorsement, intention, or a plan for coordination	Attitudes, commitments, demands, and interpersonal uptake	That the utterance represents a moral property in the realist sense
Fictional or practice-internal	Uses a familiar moral framework without literal belief in its apparent ontology	Convenience, solidarity, deliberation, and established social practice	That useful participation is literal belief in the framework's entities

Table 1 does not assert that every route succeeds for every sentence. It identifies counterinterpretations the commandeering argument must exclude. If a route preserves the relevant content and practical work in context, the vocabulary alone cannot force realist commitment.

5.1 Description and prediction

Some contested predicates have a substantial descriptive core. An interlocutor is dogmatic when contrary evidence has little effect because it is contrary. A selection process is biased when it treats relevantly similar evidence asymmetrically. A speaker is arrogant when confidence outruns competence or when others' standing as epistemic participants is discounted without adequate reason. These descriptions remain partly theory-laden, but theory-ladenness is not moral realism. Psychology, statistics, and social

explanation are full of contestable classifications that do not become moral properties merely because people care about them.

The criticism gains force from consequences. A dogmatic method fails to correct error. A biased process produces systematically skewed outcomes. Arrogant dismissal deprives a group of information and makes calibration harder. A non-realist who values accurate inquiry can oppose those patterns because of what they do. The realist may then ask why accuracy should be valued. That is a legitimate next question in the argument. It does not transform the earlier causal claim into a hidden moral assertion.

5.2 Ends and selected standards

“You are hurting your cause” is almost transparently conditional. If the aim is to persuade a particular audience, and a tactic predictably alienates that audience, then the tactic is defective relative to the aim. The assessment can be mistaken because the causal prediction is wrong, because the audience is misidentified, or because persuasion is not actually the speaker’s goal. None of those possibilities requires an objective moral property.

The same structure supports epistemic criticism. If participants jointly treat truth, coherence, or responsiveness to evidence as aims of inquiry, then ignoring counterevidence is a failure relative to the practice. The standards can be argued about. Some may be constitutive of a practice rather than individually chosen. But the relation “this conduct frustrates this standard” does not entail “this standard has stance-independent moral authority over every agent.” An end-relative semantic account such as Finlay’s provides one sophisticated model of how context can supply the relevant standard (Finlay 2014).

5.3 Expression, planning, and coordination

A critic may do more than describe. “That treatment is cruel” can express aversion, demand cessation, signal solidarity with the target, and commit the speaker to future resistance. An expressivist does not deny these acts. Expressivism is attractive partly because it takes their action-guiding and interpersonal character seriously (Gibbard 1990; Ridge 2014; Sinclair 2021).

This answer is not the claim that moral language is meaningless noise. Plans constrain later action; attitudes can be coherent or unstable; demands can conflict; shared commitments can structure institutions. Quasi-realist projects specifically seek to explain why nonrepresentational starting points can support truth-like grammar, logical embedding, disagreement, and deliberation (Blackburn 1993). Whether those projects ultimately succeed is a major metaethical question. The mere fact that the sentence sounds serious does not decide it.

5.4 Fiction and practice-internal speech

An error theorist faces the sharpest problem because the ordinary surface grammar may appear assertoric while the alleged moral facts do not exist. One response is abolition: stop making false moral assertions. Another is reform: replace them with explicit natural, prudential, or political claims. A third is fictionalism: continue using parts of moral discourse as a useful practice without literal belief in its apparent ontology (Kalderon 2005; Nolan, Restall, and West 2005).

Fictionalism is not costless. Participants may misunderstand the pretense, and the emotional force of a practice may depend on attitudes difficult to sustain under explicit make-believe. Those are substantive objections. Yet even an imperfect fictionalist program shows that use and belief can come apart. Lawyers reason within legal fictions; scientists use idealizations; ordinary speakers talk as though institutions act. The success conditions of each practice differ, but none permits an automatic inference from fluent use to literal ontology.

6 A Five-Question Commitment Test

Instead of classifying a word before hearing its use, ask five questions about the token utterance.

- Q1. Literal content:** What pattern, relation, or property is asserted? Does “biased” mean asymmetric treatment of evidence, culpable prejudice, or both?
- Q2. Supplying standard:** Is the direction of evaluation fixed by an aim, an agreement, a social practice, a speaker attitude, or a claimed categorical reason?
- Q3. Speech act:** Is the speaker reporting, advising, warning, protesting, demanding, expressing, or speaking within a fiction? Several acts can occur together.
- Q4. Portability:** Would the criticism retain the same authority for an agent who rejects the supplied end or standard? If not, the force may be conditional even when intense.
- Q5. Ontological assertion:** What fact must exist for the utterance to be correct as used? The answer must be shown, not read off the emotional valence of the vocabulary.

The test can be applied to recurring examples.

Table 2: Predicate uses and the realist addition that would require argument

Predicate use	Pattern or relation available to a non-realist	Immediate critical point	Additional realist claim
Arrogant	Confidence outruns competence; others’ input is discounted	The posture predicts calibration and coordination failures	The posture is categorically morally wrong independent of endorsed standards
Biased	Relevant evidence or persons are treated asymmetrically	The process frustrates accuracy, fairness rules, or stated aims	The asymmetry instantiates a stance-independent moral defect
Dogmatic	Counterevidence receives systematically reduced weight	The method blocks error correction under inquiry standards	Every agent has a categorical moral duty to revise in the specified way
Harmful	Conduct causes pain, fear, deprivation, or loss of agency	Creatures who oppose those effects have desire-relative or instrumental reason to resist	The natural harm facts are identical with, ground, or evidence an objective moral property
Humble	Self-estimation is calibrated and correction remains possible	The posture can improve inquiry and social learning	Humility is an objective virtue in every relevant context
Self-defeating	A tactic reduces the probability of its declared goal	The agent has instrumental reason to change tactics	The agent is morally required to pursue that goal or avoid that tactic

The paper’s governing stance rejects realist ontology, but the table has a narrower logical job: it marks the last column as an additional claim rather than pretending the earlier columns already establish it. A naturalist realist may argue that certain harm facts constitute moral facts; a non-naturalist may argue that categorical reasons supervene on them; an expressivist may reject the representational framing. The commitment test prevents the realist alternatives from winning by placing their conclusion inside the word.

7 Why Critical Force Is Not Categorical Authority

Three features make the shortcut tempting: emotional heat, interpersonal demand, and resistance to opt-out. None is conclusive.

Emotional heat often reflects the stakes for embodied and dependent creatures. Pain hurts, betrayal disrupts trust, humiliation changes social standing, and deception interferes with agency. A person need not believe in moral properties to have aversions, attachments, vulnerabilities, or projects. The

reality of suffering is not weakened by distinguishing it from a moral ontology. The distinction asks what further property is asserted, not whether the suffering occurs.

Interpersonal demand also exceeds description. A protester may not merely report that a policy causes fear; the protester may demand repeal. But demands can arise from power, solidarity, bargaining, convention, identity, or adopted commitments. A demand's existence does not establish its categorical authority. Conversely, rejecting categorical authority does not make the demand unreal. It changes the account of what gives it force.

Finally, some standards appear resistant to opt-out. A participant in inquiry cannot coherently demand that others accept claims while treating every logical relation and evidential constraint as optional. A social practice may have constitutive norms: reject all of them and one leaves the practice. This is important, but constitutive authority is still not automatically moral-realist authority. Terence Cuneo's companions-in-guilt strategy presses a powerful challenge: if moral facts are objectionable, epistemic normative facts may be equally implicated (Cuneo 2007). A complete non-realist theory must explain epistemic practice; that is a theoretical burden, not a concession of moral duty. Its existence does not show that the adjective "dogmatic" has already paid it on the realist's behalf.

The decisive distinction is between *inescapability within an activity* and *categorical authority over every agent*. A move can be illegal within chess without being morally wrong. A method can be defective as inquiry because it insulates claims from correction. A speaker can be strategically ineffective relative to persuasion. One may then argue that agents have categorical reasons to enter or respect those practices. The argument is not contained in the local failure judgment.

8 Thick Concepts and the Limits of Decomposition

The strongest semantic objection concerns thick concepts: terms such as *cruel*, *brutal*, *lewd*, *rude*, or *courageous* that appear to combine description and evaluation. If the evaluation belongs to conventional meaning, perhaps a speaker cannot sincerely use the term while withholding its evaluative commitment.

The literature does not yield a simple victory for either side. Some accounts treat evaluation as semantically inseparable; others argue that descriptive content can be detached and that evaluation is conveyed through pragmatics or typical use (Väyrynen 2013). Disagreement may also be partly metalinguistic: speakers negotiate which concepts or standards should organize thought rather than merely disagree about one fixed property (Plunkett and Sundell 2013; Eklund 2017).

Three conclusions follow. First, a careful non-realist need not insist that every token of every thick term is amoral. Where ordinary meaning strongly encodes moral appraisal, reform or paraphrase is clearer. "The policy foreseeably causes severe pain and restricts exit" makes the natural stakes explicit without relying on a contested thick term.

Second, encoded evaluation still does not settle ontology. An expressivist can accept that a term conventionally performs evaluation while denying that the evaluation represents a stance-independent property. Semantic moral content and moral-realist metaphysics are different levels. The realist must therefore defend not only the evaluation but the representational account of it.

Third, a speaker can mention, echo, challenge, or repurpose a term. Quotation, irony, anthropological report, legal usage, and intrapractice reasoning complicate commitment. Context is not an escape hatch invented for non-realists; it is part of ordinary semantic interpretation. The commandeering argument fails when it treats the most realist-friendly use as the only possible use.

9 The Apologetic Shortcut Has Three Missing Bridges

In Christian apologetics, the vocabulary argument sometimes expands into an argument for theism. A skeptic denounces abuse or deception; the apologist treats the denunciation as evidence for objective morality; objective morality is then treated as evidence for a personal moral ground. The compressed inference contains three separate bridges.

Table 3: The three bridges hidden in the apologetic shortcut

Bridge	Compressed move	What must be established	Live alternative
Semantic	Critical utterance $\Rightarrow$ categorical moral assertion	The token's content and force cannot be preserved by a non-realist interpretation	Description, end-relation, expression, planning, fiction, or local practice
Metaethical	Categorical moral assertion $\Rightarrow$ moral realism	Expressivist, constructivist, and other non-representational accounts fail	Practical commitment without stance-independent moral representation
Theological	Moral realism $\Rightarrow$ theism	Moral facts require a personal theistic ground, and rival grounds fail	Naturalist realism, non-natural truth, constitutivism, or another metaphysics

Table 3 does not refute every moral argument for theism. It shows why the critic's vocabulary cannot do the work by itself. Even a successful moral realist argument would leave the theological bridge open. Naturalist realism explicitly locates moral facts within the natural world (Railton 1986); robust non-natural realism need not identify normative truth with a personal commander (Shafer-Landau 2003). A further argument would have to establish personality, authority, uniqueness, and the relevant relation of grounding.

The shortcut is therefore not economical. It is compressed. Each omitted bridge is a major philosophical dispute. Treating ordinary human opposition to suffering as an implicit confession of theism does not solve those disputes; it conceals them.

10 Strong Realist Replies

10.1 "Sincere condemnation claims more than preference"

The realist may object that the non-realist account sounds too weak. When people condemn torture, they do not usually mean only "I dislike it" or "it conflicts with my project." They address others as though the reason applies regardless of preference.

This phenomenology deserves respect. It supports the claim that ordinary moral discourse often presents itself as more than autobiographical taste, a point central to error theory as well as realism (Mackie 1977; Joyce 2001; Olson 2014). But the amoral predicate defense need not translate every condemnation into a preference report. Expressive and planning theories treat the utterance as a public practical commitment directed at conduct and coordination, not as a report about private feeling. Fictionalists and reforming error theorists offer different accounts. The realist may argue that all fail. The sincerity of the utterance does not itself choose among them.

10.2 "The non-realist still uses reasons"

A second reply moves from moral adjectives to reasons. If the non-realist says that suffering gives everyone reason to stop a practice, has categorical normativity not returned?

Possibly. The exact claim matters. A universal categorical-reason assertion is stronger than a causal description or an end-relative recommendation. A non-realist who makes it must explain how it fits the theory; this is an argumentative requirement, not a stance-independent moral duty. Some expressivists explain reason claims through practical attitudes; some constructivists ground them in procedures or agency; some error theorists reject their literal truth. The present paper does not resolve the general

theory of reasons. It insists only that this stronger claim cannot be attributed whenever someone says “harmful” or “arrogant.”

10.3 “Natural facts may just be moral facts”

A naturalist realist can grant every descriptive claim in Table 2 and argue that some of those natural facts constitute moral facts. Severe, unconsented suffering under specified conditions may simply be morally bad, not a neutral base awaiting supernatural addition.

This reply correctly blocks any assumption that realism must posit spooky furniture. It also reveals why commandeering fails. The identity or grounding claim is a substantive realist theory, not a consequence of the critic’s word choice. If a speaker reports suffering and opposes it, the naturalist must still show that the relevant natural property is a moral property and that the speaker’s assertion carries that identity. Re-labeling the same facts inside the realist’s theory cannot force the speaker to accept the theory.

10.4 “Shared disagreement requires shared content”

If realist and non-realist speakers use the same words while apparently disagreeing, perhaps they must share moral content. Otherwise they talk past each other.

Some shared content is normally required, but not every disagreement is a collision over one descriptive proposition. Speakers can disagree in attitude, plan, standard, or preferred concept. They can negotiate which considerations should control a practice while agreeing on natural facts. Work on metalinguistic disagreement explains how conflict can persist when speakers contest the best way to use normative or evaluative language (Plunkett and Sundell 2013). This account may not explain every moral dispute. It is enough to show that disagreement does not automatically settle the metaphysics of the shared vocabulary.

10.5 “Without realism, criticism loses authority”

The final reply is practical: without objective moral authority, criticism becomes mere noise backed by power. This is not a semantic objection but a challenge about what non-realists can justify.

The challenge is serious. Human opposition, negotiation, sanctions, empathy, and institutional design can reproduce asymmetry, coercion, and suffering. Moral realism, however, does not make people epistemically infallible about alleged moral facts, and invoking objectivity does not identify which norms are true. Non-realist practices can be tested against nonmoral facts about suffering, consent, agency, reciprocity, predictability, and power, and against coherence among their own commitments. Those resources may or may not satisfy every aspiration traditionally assigned to morality. Their possible insufficiency is not proof that a speaker who uses them has secretly adopted realism.

11 What the Defense Allows—and What Coherence Excludes

The defense allows forceful speech. A non-realist can say that a policy predictably terrorizes vulnerable people, that a leader lies, that a method shields itself from correction, that a discourse humiliates dissenters, or that a tactic sabotages its declared aim. The speaker can oppose, organize, demand, refuse, and negotiate. The practical world does not disappear when one denies stance-independent moral facts.

The defense also allows conceptual reform. When a contested word invites a false realist inference, the speaker can specify the work: “By *dogmatic*, I mean that contrary evidence receives less weight because it is contrary”; “By *harmful*, I mean that the practice foreseeably produces pain, fear, and loss of agency”; “By *self-defeating*, I mean that the tactic reduces the probability of the speaker’s stated goal.” Precision does not drain the criticism. It shows what could make it true or false.

The defense also imposes three consistency constraints. These are not stance-independent moral prohibitions; they mark what follows without equivocation or non sequitur. First, if a non-realist invokes

categorical authority and later retreats to description, the asserted content has changed, and that change must be acknowledged for the argument to remain stable. Second, an end-relative assessment does not make a selected end immune to further practical evaluation. Ends can conflict, rest on false beliefs, or be rejected after fuller information. Third, defeating the vocabulary shortcut does not prove moral non-realism. Metaethical arguments about truth, reasons, disagreement, motivation, and knowledge remain.

The corresponding argumentative constraint applies to realists. A realist remains free to defend objective moral facts, natural or non-natural, and to argue that some thick terms encode moral content or that practical authority is best explained realistically. But a critical adjective does not itself levy an ontological tariff. Shared concern establishes shared concern. Shared description establishes shared description. The remaining metaphysics must be argued.

12 Conclusion

The paper's governing stance is moral non-realism: critical language does not require stance-independent moral facts to be sincere, accurate, or practically forceful. A token utterance can describe a pattern, predict a consequence, assess means relative to an end, express opposition, coordinate a plan, or operate within a practice. These uses can be sincere and consequential. Their force does not by itself establish that the speaker represents the realist ontology this paper rejects.

The five-question commitment test identifies the missing work. Ask what the utterance literally asserts, which standard supplies its direction, what act it performs, whether its authority survives rejection of that standard, and what ontology it actually invokes. Another speaker may supply an explicitly realist answer. The point is that such an answer cannot be confiscated from this speaker by vocabulary alone.

The strongest objections leave this conclusion intact. Thick concepts complicate decomposition but do not equate evaluative meaning with realist ontology. Sincere condemnation may express more than autobiographical preference without functioning as an ordinary factual report. Epistemic normativity raises a companion challenge without turning every local criticism into a moral fact. The existence of naturalist realist theories shows that realism need not be supernatural and therefore makes the apologetic leap to theism even less automatic.

The intellectual change required is modest and firm: stop treating practical seriousness as ontological surrender. A realist case must defend the semantic, metaethical, and, where relevant, theological bridges. Until then, commandeering a critic's words is not an argument. It is a refusal to hear what the critic said.

Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The reconstruction preserves the paper's moral non-realist standpoint while separating the validity of the counterinterpretation argument from the substantive question of whether the proposed non-realist interpretations are genuinely available. Every symbolic line is followed by an ordinary-language annotation. The conclusion concerns what an utterance establishes *by itself*; the bounded formal result does not convert the paper into neutrality between the ontology it rejects and the non-realist alternatives it defends.

Syllogistic reconstruction

1. **Premise 1:** A critical utterance by itself entails moral-realist commitment only if every admissible interpretation that preserves its ordinary critical force also carries that commitment.
2. **Premise 2:** Some critical utterances have admissible descriptive, end-relative, expressive, planning, or practice-internal interpretations that preserve their ordinary force without moral-realist commitment.
3. **Conclusion 1:** Therefore, those utterances do not by themselves entail moral-realist commitment.
4. **Premise 3:** The commandeering argument treats the utterance by itself as establishing moral-realist commitment.

5. **Conclusion 2:** Therefore, the commandeering argument is invalid unless it supplies an additional semantic bridge that excludes the relevant non-realist interpretations.

The inference is deductively valid once Premises 1–3 are granted. Premise 1 states the ordinary countermodel test for entailment. Premise 2 is the substantive semantic premise; Sections 4–8 support it through concrete uses and developed non-realist theories. Premise 3 characterizes the shortcut under examination. None of the premises says that every critical utterance is non-realist or that stance-independent moral facts do not exist.

Symbols

- u : the particular critical utterance being assessed.
- $\mathcal{I}(u)$: the set of admissible interpretations of u in its context.
- $F(i)$: interpretation i preserves the ordinary descriptive, evaluative, or practical force of u .
- $R(i)$: interpretation i commits the speaker to stance-independent moral facts.
- $\models$: the entailment sign; when written as $u \models R$, it says that u logically entails moral-realist commitment.
- $S(u)$: the vocabulary shortcut succeeds for u , meaning that u alone establishes moral-realist commitment.
- $M(x)$: item x instantiates a stance-independent moral property.
- $\forall$ and $\exists$: “for every” and “there exists”; $\neg$, $\wedge$, and $\rightarrow$: “not”, “and”, and “if-then.”
- $\not\models$: the statement on the left does not logically entail the statement on the right.

The counterinterpretation test

Entailment is defined by the absence of a force-preserving counterinterpretation:

$$u \models R \quad \leftrightarrow \quad \forall i \in \mathcal{I}(u) [F(i) \rightarrow R(i)]. \quad (1)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (1) says that the utterance entails realist commitment only if every admissible interpretation that keeps its ordinary critical work also carries that commitment. An interpretation that drains the sentence of its warning, opposition, or assessment would not count as a relevant counterexample.

The paper’s substantive premise is that at least one relevant counterinterpretation exists for many disputed utterances:

$$\exists i \in \mathcal{I}(u) [F(i) \wedge \neg R(i)]. \quad (2)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (2) says that there is an admissible interpretation—descriptive, end-relative, expressive, planning-based, or practice-internal—that preserves the utterance’s real critical force without committing the speaker to stance-independent moral facts. The body of the paper argues for this premise; logic alone does not guarantee it for every sentence.

Lines (1) and (2) yield:

$$\therefore \quad u \not\models R. \quad (3)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (3) is the first bounded conclusion. If a force-preserving non-realist interpretation is admissible, then the utterance by itself does not entail moral realism. It may still receive a realist interpretation in that context; entailment fails because realist commitment is not unavoidable.

The vocabulary shortcut depends on the entailment it claims to extract:

$$S(u) \rightarrow u \models R. \quad (4)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (4) says that the shortcut can succeed only if the utterance alone entails realist commitment. If extra premises about meaning, context, categorical authority, or ontology are needed, then the vocabulary is not doing the work by itself.

By modus tollens from lines (3) and (4):

$$\therefore \quad \neg S(u). \quad (5)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (5) gives the paper’s central verdict: for the utterances covered by line (2), the vocabulary shortcut fails. Modus tollens is the valid pattern “If shortcut success requires entailment, and entailment fails, then the shortcut does not succeed.”

The scope limit

Failure of the shortcut does not show that every interpretation is non-realist, and it does not show that no moral properties exist:

$$\neg S(u) \not\models \forall i \in \mathcal{I}(u) \neg R(i), \quad \neg S(u) \not\models \neg \exists x M(x). \quad (6)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (6) blocks both overclaims. Defeating the inference from one utterance does not prove that the utterance lacks every realist reading. It also does not prove that stance-independent moral properties are absent. A realist would still need a separate semantic, metaphysical, or epistemic argument for that ontology.

The formal result is therefore exact. The logical steps from a counterinterpretation to failed entailment, and from failed entailment to failed shortcut, are valid. The main dispute concerns Premise 2: whether the proposed interpretations genuinely preserve the utterance in context. That question is semantic and pragmatic, and it must be argued case by case rather than settled by the emotional force of a word.

Worked diagnostic cases

The abstract test becomes clearer when applied to actual utterances. Suppose u_1 is “The manager is arrogant.” In context, the speaker explains that the manager routinely discounts evidence from junior staff while accepting equivalent evidence from senior staff. Let i_1 be the interpretation “the manager exhibits that status-sensitive evidential pattern.” Then:

$$i_1 \in \mathcal{I}(u_1) \wedge F(i_1) \wedge \neg R(i_1). \quad (7)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (7) records a concrete counterinterpretation. The description preserves the accusation’s critical point because it identifies an observable failure in how evidence is handled. Yet it need not assert a stance-independent moral property. Anyone who claims that the word *arrogant* nevertheless forces realism must explain why this contextual paraphrase is inadmissible.

Now suppose u_2 is “That inquiry was biased.” The speaker means that confirming reports were admitted at a lower evidential threshold than disconfirming reports, even though the sources were otherwise comparable. Let i_2 name that asymmetric procedure:

$$i_2 \in \mathcal{I}(u_2) \wedge F(i_2) \wedge \neg R(i_2) \implies u_2 \not\models R. \quad (8)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (8) shows the inference in miniature. The asymmetry can be measured, challenged, and connected to the inquiry’s declared aim of reaching an accurate result. Because this force-preserving reading lacks realist commitment, the sentence alone does not entail moral realism. This conclusion concerns entailment; it does not forbid a speaker from also condemning the procedure on realist grounds.

Finally, let u_3 be “The doctrine is dogmatic.” If i_3 means that contrary evidence is automatically reclassified as proof of hostility, the criticism identifies a self-sealing rule. The rule can be condemned as an obstacle to the group’s stated aim of discovering truth. But a different context might make the speaker add, “and such intellectual closure is objectively wrong regardless of anyone’s aims.” Call that enriched interpretation i_3^+ :

$$R(i_3^+) \quad \text{while it may still be true that} \quad \exists i_3 \in \mathcal{I}(u_3) [F(i_3) \wedge \neg R(i_3)]. \quad (9)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (9) distinguishes a realist interpretation from entailment by the original vocabulary. The added claim of objective wrongness carries realist commitment, while the bare charge of dogmatism may still admit a force-preserving non-realist reading. The defense therefore listens to the whole assertion instead of either erasing explicit realism or manufacturing realism from a critical adjective.

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