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Compaijen, J.R.; Meijer, Michiel

Published in:
International Journal of Philosophical Studies

Published: 01/01/2021

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Compaijen, J. R., & Meijer, M. (2021). The Reification of Value: Robust Realism and Alienation. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 29(3), 275-294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2021.1923779>

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The Reification of Value: Robust Realism and Alienation

Rob Compaijen^a and Michiel Meijer ^b

^aProtestant Theological University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; ^bUniversity of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relation between metaethical reflection and value experience, and does so by focusing on robust realism. Robust realism is typically criticized for its ontological and epistemological commitments. In this paper, however, we hope to shed new critical light on the plausibility of the theory by using two concepts – ‘reification’ and ‘alienation’ – that have their origin in critical social theory. We use the concept of ‘reification’ as an interpretative lens to look at robust realism and show that it is reifying in two respects: it turns values into things, and, correspondingly, turns human agents into disengaged observers of those things. This analysis is then used to argue that robust realism is alienating in the sense that it distances us from the world that presents itself to us in value experience, and that it separates us from what we call our engaged responsiveness. We also argue that its alienating effects give us good reason to reject the theory.

KEYWORDS Reification; alienation; robust realism; value; moral experience; Bernard Williams

1. Introduction

In our everyday lives, value experience is ubiquitous. We see a colleague as courageous, perceive the wrongness of a child being bullied, are moved by our friend’s compassion, experience the terrorist attack we see on the news as horrible, and so forth. In this paper we will not be exploring the interesting and controversial issue of the veridical nature of experiences of value. Instead, we will be focusing on what one *particular* metaethical theory, robust realism, does when it reflects on experiences such as these. More specifically, we will focus on robust realism in order to show that its distinctive modes of reflection on value experience ultimately lead to alienation. If we can establish this, that would be an interesting outcome because robust realism, by ‘taking morality seriously’ – as one of its influential representatives recently described it (Enoch 2011) – seems to hold the promise of being unalienating with regard to our experiences of

CONTACT Rob Compaijen  j.r.compaijen@pthu.nl

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value. A second aim of the paper is to show that being alienating is a good reason to reject robust realism.

In trying to meet these two aims, our argument bears structural resemblance to Bernard Williams' influential critique of utilitarianism and Kantianism. Williams, as is well-known, sought to establish that these normative ethical theories are alienating: on his view, they alienate us from our (ground) 'projects' – projects we engage in that give our life to a significant degree its meaning – and our commitments such as friendships and relationships. He argued that this gives us good reason to reject utilitarianism and Kantianism. Our argument differs from Williams' critique, however, in directing the charge of alienation towards *metaethical* reflection (as embodied by robust realism).

Recent years have seen more and more (critical) attention devoted to robust realism. Most of the critique directed at robust realism focuses on familiar ontological and epistemological issues: What is the ontological status of purported objective non-natural moral facts? And how could we possibly come to know about such facts? In this paper, however, we take a different approach. We will be using two concepts – 'reification' and 'alienation' – that have their origins in the tradition of critical theory, in order to shed new critical light on the plausibility of robust realism. We will argue, *first*, that robust realism is reifying in that it simultaneously turns values into things and practical agents into disengaged observers of those things, and, *second*, that this implies that agents are alienated from their surroundings as well as from themselves.

This already indicates that our discussion of robust realism will be quite distinct from the typical debates regarding the theory. We are interested in what robust realism's metaethical reflections do to our experience of value. More specifically, we are interested in how it understands value and practical agency, and the relation between the two. Thus, while it might seem to readers who are familiar with the typical debates regarding the theory that we are concerned with the issue of the relation between normative truths and motivation,¹ we are in fact elaborating a different topic. (Although the argument we develop here might have implications for the relation between normative truths and motivation.)

Although this paper, then, aims to develop a (novel) *critique* of robust realism, it is worth noting that we are also sympathetic to it. We applaud its aim of taking the realist-seeming commitments of value experience and moral discourse seriously in an intellectual climate that is dominated by scientific naturalism. We believe, however, that the specific ways in which it does this are problematic.

The outline of the paper is as follows. In the next part, we briefly characterize the theory of robust realism. In the third section, we draw on Axel Honneth's recent analysis of the concept of reification to argue that

robust realism involves reification. In the fourth part, we use this analysis to argue that robust realism alienates us from the world and from (a significant aspect of) ourselves. In the fifth section, we conclude by arguing that being alienating is a good reason to reject a metaethical theory.

2. Robust Realism

Many moral philosophers, even those who are skeptical of a realist understanding of value, agree that value experience suggests moral realism.² This is mainly because the phenomenology of value experiences suggests that value pertains to the world outside of ourselves. This is, perhaps, most clear in situations in which value experience involves the experience of a demand to act or respond in some way. Such experiences suggest that we are ‘under the spell’ of something outside of ourselves. This has been well described by Maurice Mandelbaum, who was one of the first to systematically engage in the phenomenology of value experience: ‘It is my contention that the [moral] demands which we experience [...] are always experienced as emanating from “outside” us, and as being directed against us. They are demands which seem to be independent of us and to which we feel that we ought to respond’ (Mandelbaum 1955, 54).

How have robust realists attempted to account for value experience within their specific theory? Robust realism, as it is typically understood, is the conjunction of four views: moral realism, cognitivism, objectivism, and non-naturalism.³ *Moral realism* is the view that there is a moral reality that people are trying to represent when they issue judgments about what is right and wrong (Shafer-Landau 2003, 13). As a form of *cognitivism*, moral realism allows for moral judgments to be capable of being true or false in virtue of their (in)accurate representation of moral facts (Shafer-Landau 2003, 17; FitzPatrick 2008, 161). Furthermore, almost all robust moral realists argue that at least some moral judgments are in fact true (Shafer-Landau 2003, 17; FitzPatrick 2008, 161). As a form of *objectivism*, robust realism also makes a claim about the independence of moral facts. What distinguishes moral realism from other forms of cognitivism is the endorsement of the ‘stance-independence’ of moral reality. Robust realists believe that moral judgments, when true, are true independently of what any human being thinks of them (Shafer-Landau 2003, 2). This means that moral facts obtain independently of any actual moral beliefs or attitudes or responses and, moreover, that ‘the moral standards that fix the moral facts are not made true by virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective’ (Shafer-Landau 2003, 15; cf. FitzPatrick 2008, 162, 164). This condition of realism – a matter of substantive debate among moral realists – makes it clear that, for the robust realist, no belief, attitude or response is constitutive of moral truth, as the truth-conditions for moral claims are fixed without any

reference to such perspectives. This effectively rules out ‘ideal observer theories’ which appeal to some preferred perspective (such as that of a fully informed rational agent) in order to construct moral facts from the responses yielded from that perspective in defense of moral realism (Shafer-Landau 2003, 15–16; FitzPatrick 2008, 164). The final element which characterizes robust realism concerns another intramural debate within the realist camp: whether moral realism is best understood as a form of ethical naturalism or non-naturalism. Robust realists defend forms of *non-naturalism*, the view that moral facts are irreducibly normative. Non-naturalism entails that moral facts are not natural facts (Shafer-Landau 2003, 55; FitzPatrick 2008, 166). For present purposes, natural facts are simply the non-normative facts that the empirical (physical, biological, psychological) sciences study. According to the robust realist, moral facts are distinct from any given natural fact and therefore resist any scientific reduction.

It is important to see that robust realism does not engage directly with value experience, but turns instead to the judgments we formulate on account of it. (It shares this focus on moral judgments with most other metaethical theories.⁴) That is, robust realism argues that the realist-seeming experience of value is best understood in terms of moral judgments, which, in turn, are best understood as purporting to represent the facts. In this respect, moral judgments and ordinary beliefs about the world are fundamentally alike as they both seek to describe facts which reflect truths not of our own making. In this sense, Enoch writes, ‘moral discourse at least purports to be objective in roughly the way usual empirical discourse is’ (2018a, 31). FitzPatrick puts this point as follows:

Ethical claims purport to state facts (attributing ethical properties to actions, persons, policies, etc.), and so are straightforwardly true or false in the way that other purportedly fact-stating claims are, by accurately representing the facts or not (FitzPatrick 2008, 161).

As examples of the kind of facts that moral judgments seek to represent, FitzPatrick notes that ‘it is morally wrong to stone gays or rape victims, or to deprive girls of education, or to make voting rights contingent on race, and so on’ (FitzPatrick 2014, 581). For the robust realist, moral facts are best understood as ‘brute facts about value that are not further explicable’ (FitzPatrick 2008, 194). In this respect, Shafer-Landau makes it clear that being a moral realist just *is* to be committed to ‘a set of brute facts for which no further explanation is available,’ as a basic ontological reality: values just are ‘a brute fact about the way the world works’ and there may not be much more for philosophy to say here (Shafer-Landau and Cuneo 2007, 158; Shafer-Landau 2003, 46). The implication here is that robust realism sees values either as purely abstract objects (perhaps like mathematical entities such as prime numbers) or as properties that ‘inhabit’ the world as part of the

‘fabric’ or the ‘furniture’ of the world; that is, to see them as discrete entities that are there anyway – perhaps on a par with ‘geological’ or ‘biological’ properties.⁵

As we have seen, robust realism is understood by its proponents as taking morality (most) seriously. Enoch phrases this in particularly strong terms, claiming that robust realism is ‘obviously the default position’ since ‘much of the game for other views is to cleverly accommodate what non-naturalist realism straightforwardly accommodates’ (2018a, 33). When robust realism claims to take morality at face value, it has a particular understanding of what morality is. In light of the above analysis, it seems clear that morality, on this view, has to be understood in terms of moral judgments that seek to represent brute, objective, non-natural facts. Most of the critique that is brought forward against robust realism focuses on the ontological and epistemological issues that, according to its critics, are attached to it. We adopt a different approach here, aiming to show that robust realism involves alienation. In trying to meet this aim, we now focus on the ‘thing-like’ language that robust realism deploys, that is, to argue that robust realism seems to reify value by understanding it in terms of brute, objective, non-natural facts about the world.

3. Reification

In this section, we will use the concept of ‘reification’ to analyze robust realism. That is, we will use the idea of reification as an interpretive lens, as an idea that helps us to understand what robust realism does in its metaethical reflections. Reification – from the Latin ‘*res*’ or ‘thing’; German: ‘*Verdinglichung*’; literally ‘making into a thing’ – is a complex term that designates the perception and treatment of something as an object or thing; something that is ordinarily not perceived and treated as such. In the philosophical literature, the concept of reification originates from critical social theory, going back to the work of Karl Marx and George Lukács. It has been taken up more recently by Axel Honneth in a way that, we believe, is particularly revealing with regard to robust realism. We therefore briefly consider Honneth’s use of this concept before applying it to the present analysis. Honneth starts from the concept of reification as defined by Lukács:

[For Lukács] ‘reification’ signifies nothing but the fact ‘that a relation between people has taken on the character of a thing.’ In this elementary form, the concept clearly designates a cognitive occurrence in which something that doesn’t possess thing-like characteristics in itself (e.g. something human) comes to be regarded as a thing (Honneth 2008, 21).

Lukács, of course, uses the concept to criticize capitalism. Crudely put, his critique is that all members of capitalist societies are being socialized into

a reifying system that, by viewing human action in terms of economic transactions, will make them necessarily perceive the surrounding world (including human beings) as mere things. On Lukács' account, reification designates a condition 'in which one's natural surroundings, social environment, and personal characteristics come to be apprehended in a detached and emotionless manner – in short, as things' (Honneth 2008, 25). As this passage already suggests, reification involves two elements. *First*, it involves the now familiar movement of viewing one's surroundings (including human beings) as things. *Second*, this corresponds to a process in which human beings become essentially 'observers.' Honneth describes this latter point as follows: 'Here the subject is no longer empathetically engaged in interaction with his surroundings, but is instead placed in the perspective of a neutral observer, psychically and existentially untouched by his surroundings' (2008, 24).

Honneth adopts the basic structure of Lukács' understanding of reification but believes that it ultimately falls short of providing a convincing analysis of reification. The problem he sees in Lukács' theory is that it is insufficiently sensitive to the *value* of disengaged observation. Disengaged observation is what is typically involved in 'intelligent problem solving' (Honneth 2008, 56) and in the sciences in general – and these practices are clearly deeply valuable. In order to account for this, Honneth invokes a distinction that is crucial for his attempt to reinterpret the concept of reification: on the hand, there is disengaged observation that retains 'the consciousness of the degree to which we owe our knowledge and cognition [...] to an antecedent stance of empathetic engagement and recognition;' on the other, there is disengaged observation that forgets this (Honneth 2008, 56). It is this latter attitude – an attitude that Honneth describes as 'forgetfulness of recognition' (2008, 56), where 'recognition' signals his broadly Hegelian interpretation of the idea of 'an antecedent stance of empathetic engagement' – that is the core of reification for him. He goes on to elaborate this understanding of reification in a way that also points to the significance of his analysis for the argument we develop in this paper:

To the extent to which in our acts of cognition we lose sight of the fact that these acts owe their existence to our having taken up an antecedent recognitional stance, we develop a tendency to perceive other persons as mere insensate objects. By speaking here of mere objects or 'things,' I mean that in this kind of amnesia, we lose the ability to understand immediately the behavioral expressions of other persons as making claims on us—as demanding that we react in an appropriate way. We may indeed be capable in a cognitive sense of perceiving the full spectrum of human expressions, but we lack, so to speak, the feeling of connection that would be necessary for us to be affected by the expressions we perceive (Honneth 2008, 57–58).

Honneth argues, then, that when we adopt a stance of disengaged observation in a way that forgets the antecedent stance of engagement and the accompanying experience of being affected by human beings and their world, we will reify human beings and the world at large in the sense that we regard them as things and are no longer able to perceive and experience them as making demands on us.⁶

However, one might wonder, what, exactly, does ‘forgetfulness’ mean here? Honneth emphasizes that we should not understand this notion too radically. ‘It cannot be true that our consciousness can be simply dispossessed of this fact of recognition and that recognition thereby “vanishes” from view. Instead, a kind of reduced attentiveness must be at issue, which causes the fact of recognition to fall into the background and thus to slip out of our sight.’ (Honneth 2008, 59) When we argue that robust realism is reifying, then, we argue, in effect, that robust realism exhibits ‘reduced attentiveness’ with regard to antecedent value experience, which causes value experience ‘to slip out of our sight’.

As we mentioned above, we want to use this analysis of reification as an interpretative lens through which we examine robust realism. Can we understand robust realism as reifying? One might be skeptical about this move from the outset. The concept of reification, it might be argued, is primarily a *social* concept because it is grounded in relations between people. However, since robust realism does not claim to be so grounded, the argument to show that this position involves reification has little impact, even if successful.⁷ We seek to demonstrate, however, that the concept of reification can be used in a much broader sense than criticizing social relations within a certain system of behavior. Our interest in reification is less about relations between people than about the way human beings relate to the world and to themselves. As noted at the beginning of this section, our view is inspired by a broad definition of reification as the perception and treatment of something as an object or thing (something that is ordinarily not perceived and treated as such). In this respect, our specific concern about robust realism (and the way it understands values in terms of brute, objective, non-natural facts) is this: can we understand robust realism in terms of disengaged observation that has forgotten the experience of value (in the sense of exhibiting a reduced attentiveness to it) which is rooted in an antecedent stance of engaged responsiveness?

We believe so. As we have seen, reification involves two related elements. In reification something that is ordinarily not treated as a thing comes to be regarded as a thing, and human beings relate to the world as disengaged observers. In light of this, it seems quite clear that robust realism qualifies as reifying. *First*, it sees value – something that we do not regard as a thing in ordinary value experience – as a brute, objective, non-natural fact about the world that moral judgments seek to represent accurately. Now, one might

object that robust realism does not qualify as reifying because it is concerned with facts and facts are not identical to things. We disagree. The specific way in which robust realism conceives of moral or normative facts makes it evident that they are understood as thing-like entities. As we saw in section 3 above, it conceives of such facts as ‘properties’ – moral, ethical or normative properties – which are to be understood as objects that we can register and seek to represent accurately in our moral judgments. This is sufficiently thing-like for robust realism to qualify as reifying in this respect. Christine Korsgaard undoubtedly made a caricature of the robust kind of moral realism when she characterized it as being in the business of spotting ‘normative entities, as it were wafting by’ (Korsgaard 1996, 44), but the gist of her point – namely, that ethics, according to robust realism, has to be understood in terms of registering thing-like objects in the world – seems accurate. And this relates to the *second* element of reification. By arguing that ethics should be understood as a search for knowledge; that is, by arguing that ethics is about aiming to accurately represent the facts in moral judgments, moral agents seem to be understood as disengaged observers.

Let us make these points more tangible by looking at an example. Suppose that you are at the school your daughter goes to. You overhear a sad classmate, who (you happen to know) comes from a neglecting household, telling his teacher that his mother has moved out. You notice how his teacher comforts and is attentive to him. Now, in ordinary value experience, situations such as these are experienced as involving a demand to ‘react in an appropriate way’ (Honneth 2008, 58), both in terms of emotional responses and in terms of performing some action. We experience the situation of our example in terms of, for instance, demanding pity, we might feel that the teacher’s behavior demands our admiration, we experience a demand to be more compassionate to the persons in our lives who we know feel neglected, and so forth.

Now, by reflecting on such situations in the style of robust realism, one seems forced to regard the value (the compassionate and attentive way in which the teacher relates to the pupil) and disvalue (a child suffering from being neglected) in terms of brute, objective, non-natural properties. Moreover, in robust realism’s reflections one’s relation to these properties is understood in terms of observing them and attempting to accurately represent them in our moral judgments. However, when I relate to the suffering child and the comforting, attentive teacher in these detached ways it seems that I am no longer able to experience the scene as demanding me to respond. In a different context, Akeel Bilgrami (2016, 925) makes a similar point, writing that one may ‘view another person’s condition in detached terms of average daily caloric counts’ but one ‘may also perceive that that person is in need’ – and it is only when we view others as being in need (or, for that matter, as suffering, or as being attentive) that we will

experience a demand to respond in some way. In ordinary value experience we relate to the world in an engaged spirit, and the kind of reflection that is involved in robust realism seems to make us step outside that engagement and adopt a detached, observing point of view.

This point can also be illustrated by looking at the way in which robust realists characterize the relation between human beings and moral facts. Writing about the objectivity of moral truths, Enoch compares moral agents to scientists:

Objective facts are those we seek to discover, not those we make true. And in this respect too, when it comes to moral truths, we are in a position more like that of the scientist who tries to discover the laws of nature (which exist independently of her investigations) than that of the legislator (who creates laws) (Enoch 2018b, 215).

The imagery that is deployed here – the language of discovery and the image of moral agents being more or less like scientists – accords well with Shafer-Landau's characterization of how human beings relate to purported moral facts. Reflecting on the question of whether there might be moral truths that are principally unknowable, he invokes the figure of the ideal epistemic agent: 'Epistemologically ideal agents [...] will be fully informed. This means that they will know all facts. Moral realists believe that some of these facts are moral ones; so a genuinely ideal epistemic judge will know all moral facts' (Shafer-Landau 2003, 17). Of course, he adds, none of us is actually like that, and 'the various epistemic liabilities we carry around with us will almost certainly prevent us from ever knowing the whole moral truth' (Shafer-Landau 2003, 17). As this indicates, what matters on this robust realist picture of morality is *knowing the facts*. More importantly, this implies a picture where the way in which moral agents relate to the world is fundamentally understood in terms of *observing* it – indeed, on a par with scientists who aim to discover facts about the natural world.⁸

We have good reason to suppose, then, that both elements of reification can be found in robust realism. This also gives us ground to conclude that the kind of metaethical reflection that robust realism undertakes *forgets* the experience of value that is rooted in an antecedent stance of engaged responsiveness. By understanding value in terms of brute, objective, non-natural properties and by understanding moral agents as fundamentally in the business of observing those properties and issuing moral judgments that seek to represent them accurately, it exhibits a 'reduced attentiveness' with regard to antecedent value experience, which causes value experience 'to slip out of our sight.' (Honneth 2008, 59) There is very little in the writings on robust realism about value experience and about how robust realism's metaethical reflections relate to it (and this, of course, already suggests the plausibility of our critique of robust realism's 'reduced attentiveness' with

regard to value experience) but let us try to picture how robust realism would proceed. It wants us to reconstruct value experiences, such as the situation of the neglected child, in terms of value judgments. ‘Neglecting one’s child is morally wrong’, for instance, or ‘comforting or attending to a sad child is praiseworthy’. It highlights that value judgments such as these purport to state facts. It tells us that they are true if they indeed accurately represent the facts. And it emphasizes that such facts should be understood in terms of objective, non-natural properties of the world. By now the value experience that gave rise to reflection in the first place, has already ‘slip[ped] out of our sight.’ In approaching it in this way, then, robust realism shows a ‘reduced attentiveness’ with regard to the value experience.

To conclude: on the view that is expounded in this section, robust realism qualifies as reifying. As the history of the use of the concept makes clear, ‘reification’ has a pejorative connotation. Showing that something is reifying is, in effect, criticizing it. In our analysis up to this point, however, that critical dimension has not yet really come to the fore. In the next section we will go on to criticize robust realism, arguing that it leads to alienation because it is reifying.

4. Alienation

Now that we have shown that and how robust realism’s reflection on value experience involves reification, we should ask: why, exactly, is that a problem? Answering that question takes us to a discussion of the related notion of ‘alienation’ (which, quite remarkably, is not very important in Honneth’s account of reification). Succinctly put our answer is that the reifying tendency of robust realism is problematic because it alienates us from the world and from ourselves. We will begin by laying out our conception of alienation.

David Leopold (2018) has aptly characterized alienation as ‘involving a problematic separation between a self and other that properly belong together.’ This description singles out three key features of alienation. *First*, alienation involves a *subject*. Leopold writes that the subject is typically a self, but immediately adds that it might also be a group. *Second*, the subject is alienated from some *object*. Alienation might involve, roughly, three kinds of objects. One might be alienated from other people (for example, from one’s friend, one’s spouse, or one’s family). One might also be alienated from ‘an entity which is not a subject,’ as Leopold writes (for example, from the natural world or certain social norms). Lastly, one might be alienated from oneself (for example, from one’s feelings or (certain features of) one’s body). *Third*, the relation between subject and object should be understood in terms of a *problematic separation*. Importantly, both these notions – ‘problematic’ and ‘separation’ – are necessary in order to properly understand a relation as

alienated. 'Separation' is necessary, because not every problematic relation between a subject and an object is an instance of separation. Leopold gives the example of someone who has 'no life, no identity, finds no meaning, outside of her family membership.' This, arguably, denotes a problematic relation between a subject and an object, but it would be odd to describe it in terms of alienation. To count as alienated, the relation should be one of *separation*. 'Problematic' is necessary, because not every kind of separation between subject and object is problematic. Some relations that involve separation are characterized by indifference (for example, one might be indifferent to a group that supports some sports team) or hostility (for example, one might feel hostile towards a person one competes with in some competition). Although such relations involve separation, it would be odd to describe them in terms of alienation.

Alienation, then, involves problematic separation. Yet, what, exactly, makes separations problematic in the relevant sense? Leopold answers this question by adding a constraint: alienation obtains where a subject and object are separated that *properly belong together*. Further clarifying this constraint, Leopold explains that alienation occurs where a separation between a subject and an object frustrates some 'baseline condition of harmony or connectedness.' That is, to say that subject and object 'properly' belong together is 'to suggest that the harmonious or connected relation between the subject and object is rational, natural, or good. And, in turn, that the separations frustrating or conflicting with that baseline condition, are correspondingly irrational, unnatural, or bad.'

Now that we have a basic definition of alienation in place, let us briefly reflect on two additional ideas that need to be highlighted for a proper understanding of the topic. *First*, alienation implies the idea of a 'prior relation' of connectedness (Jaeggi 2014, 25). The most natural way to understand this is to believe that alienation implies the loss or absence of a condition that once obtained, namely the condition of properly belonging together. As this way of putting it suggests, it is natural to understand this in temporal or historical terms. Schacht (1971, 250) also highlights this by drawing attention to the etymology of the German '*Entfremdung*,' which means *making* or *becoming* alien, and writing that 'the term "alienation" is only employed in connection with separations which were preceded by the relevant forms of unity.'⁹

Second, there is the interesting issue of whether alienation designates only a subjective condition or whether it can designate an objective condition as well. In the former case, the subject itself will *experience* being alienated from an object. In the latter case, one does not have to actually experience alienation in order for one's condition to be correctly described as alienated. We believe that alienation can be an objective condition. It does not seem far-fetched to say that, in some cases, one's relation to an object can be

described as alienated even when one does not feel or experience being separated from that object as problematic. For example, it seems reasonable to say that most people – at least in Western countries – are alienated from the animals whose products they consume. The situation of buying and consuming animal products is so far removed from the production processes of those products that consumers are generally unaware of these processes. This accounts for the shock many people express when they discover how, for example, the meat or eggs they consume are actually produced – and it is typically only *then* that they will experience and report having been alienated from the animals whose meat and eggs they consume(d).¹⁰

Now, with this conception of alienation in place, can we understand robust realism as alienating? We have seen that robust realism is reifying in nature. It conceives of value in terms of brute, objective, non-natural properties and, correspondingly, it regards agents as disengaged observers of those facts. This involves a loss, a forgetfulness of the experience of value that is enabled by our engaged responsiveness.¹¹ Corresponding to this loss, there are two ways in which robust realism qualifies as alienating.

First, by reifying (the elements of) the world that we experience in terms of value, robust realism separates us from (those elements of) the world. Our everyday experiences of people as compassionate or ruthless, of acts as courageous or cowardly, of situations as deplorable or applaudable, and so forth – and the accompanying experiences of demands – express a thoroughly engaged connection to the world. As we have seen in the previous section, robust realism involves a forgetfulness with regard to our prior engaged relation to (an aspect of) the world, and replaces that relation by an essentially different relation to what in an important sense has become a different *world*. In short, it separates us from the world of lived experience.

The key question is whether this separation qualifies as a *problematic* separation. Is it plausible to suppose that there is some kind of ‘baseline condition of harmony or connectedness’ between ourselves and the world that is presented to us in value experience; one that is being violated by robust realism? In other words, can we be said to *properly belong* to that world? We quite obviously do: we always already belong to the world of lived (value) experience. In our everyday lives, we continuously experience demands to be *responsive* to it. That is to say, in our everyday lives, our experience of the world in value terms incessantly has the effect of responding to it in terms of affect that is triggered by it, or in terms of actions that one feels demanded to undertake. Because this is so fundamental, so inescapable, there is an obvious sense in which we *properly* belong to the world that presents itself to us in value experience. Chappell (2017a, 714) makes a point like this when she argues that ‘we experience the world as value-laden, and value-laden from the bottom up; as *drenched* in value.’ She concludes that it

is not our ordinary value-laden world that needs to be justified, but the ‘abstraction[s] from it’ (Chappell 2017a, 714).

Second, robust realism, as we have seen, not only reifies the experience of value but reifies human agents as well. It turns engaged moral agents into disengaged observers of facts, of thing-like properties. Or, to use Honneth’s (2008, 24) phrase, it turns the practical agent into a ‘neutral observer, psychically and existentially untouched by his surroundings.’ In so doing, robust realism separates us from ourselves. It erases a prior relation of connectedness by creating a separation between ourselves and our antecedent engaged responsiveness; that is, it separates us from the capacity that is central to our being involved in the practical affairs that make up most of our daily life, and that, moreover, is fundamental to our attempts to make sense of the world in which we live.

Again, to be able to understand this condition as an instance of alienation, the important question is whether this separation qualifies as a *problematic* separation. The key issue here is whether our capacity for engaged responsiveness *properly belongs* to us. Now, denying that it does comes with the price of denying that we are robustly practical agents; and while this is a view one might theoretically hold, it runs so deeply counter to everyday experience that the burden of proof is on the skeptic here. More importantly for our purposes, it seems very doubtful that proponents of robust realism – who are, after all, ethicists – can be counted among such skeptics.

For these reasons, we conclude that robust realism is alienating. It alienates us not only from the world that presents itself to us in value experience, but also from a vital aspect of ourselves. It may be retorted that those who (are made to) reflect on value experience in the way robust realism does, do not tend to *experience* such reflections as alienating. Note, however, as we have seen, that alienation does not necessarily designate a subjective condition. Perhaps, in fact, it is to be expected that those who reflect on value experience in the style of robust realism will not actually experience alienation. If it is true, as we have argued, that robust realism is reifying in nature, and if reification indeed involves a *reduced attentiveness* to value experience, then it seems not at all obvious to *experience* being separated from that which is given in value experience.

We believe this is an interesting result, because it seemed that, by purporting to take morality seriously, robust realism holds the promise of being unalienating. More generally, the present analysis enables us to see that when robust realism is characterized as taking morality at face value this is not obviously true. While it does *start* from value experience, it ultimately *separates* us from that experience. This result raises an important question: granted that robust realism is alienating in the senses established here, does that also constitute a good reason to *reject* it? Reaching towards the end of this paper, this is the question to which we now turn.

5. Why Being Alienating is a Good Reason to Reject Robust Realism

Our final claim is that robust realism's alienating effects indeed constitute a good reason to reject it. Before developing the argument, it will be helpful to return to Williams' critique of utilitarianism and Kantianism as alienating ethical theories (as mentioned in the introduction of this paper).¹² Adhering to utilitarianism, Williams argues, forces us to view our (ground) projects, friendships, and loving relationships as possessing only instrumental value; that is, valuable to the degree that they contribute to the maximization of utilitarian value. The implication is that we have to detach from our loving commitment to them. In Williams' view, this clearly shows that utilitarianism alienates us from our (ground) projects and commitments. Something along the same lines holds for Kantianism. Suppose that one finds oneself in an emergency where several people are in danger but one is able to rescue only one person. Suppose, also, that among those one could rescue is one's spouse. Is one morally allowed to choose to save her instead of one of the others? Williams claims that while the Kantian view allows for the possibility of being justified in saving one's spouse, the moral justification it provides alienates one from one's (loving commitment to one's) spouse. That is, it 'provides the agent with one thought too many: it might have been hoped by some (for instance, by his wife) that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be the thought that it was his *wife*, not that it was his wife and that *in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one's wife*' (Williams 1981, 18. Emphasis added.).

Williams' critique of utilitarianism and Kantianism has generated a large body of literature, a significant portion of which is dedicated to disputing his line of reasoning. This is not the place to go into these debates. What the debate makes clear is that both sides of the discussion give expression to the idea that the charge of alienation is forceful. Now, the reason that the charge of alienation is generally seen as forceful with regard to utilitarianism and Kantianism is that *these theories purport to be action-guiding*. Utilitarianism and Kantianism aim to develop an answer to the question of what I or we should do. They aim to guide us in our deliberations about how we should go about living our lives. However, Williams' argument suggests that, in their attempt to *guide* us, they in fact *alienate* us from the things that are deeply important to us and that give significant meaning to our lives. He concludes, then, that we have good reason to reject theories that aim to shape our lives but, in doing so, require us to detach ourselves from the things we hold most dear.

What this brief sketch of Williams' critique of utilitarianism and Kantianism demonstrates is that alienation is a good reason to reject a theory if that theory aims to be *practically* relevant. The key question,

then, is whether robust realism aims to be of practical relevance. It might be responded that this is simply the wrong question to ask. One might argue that, because it is a *metaethical* theory, robust realism does not aim to be practically relevant. Action-guidingness and practical relevance more generally are desiderata for normative ethical theories, whereas metaethics is a wholly different game: it analyses moral language, asks whether there are moral facts and how we can have access to them, investigates the nature of practical reasons and their relation to motivation, and so forth. From this perspective, it is simply mistaken to expect robust realism to aim for practical relevance.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, we do not subscribe to this picture of metaethics. There should definitely be time and place in ethics for the questions that make up metaethics, but, we believe, the insights we arrive at when pondering them should remain connected and be brought back to the practices and experiences from which our questions ultimately originate. We are, of course, not the first to make this point. Williams takes this position in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, for example where he writes, famously, that ‘the only serious enterprise is living, and we have to live after the reflection; moreover (though the distinction of theory and practice encourages us to forget it), we have to live during it as well’ (Williams 1985, 117). (In light of our analysis of reification it is interesting to note that Williams refers to forgetfulness here.) Another example is Chappell ([2014] 2017b, 14) who brings forward the view that ‘ethics is essentially practical,’ which she elaborates as follows: ‘By its very nature ethics is about knowing what to do: knowing how to make a difference to the world by our choices’ (Chappell [2014] 2017b, 14). A particularly forceful challenge to the idea that practical relevance is not a desideratum for metaethical thought has been brought forward by Korsgaard.¹³ Korsgaard argues that ‘the business’ of ethics, as a branch of practical philosophy, ‘is to work out solutions to practical problems’ (2008, 325). She is skeptical of the ‘difference between doing ‘meta-ethics’ and doing ‘normative’ or ‘practical’ ethics, and one important reason for this is that ‘[t]he attempt to specify the meaning and reference of an ethical concept will point fairly directly to practical ramifications’ (2008, 326).

Korsgaard’s critique is especially relevant for our current purposes because her critique is specifically directed at moral realism. That is, she criticizes realist metaethical theories for espousing a conception of ethics that does not entail practical relevance. This is how she phrases the point in *The Sources of Normativity*:

According to substantive realism, then, ethics is really a theoretical or epistemological subject. When we ask ethical questions, or practical normative questions more generally, there is something about the world we are trying

to find out. The world contains a realm of inherently normative entities or truths, whose existence we have noticed, and the business of ethics, or of practical philosophy more generally, is to investigate them further, to learn about them in a more systematic way. But isn't ethics supposed to be a practical subject, a guide to action? (Korsgaard 1996, 44)

Korsgaard, in other words, suggests that moral realism's core business is a matter of discovering things about the world, and not about making a practical difference to it.

We believe, then, that the robust realist faces a dilemma. Opting for the *first* horn of the dilemma amounts to claiming that robust realism does not aim at practical relevance. The upshot of this will be that the charge of alienation loses most of its force. If, that is, robust realism does not aim to be practically relevant, then it does not seem particularly problematic that it alienates us from our surroundings and from (a significant aspect of) ourselves. However, opting for the first horn does come at a price, since it now seems to have become unclear in what respects robust realism can intelligibly claim to be a theory in ethics (which its proponents seem to want it to be).

Opting for the *second* horn of the dilemma amounts to claiming that robust realism does aim at practical relevance. This seems to warrant that its proponents can intelligibly claim robust realism to be a theory in ethics. However, it also means that the charge of alienation has significant force against it.

This is not just a hypothetical issue: recent proponents of robust realism have taken up the challenge formulated by Korsgaard. FitzPatrick has responded most directly to Korsgaard's critique.¹⁴ He acknowledges that ethics should aim for practical relevance and that, contrary to what is suggested by Korsgaard, robust realism both does that and is capable of being practically significant (FitzPatrick 2005). More specifically, he argues that the normative truths that moral agents are after according to robust realism 'have clear practical significance for the deliberating agent because [they are] at the same time nothing less than the appropriate solution[s] to her basic practical problems[s]' (2005, 688). A normative truth is 'a truth precisely about what she [the agent] needs to do in order appropriately to exercise her will and constitute herself as an agent' (FitzPatrick 2005, 688). He concludes the article in which he develops these ideas by writing: 'Ethics can be both practical and theoretical – a search for knowledge of normative truth for the sake of the practical end of living well – and the theoretical aspect needn't pose any obstacle to meeting the demand for practical relevance' (FitzPatrick 2005, 691). Enoch (2011, 241) echoes this conclusion when he writes that 'Robust Realism has no problem accommodating a genuine practical role for reason'.

Given these defenses of robust realism's practical significance, the charge of alienation has significant force and constitutes good reason to reject robust

realism. Here we are reminded of Williams' point. If utilitarianism and Kantianism aim to guide us in how we should live our lives, then the fact that they alienate us from the things in life that we hold most dear and that give our lives their meaning, is a powerful argument against these theories. Similarly, if it is true, as FitzPatrick and Enoch argue, that robust realism aims to contribute to the practical end of living well, then the fact that it alienates us from the ordinary world of value experience as well as from (a significant aspect of) ourselves is a powerful argument against it. More particularly, we have good reason to reject a theory that aims to contribute to the practical end of living well, but which, in so doing, *both* separates us from the value-laden world that presents itself to us in value experience and in which we *de facto* attempt to live well, *and* that turns us into neutral observers who are disengaged from their surroundings.

This predicament leaves us with a fundamental question: could there be a moral realism that does *not* end up in reification and alienation? Answering this question requires a paper on its own. Here we will conclude our paper by highlighting Williams' suggestion that such a moral realism should be richly phenomenological in nature:

There could be a way of doing moral philosophy that started from the ways in which we experience our ethical life. Such a philosophy would reflect on what we believe, feel, take for granted; the ways in which we confront obligations and recognize responsibility; the sentiments of guilt and shame. It would involve a phenomenology of the ethical life. This could be a good philosophy, but it would be unlikely to yield an ethical theory (Williams 1985, 93).

Exploring the possibility and viability of a phenomenologically informed moral realism is a project well worth pursuing. Even if such an inquiry would not amount to an ethical 'theory' in the traditional sense, it holds the promise of attuning us to the world rather than to alienate us from it.

Notes

1. As elaborated, for example, by Enoch (2011, 217–266).
2. Cf. Dancy (1986); Mackie ([1977] 1990, 15); Blackburn (1993, 152); Smith (1993); and Brink (1989, 23–24).
3. We focus here on the position that emerges from the views of Shafer-Landau (2003) and FitzPatrick (2008).
4. According to Williams, the focus on judgments or beliefs lies in the nature of ethical theorizing as such: 'The natural understanding of an ethical theory takes it as a structure of propositions, which, like a scientific theory, in part provides a framework for our beliefs' (1985, 93). However – and this is highly relevant for the thrust of this paper – he also notes that '[e]thical theories, with their concern for tests, tend to start from *just one aspect of ethical experience*' by focusing on ethical beliefs.' (Williams 1985, 93. Emphasis added.)

5. Enoch (2011, 203) makes the comparison between the realities of mathematical knowledge and moral knowledge, Mackie ([1977] 1990, 15–16) speaks of the ‘fabric’ and ‘furniture’ of the world in rejecting moral realism, and Shafer-Landau (2003, 63) draws the analogy between moral and geological/biological properties.
6. Referring to theories that see the world as a mere set of *objects* about which we can get objective knowledge, Charles Taylor uses the term ‘epistemological blockage’ to denote the phenomenon that such theories obscure from view our practically involved relation to the world (Meijer and Taylor 2020, 992–993).
7. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.
8. Cf. Enoch’s claim that ‘moral discourse at least purports to be objective in roughly the way usual empirical discourse is’ (2018a, 31); Although our critique of the reifying nature of robust realism raises important questions about how this view relates to naturalistic approaches to ethics, those questions are beyond the scope of this paper. Our concern here is mainly to show that robust realists reify value experience by understanding moral properties as objects of cognition.
9. There is some debate on the question of whether alienation *necessarily* implies the idea of a historical prior relation. Rahel Jaeggi (2014) mentions the possibility of a *logical* or *ontological* understanding of the idea of a ‘prior relation.’ Peter Railton also argues that alienation need not imply a historical prior relation. He writes: ‘I do not assume that the loss in question represents an actual *decline* in some value as the result of a separation coming into being where once there was none. It seems reasonable to say that an individual can experience a loss in being alienated from nature, for example, without assuming that he was ever in communion with it, much as we say it is a loss for someone never to receive an education or never to appreciate music’ (Railton 1984, 134).
10. It might be objected that the admission that alienation can be an objective condition – that is, that one can be alienated even if one does not experience alienation – does not sit well with our emphasis on the importance of phenomenological accuracy in ethics. Note, however, that there would be a full-blown tension in this regard only when we would argue that alienation can be a condition that is *principally inaccessible to human experience*. But this is not what we argue. What we argue is that there might be factors that obstruct recognizing or experiencing one’s condition as being alienated, and that, once these factors no longer obtain, one will recognize or experience one’s condition as one of alienation. We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing us on this point.
11. As noted earlier, our criticism here is directed at robust realism, not the general discussion on moral realism: while robust realism claims to take value experience at face value, our criticism is that it loses sight of value experience.
12. For a recent paper that explores Williams’ critique of normative ethical theory as alienating, see Smyth (2018).
13. See especially Korsgaard (1996, 2008).
14. But see also Enoch (2011, 237–241).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek [016.Veni.195.447]; Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek [69771].

ORCID

Michiel Meijer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7776-8075>

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