

IS THERE A WAY TO INVOKE THE MUSIC ITSELF
WITHOUT EMBARRASSING OURSELVES?

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the School of Music and Dance
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts

June 2014

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Title: Is There a Way to Invoke the Music Itself Without Embarrassing Ourselves?

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Degree awarded June 2014

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Master of Arts

School of Music and Dance

June 2014

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The interpretation of analytical claims about music presents a dilemma between positivism and fictionalism: is it that the structures imputed by the analysis are part of the *reality* of “the music itself,” or are the structures merely a shorthand? Although there is growing agreement that we lack direct epistemological access to the music itself, the dilemma does not disappear, in large part because we feel an ethical obligation to respect the music. We intend to “get it right” by hearing how we believe the music itself demands to be heard. This thesis adapts Simon Blackburn’s quasi-realist program in meta-ethics to the ontological interpretation of music analysis. Quasi-realism allows scholars to hold that although analytical choices boil down to values, this does not prevent the expression of realist-sounding ontological claims implied by their work. The analogy with quasi-realism provides an additional motivation for further work in the ethics of music analysis.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express sincere appreciation to Professor Grant for his guidance and insight during the development of this project, as well as to Professors Boss and Rodgers for their additional feedback on the manuscript. I would also like to extend a broader appreciation not to only the members of the committee but also to all my professors and colleagues at the University of Oregon and Williams College for their stimulating conversations, high standards, and good spirits.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Certain novels not only cry out for critical interpretations but actually try to direct them. This is probably analogous to a piece of music that both demands and defines the listener's movements, say like a waltz.
—David Foster Wallace¹

When it is not immediately obvious whether something is an upbeat or a downbeat, choosing between the two can seem pretty arbitrary—you feel that the analysis is forcing you to make judgments that are not demanded by the music itself.
—Nicholas Cook²

In our contemporary era in which the supreme sin within humanistic discourse might be said to be naiveté, as Bruno Latour wryly observed in 2004,³ there is a strong imperative to avoid embarrassing ourselves. In music scholarship, this means retreating from any position that might entail one of a panoply of discredited epistemological and ontological premises regarding the autonomy of “the music itself” and our capacity as scholars to determine stable musical “facts.” In his 1999 essay “Analysis in Context,” Jim Samson delivers

1. David Foster Wallace, “The Empty Plenum: David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10, no. 2 (1990), 217.

2. Nicholas Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis* (London: J.M. Dent, 1987), 81.

3. Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004), 239.

both a précis of the argument for epistemological pluralism in music and against autonomous and positivistic premises, which would otherwise contribute to an unearned “ambition and pretension” on the part of the analyst,⁴ as well as an argument against conflating poetic and interpretive functions, for the reason that it would spoil the “vital capacity of the significant text ... to make its own statement.”⁵ This is not a diagnosis of inconsistency on Samson’s part—on the contrary, it is a vivid example of the moderating, pacifying centrist pluralism that is advocated throughout the contemporary literature on the foundations and epistemologies of musicology and music theory. Giles Hooper, in the course of arguing that the matter of “the music itself” is a red herring, warns us against the “impaired conception [that] arises when either of these constitutively dialectical poles is hypostasized—that is to say, when music is viewed either as existing absolutely prior to any discursive engagement or as coming into existence only as a contingent product of the latter.”⁶ Better to tread lightly between the horns of the dilemma than to stake a claim at one end or the other.

From this it would seem that these are safe times for musical scholarship. The intersections of musicology and theory, of text and context, and of discovery

4. Jim Samson, “Analysis in Context,” in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 46.

5. *Ibid.*, 53.

6. Giles Hooper, “An Incomplete Project: Modernism, Formalism and the ‘Music Itself,’ ” *Music Analysis* 23, nos. 2–3 (2005), 319.

and interpretation are each protected by a blinking red light: so long as one stops and acknowledges the opposing traffic, one may proceed with caution. And yet the stakes with respect to scholarly naiveté have remained quite high. Kevin Korsyn's 2003 monograph critiquing contemporary musicology and theory, *Decentering Music*, bids us to transcend discursive binaries (text/context, history/theory, modernism/postmodernism, subjective/objective), lest one commit the same errors one set out to correct. All in all, his is a very cautious and commendable position, and yet Korsyn found himself the subject of a devastating review by Ruth A. Solie in which she argues that the study has come ten years too late to be sufficiently relevant, that the problems animating Korsyn's study "hardly even sound familiar any more," and that the epistemological and ontological caveats he invokes are so pervasive as to be pedestrian. Her verdict is unflinching: "I wonder if Korsyn isn't just rueing the human condition, rather than identifying a specific crisis?"⁷

Solie's impatience is not uncommon. Notes of fatigue and even apology permeate the studies that have continued to stir the embers of the musicology vs. theory polemics of the 1990s—those that transpired between Kerman and Agawu, McClary and van den Toorn, or even within critical musicology, between Tomlinson and Kramer on how vigorously one must guard against

7. Ruth A. Solie, review of *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research*, by Kevin Korsyn, *Music and Letters* 85, no. 3 (2004), 421.

reifying the notion of “the music itself” once more.⁸ Just as Solie announces that “we’re all pretty bored by now” with these polemics, Michael Klein supposes even Kerman would be surprised by the extent to which rejoinders by analysts have been “so varied and sustained” during the same period when “certain theorists even in the early 1980s had already begun to explore areas that resonated with the tones of his new musicological paradigm.”⁹ It is worth remembering that Kerman’s original polemic ends with its own note of moderation: he summarizes his call to action as concerning the recognition of “other kinds of aesthetic value in music besides organicism. I do not really think we need to get out from analysis, then, only out from under.”¹⁰ Agawu’s final substantial contribution to the debate begins, tellingly, with a chronology, turning a contemporary investigation into the epistemology of music theory into

8. Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); Kofi Agawu, “Analyzing Music under the New Musicological Regime,” *The Journal of Musicology* 15, no. 3 (1997): 297–307; Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Pieter C. van den Toorn, *Music, Politics, and the Academy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Gary Tomlinson, “Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer,” *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 18–24; Lawrence Kramer, “Music Criticism and the Postmodernist Turn: In Contrary Motion with Gary Tomlinson,” *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 25–35.

9. Michael L. Klein, *Intertextuality in Western Art Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 46–7.

10. Joseph Kerman, “How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (1980), 331.

an inquiry into historical music theory (or historical new musicology, in equal measure).¹¹

Both the moments of inception and reception of these polemics seem the most tame: it is as if the supreme act of naiveté today is to suppose that there remains a live issue requiring some resolution. James Currie elegantly summarizes two main reasons that the notion of “the music itself” persists in contemporary discourse. First, whether we follow Hooper in his invocation of Habermas’s theories of communicative action and intersubjectivity, or else invoke Kant’s conception of “regulative ideas,” there is some sense in which “the music itself” must persist as a locus for our thoughts. Second, in order to maintain the deconstructive impulse, it must inevitably be parasitic upon a corresponding *construct*. All this in two paragraphs, before Currie immediately declares his greater interest in other questions, “timely as such analyses are for musicology’s self-reflection.”¹²

I wish to reanimate the matter of “the music itself” in a way that rejects the commonly-voiced idleness of the question—not in order to return to a regulation of one kind of scholarship by another or to upset our hard-won methodological pluralism in any way—but rather to insist that the epistemology

11. Kofi Agawu, “How We Got Out of Analysis, and How to Get Back In Again,” *Music Analysis* 23, nos. 2–3 (2004), 267.

12. James Currie, “Music After All,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 62, no. 1 (2009), 177–8.

of music analysis (the field most susceptible to an ontological commitment to “the music itself”) is not merely a matter for self-reflection, but raises critical matters of cognitive dissonance that cannot help but impinge on active praxis. In an essay treating the possibility of forming criteria of correctness in music analysis, Jonathan Dunsby can be heard to even apologize for asking such an idle question: “If truth is the first casualty of activity, and if all is not what it seems, and if we are not plagued here by ethical questions, what sort of purchase do practitioners have on the practice of music theory? ... It is hard to imagine a more contingent question in a more contingent context.”¹³ Dunsby does not drop the matter insofar as he then proceeds to propose ways of thinking about theoretical suitability, but most revealing is his trenchant conditional: if truth and ethics are off the table, then we are left with a rather idle matter.

Arguing the converse makes the matter more vivid: if the contemporary pluralist methodology that refuses to be caught on either horn of the dilemma between positivism and fictionalism (defined on pp. 10–11) entails quite idle and obvious solutions to epistemological and ontological questions such that “either/or”s can be sufficiently remedied with comfortable “both/and”s, then there is nothing at stake, ontologically or ethically. A central point of this study is that this is an unacceptable result. Marion Guck observes in an essay titled

13. Jonathan Dunsby, “Criteria of Correctness in Music Theory and Analysis,” in *Theory, Analysis and Meaning in Music*, ed. Anthony Pople (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 81.

“Music Loving” that it is difficult to comprehend the fervency of Tomlinson’s critique of Kramer (with respect to the latter’s contextualism still depending on some notion of the music itself) if it is considered solely as a matter of academic politics: “Kramer seems to be getting to him somehow. There’s something more at stake....”¹⁴ She locates Tomlinson’s discomfort inside a broader reticence to acknowledge “music loving” within scholarship, and here arises once again the risk of embarrassing ourselves: “We do not call ourselves music lovers; we call amateurs music lovers. My title was difficult to settle on because I kept finding it embarrassing.”¹⁵ Notwithstanding the fact that the linguistic turn has permanently fixed the separation of our affections (i.e. discourse) from the source of our affections (i.e. music), it still seems that we can follow Guck in holding that the reason one embarks on musical scholarship in the first place—our love of music—should commit us to some thesis about the power and agency of the music itself.

Although my position is that we need a new solution to this question, I should reiterate that the dilemma between positivism and fictionalism is formidable. I wish to salvage the ontologically-implicative dimension of analytical discourse, though not by latching on to either horn of the dilemma—

14. Marion A. Guck, “Music Loving, Or the Relationship with the Piece,” *The Journal of Musicology* 15, no. 3 (1997), 344.

15. *Ibid.*, 345.

for instance, something like “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Positivism” —but rather by arguing that the dilemma must be transcended more radically, neither denying its force nor succumbing to either untenable position.

In Chapter II, I expose the ongoing ontological and ethical commitments of music-analytical discourse despite its consonance, as currently practiced, with the epistemological insights advanced by the New Musicology. In Chapter III, I sketch a means of transcending the dilemma between positivism and fictionalism without denying its force through an analogy with Simon Blackburn’s “quasi-realist” theory of ethics. A proponent of quasi-realism subscribes to an anti-realist metaphysical position about ethics while sanctioning realist-sounding first-order ethical talk. Indeed, realist second-order or *n*th-order ethical talk is just as valid—it is only at some supernumerary point of reflection, quite separate from *doing* ethics or moralizing, that the anti-realist insight emerges at a point safely removed from active praxis. Applying this to music analysis, we discern that the axis from description to explanation, and perhaps even beyond that to truth, is essentially “flat,” since the differences merely reduce to the further deployment of first-order normative claims. (In sum: it’s values “all the way down.”)

Although each line of argument could be viewed in isolation, i.e. the task of resurrecting the dilemma considered separately from the task of salvaging the

semantics and sense of contemporary analytic discourse through an analogy to ethical quasi-realism, it is noteworthy that ethics emerges as a point of convergence between the two lines of argument. Since ethics is profitably considered as entailing responsibility to a corresponding principle, and it is the notion of the music itself that will receive new attention in Chapters II and III, Chapter IV imagines the consequences of invoking the music itself once again—not naïvely reified as a truthmaker for objective claims, nor resolving the text/context dialectic in favor of text alone—but as an agent to which listeners owe some obligation or responsibility, or as an agent with powers to direct or demand our hearings.

CHAPTER II

ONTOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION

2.1. Orders of Avowal

The dilemma I wish to stage (and ultimately transcend) between what I am loosely calling positivism and fictionalism depends on the diagnosis of a degree of ontological avowal in music analysis, as the two ideas amount to different assessments of an ontological claim about how the music might “go,” conceived independently of any specific act of perception. I call the effort to claim how music “goes” ontological construction. Later in this section I will argue why music analysis is best conceived to entail such a dimension, but first I will clarify the dilemma I am posing about the assessment of ontological construction.

By positivism, I mean the idea that an analytical claim about the way music goes is supposed to correspond with the way the music *actually* goes. For instance, one would say this: we find in the first four measures of the Prelude in C Major from Book 1 of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* a tonic prolongation; this is not merely convenient analytical shorthand, but rather tonic is actually being prolonged.

By fictionalism, I mean the idea that any analytical claim about the way music goes is a fiction, as there is no sense in which music *actually* goes any certain way, at least not in any way accessible to music analysis. One might revise the previous example: the first four measures enact a tonic prolongation, and we tend to think of this as the prolongation of some real tonic; however, “tonic” and “prolongation” are inventions, terms that help us tell a better story about the music rather than terms that refer to real objects, whatever a “real” tonic would be.

Rather than treat this as an epistemological question, I would rather introduce the matter as a second-order ontological avowal: on positivism, the first-order ontological proposal (“here is how the music goes”) is affirmed; on fictionalism, it is automatically denied. There is something attractive about each alternative: whereas the fictionalist view remedies what Samson called the “ambition and pretension” of the analyst, it comes at the cost of any positive proposal that the music goes any certain way—and who are we to say that music goes no particular way?

The reason I would rather not characterize the question as an epistemological one is that I am supposing that contemporary music analysis can be practiced in a way that harmonizes with the epistemological insights advanced by the New Musicology: for instance, that we should be suspicious of

the search for and attempted demonstration of “deep-structural universals,” that we should reject methodologies that appear designed to articulate a principle (e.g. organicism) in order to install such a principle as the value system of the ideology, and that structural listening is the superior mode of listening.¹⁶ I am imagining a contemporary discourse that espouses a healthy fallibilism about its own claims and that recognizes any sense of evidence for its claims to be thoroughly self-referential. It has become a common refrain that if an instance of music analysis is said to be true, it is best considered as true to the underlying theory rather than to the music. Thus the dilemma between positivism and fictionalism would resolve quite easily in favor of fictionalism, so long as the problem is framed as an epistemological one.

Above I argued against such a facile resolution to the problem for the reason that it would render the matter idle: there would be nothing at stake, and we would be comfortably insulated from any thesis ascribing power or agency to the music itself. A second reason for framing the problem instead as a question of second-order ontological avowal is that it makes one who is caught in a moment of cognitive dissonance while practicing music analysis appear considerably less

16. On “deep-structural universals,” see Susan McClary, “The Blasphemy of Talking Politics During Bach Year” in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*, ed. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 13–62. On organicism and ideology, see Kerman, “How We Got Out of Analysis,” 318. On structural listening, see Andrew Dell’Antonio, ed., *Beyond Structural Listening?: Postmodern Modes of Hearing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

hapless. Imagine the absurd paraphrase of one's research that would be entailed by an analyst's subscription to fictionalism as an epistemological position: "bear with me while I tell you how tonic is being prolonged, even though it really isn't, since tonics are just invented concepts." The fictions constructed by the analyst, on this idea, would be so plainly invented that they would be better thought of as composed, as if analysis were nothing but the hypothetical composition of pieces that have not actually been composed. David Lewin invokes Bloom's theories of intertextuality in the course of evaluating phenomenological approaches in music theory in order to reach a similar point: that any phenomenological reading would amount to the production of another piece.¹⁷ Lewin has been rightly criticized by Hyer and Klein for the hapless, anxiety-free scenario that results.¹⁸ So much the better for Lewin, I will argue, as I believe him to be arguing at that moment for the insufficiency of the conception of music theory as phenomenology, but for the moment let us, too, hold this hapless picture of the practice of music analysis to be a reason against construing the central problem as merely an epistemological one.

Construing the problem as one of second-order ontological avowal renders the music analyst less hapless by removing the specter of incoherence

17. David Lewin, "Music Theory, Phenomenology, and Modes of Perception," *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3, no. 4 (1986), 382.

18. Brian Kane, "Excavating Lewin's 'Phenomenology,'" *Music Theory Spectrum* 33, no. 1 (2011), 35n48; Klein, *Intertextuality in Western Art Music*, 29–30.

from the first-order ontological avowal, that is, the interpretation of an analytical claim as stating “this is the way (or one of the ways) that the music goes.”

Whereas I argued that the epistemological point resolves fairly automatically into fictionalism, the fact that the second-order ontological avowal presents a live paradox renders the first-order avowal less suspect. As it is this sense of first-order “ontological construction” that I am aiming to diagnose and salvage, let me first introduce some critics of analysis and show how they, too, recognize this second-order ontological paradox and sanction a limited conception of first-order ontological construction.

Lawrence Kramer, in his 1995 *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, argues directly for a conception of music scholarship that foregrounds the “contingency and rhetoricity” of scholarship without renouncing an “appeal to standards of truth and falsehood, reality and illusion, reason and unreason...”¹⁹ He first sympathetically quotes Donna Haraway, who lobbies for us “to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, ... *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of the “real” world...,” but then indicates a sensitivity for avoiding contradiction by calling Haraway’s vision a tall conceptual order, asking us to reconceive Haraway’s simultaneity “as a fluctuation or negotiation among

19. Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 7.

different standpoints.”²⁰ I read Kramer as loathe to repudiate neither the contingency thesis nor the realist thesis, yet still suspicious of the attempt to embrace both at once, calling instead for a fleet-footed “negotiation” between distinct standpoints. He concludes with a note of commonsense postmodernism: “Yet an order such as this should be feasible if we can get beyond the modernist frame of mind and recognize that contingency and rhetoricity are, not antithetical to reason, but interdependent within it. ... At the same time, contingency and rhetoricity do profoundly alter and ramify the truths involved with them, some of which *do* drop out of the picture.”²¹

Kramer proceeds to his next topic without specifying the class of truths that are destined to fall out of the picture, but given his interest in devaluing the modernist sensibility, it would be natural to assume that music analysis—or at least a socially myopic variety of analysis—is included in the target. Here is the objection, from later in the introductory chapter: “Modernist forms of musical understanding ascribe a unique self-referentiality to music that renders it largely opaque from ‘extra-musical’ standpoints. Music must somehow be understood from the inside out.”²²

20. Ibid. 7–8.

21. Ibid., 8.

22. Ibid., 13.

The dimension of necessity Kramer attributes to this mode of scholarship is how his objection gains its force. Of course it is not true that music *must* be understood in any given way. So it is that rejecting this sense of necessity could provide an easy means of dispensing with the objection. Giles Hooper reminds us that the impossibility or implausibility of “the music itself” as an ontological entity or epistemic warrant does not entail any methodological prohibitions:

The key normative issue concerns the utility or desirability of framing and interpreting music as an autonomous manifestation of ideal structural relations. In itself, this is not a matter that can or should be resolved by appealing to the ‘actual’ ontological condition of music or to the nature of our epistemological access to it. That music is multiply mediated does not commit us, exclusively and a fortiori, to the adoption of those modes of interpretation oriented towards articulating it as such; one can readily acknowledge that the production, reproduction and reception of music are shaped by myriad material or ideological contingencies, while still placing a normative importance on investigating the internal properties of a given musical object or utterance.²³

But Hooper’s suggestion is only possible if Kramer’s diagnosis of a claim to methodological *necessity* on the part of music analysis is misplaced. One of the chief arguments against the hegemony of older scholarship was the claim that, *contra* Hooper, placing a normative importance on the investigation of the internal properties of a piece of music *forecloses* the recognition of music’s material and ideological contingencies. Susan McClary critiques such an exclusionary stance this way:

23. Hooper, “An Incomplete Project,” 317.

If one feels comfortable and identifies with what is being articulated in a particular kind of music, one is likely to be happy ascribing to it universality and extra-human truth. ... In other words, advocates of dominant culture tend to take refuge in a neo-Pythagorean position (that is, 'we didn't make this up: this is simply the order of things').²⁴

The number of scholars who would mouth such neo-Pythagorean certainty was surely greater when McClary wrote in 1987 than now. Even Kramer supposes widespread agreement on the epistemological point when he supposes in 2012 that "most musical analysts will now readily admit (or at least admit when pressed) that statements about form or structure do not represent music positivistically, 'as it really is.'" ²⁵ However what Kramer is worried about in 2012—the matter about which he has to imagine *pressing* analysts a little bit—is a continued insistence on the primacy of "formal" statements over "expressive" statements. Kramer takes great pains to demonstrate that expressive statements are no less true than formal statements.

And yet an analyst could quite easily reply that this leaves formal statements just as true as expressive statements. The Kramer of 2012 appears to be quite easily answered: so long as we no longer voluntarily offer implausible subscriptions to "extra-human truths" or the supremacy of one kind of scholarship over another, we can admit that we are "making things up," but still

24. McClary, "Blasphemy of Talking Politics," 17.

25. Lawrence Kramer, *Expression and Truth: On the Music of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 22.

hold that this is also supposed to be the order of things. It is not that music *must* be understood from the inside out; it is only that in some particular study, an analyst chooses to understand it that way, for practical reasons that are open to debate.

Although this reply would be responsive to the Kramer of 2012, I am not sure that it would be responsive to the Kramer of 1995, who, even though he wants to preserve a place for scholarship to address reality as against unreality and to employ reason as against unreason, also seems inspired by the McClary of 1987 to hold that analysts *inevitably* commit themselves to the supposition of “extra-human truths,” no matter if they deny such a thing when pressed.

To renew the views of Kramer 1995 and McClary 1987 today, when the targets of their criticism happily accept the same epistemological caveats, means to insist, against Hooper, that our lack of epistemological access to the music itself *should* bear against the decision to place a normative importance on investigating the internal properties of music. To do so, the idea goes, would be to commit a fundamental error.

This is the main sense in which a critic of analysis like Kramer might refrain from endorsing the contemporary practice of analysis that would otherwise harmonize with the advances of the New Musicology. One might formulate the critique of an analyst as follows: indeed, you agree that we lack

direct access to the music itself, and yes, you grant that expressive statements are no less valid than formal statements—however, by choosing to theorize form and structure, you theorize something uniquely autonomous such that it spoils your epistemological caution. One cannot theorize about tonic prolongations without believing in “real” tonics and “real” prolongations, the idea goes, and this becomes hard to square with a skepticism about whether the concepts we use to invoke the music itself are *actual* components of the music.

Such a view is analogous to “error theory” about ethics. There are a variety of views about ethical discourse that refrain from ascribing an ethical structure to the world itself, and yet only error theory insists on delegitimizing all moral discourse as a result. In Chapter III, I develop an analogy to Simon Blackburn’s quasi-realism as a means of glossing analytical discourse, and indeed error theory is one of Blackburn’s targets. Blackburn notes that John Mackie, a famous error theorist, continues worrying very much about ordinary moral matters despite his central conviction that moral discourse fundamentally rests on an error. Blackburn argues that this is enough to cast doubt on the original diagnosis of error.²⁶ Likewise one might wonder whether, if Kramer and McClary can help themselves to a degree of ontological construction in their preferred vocabulary (Kramer’s “expressive statements” and McClary’s own

26. Simon Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 150.

critical readings), why it would be that analytical vocabulary is inherently infected.

The objection must not be directed against the act of ontological construction *per se*, but against imputing analytical structures that lend themselves to claims of greater priority: ontological priority for the objects of explanation, and greater prestige for the explainers. Regarding the former, Nicholas Cook observes that “common to Cartesian philosophy and classical science is the principle of explaining phenomena by deriving them from a domain of knowledge to which ontological priority is ascribed.” On this nineteenth-century view, however, unlike that of the natural sciences, “the appropriate objective for the human sciences is therefore not certainty but understanding, and the means by which it is to be achieved is not explanation but elucidation.”²⁷ Cook locates in the late nineteenth century a “prevailing sense of disenchantment with positivistic methods” and associates it with Schoenberg’s call for a system “whose clarity is simply clarity of presentation, a system that does not pretend to clarify the ultimate nature of the things presented.”²⁸ Here, then, we are faced with a modernist who refuses to claim *ontological priority* for what is presented, an endeavor that will later be castigated as the root problem of

27. Nicholas Cook, “Epistemologies of Music Theory,” in *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. Thomas Christensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 92–3.

28. Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, trans. Roy E. Carter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 11.

arch-modernist modes of musical understanding. Instead Schoenberg intends to clarify the presentation of a first-order ontological proposal—what am I calling ontological construction—while avoiding any second-order ontological avowal about the supposed ultimate nature of the music or the inherent priority of the vocabulary used for paraphrase.

Kramer's concern in 1995, in the face of his subscription to the ideal that musical understanding should still target reality as opposed to unreality, amounts to the same point: that analysis must avoid positing a second-order ontological avowal, not merely "this is how the music goes" but "this is how the music *really* goes." The objection is against the modality of the descriptive effort, not its scope.

The point so far has been to demonstrate a difference between orders of ontological avowal, and to suggest that offering first-order proposals of ontological construction is a viable aim of musical understanding, one that can sustain the epistemological skepticism inspired by the New Musicology without suffering incoherence. However, one might still think it too clever by half to rest on a distinction between saying how the music goes and saying how the music *really* goes. One could try to install greater distance between the notions by weakening the modality of the first-order proposal from "here is how the music goes" to "here is how the music might be said to go," but this would come at the

cost of the entire ontological dimension. No longer would we be concerned with the music's agency over us, but rather with the music's imagined, hypothetical agency. We would return to the idle state of affairs where nothing is at stake and there is no problem save the dull, general malaise diagnosed by Solie. Instead we must become more comfortable with commitments to how music goes, not necessarily how it *really* goes, but neither merely how it *might* go.

2.2. Diagnosing Ontological Construction

Unfortunately there is a vivid example in the contemporary literature of an avowal of second-order ontological priority by a theorist professing to demonstrate what *really* happens:

In my view, nineteenth-century composers were not explicitly concerned with inversional relationships as such; instead these relationships appear as *necessary by-products* of a deeper and more fundamental concern with efficient voice leading. Rather than being the syntactic engine that drives the music, inversion is merely epiphenomenal—the smoke that escapes from the locomotive's chimney, rather than the furnace that makes it go. And though dualism can be useful in analysis, this is largely because it is a tool that helps *us* to comprehend the range of voice-leading possibilities available to nineteenth-century composers.²⁹

29. Dmitri Tymoczko, "Dualism and the Beholder's Eye: Inversional Symmetry in Chromatic Tonal Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Neo-Riemannian Music Theories*, ed. Edward Gollin and Alexander Rehding (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 253.

Here Dmitri Tymoczko is offering a methodological critique: he is asking us to avoid ascribing ontological priority to the vocabulary of inversion for the purposes of explanation. Why? Because there is an alternative vocabulary that *does* hold higher priority.

One wonders how this could be stated so baldly. I suppose he intends to have the historical argument—that second-practice nineteenth-century composers, as a matter of fact, did not compose with inversions in mind, but rather with an ear for parsimonious voice leading—resolve the question of how to ascribe greater or lesser ontological priority to the various objects of the explanation. This way one might frame Tymoczko’s concern without making any reference to what *really* happens. It is as if Tymoczko sees it as harmless to simply help himself to the additional avowal.

Joseph Dubiel, in the course of making a diametrically opposite point that explanation, as opposed to *mere* description, does not necessarily carry the mark of “special rational command,” curiously helps himself to the same locution: his essay is entitled, “Analysis, Description, and What Really Happens,” even though the *really happens* locution occurs nowhere in the body of the text.³⁰

Dubiel’s piece is also a methodological critique: he asks us to stop holding that the act of analysis, at minimum, requires explanation *over and above* mere

30. Joseph Dubiel, “Analysis, Description, and What Really Happens,” *Music Theory Online* 6, no. 3 (2000).

description. He is not even asking us to begin valuing description as a worthy aim of analysis, as he thinks any distinction drawn between sufficient versus insufficient purposes of analysis is invidious. His final formulation of what the act of analysis might look like under this purged vocabulary is roughly similar to the sense of first-order ontological construction: “if you’re articulating a distinct and interesting conception of how a piece goes, you’re doing all that you need to do,” as opposed to occupying oneself with a further “anxiety about whether one is rising to the exalted level of analysis.”³¹ Thus we should be concerned only with saying how a piece goes. But whither what *really* happens?

Both Tymoczko and Dubiel are helping themselves to the additional avowal of what *really* happens in a piece—Tymoczko because he presumably wants to double-down on that second-order ontological avowal, Dubiel because he wants to *do away* with any sort of second-order realm that would confirm or refute the first-order avowals. I read Dubiel to be asking: in the absence of any fundamentally different “analytical” procedure over and above “mere description,” what is the harm in saying some description of how a piece goes is also an account of how a piece *really* goes, in whatever deeper sense one might be imagining?

31. *Ibid.*, 17.

Even though the two authors escalate quite automatically from deciding what happens to deciding what *really* happens, we should maintain a way to tell the two apart, as they are making radically different claims. Tymoczko thinks there is a real elevation between the two levels, whereas Dubiel thinks it's flat, and if it's flat, it matters not whether one shuttles between locutions that were once regarded as more or less exalted. Dubiel would like us to dismiss the distinction between analysis and description, but if we reinterpret analysis (as he would surely sanction) to include any act of ontological construction, and then view description as merely one way to interpret that construction, among others more theoretically involved such as explanation or justification, then we would maintain a way to distinguish different senses of analytical discourse, that is, a way of telling the Tymoczkos apart from the Dubiels. Even if we follow Dubiel in holding that all the more theoretically exalted vocabulary (explanation, justification, what *really* happens) adds nothing fundamentally different, we can maintain a scale of theoretical involvement from description, to explanation, to justification, in order to discern where an analyst's intentions lie.

Even though Dubiel spends the majority of his essay arguing for the primacy of description, he even slips into the vocabulary of explanation and justification—providing only further proof of Dubiel's "flat" conception of the grades of theoretical involvement. He says that the new conceptions of certain

pieces (i.e. descriptions) offered to him by other analysts led him to believe that certain events were “supposed to happen” and that they “sounded just fine,” contrary to his first impressions.³² Even though this is the language of teleology (explanation) and permissibility (justification), Dubiel’s point is that this vocabulary can merely tag along once the conceptual work of the description is done. In his response to Allen Forte’s reply to his essay, Dubiel explains that he is more interested in what experiences of music are supposed to correspond with what analytical statements, rather than investigating (or regulating) the differences between strongly or weakly framed analytical statements: “I would cite my writings as evidence that I am committed to mobility along the methodological continuum, not to any fixed point on it.”³³

If there is no elevation between second-order and first-order ontological avowals—if the difference is really only something superficial, like repeatedly avowing something or stamping one’s foot—then we might wonder whether the New Musicological critique of second-order avowal developed above could return to infect the first-order level. (Recall that even critical writers like Kramer desire to keep a window open for some innocent first-order description.) Should we legitimize the entire vocabulary from what happens, to what *really* happens,

32. Ibid., 5-6.

33. Dubiel’s reply found in Allen Forte, “Responses to Plenary Session Papers, NECMT 2000,” *Music Theory Online* 6, no. 3 (2000), 2.6.

to even what's true, as in Kramer 2012's *true* expressive statements; should we delegitimize the entire vocabulary, along the lines of error theory in ethics or of McClary 1987 and Kramer 1995; or should we maintain that we can sanction some claims, e.g. "innocent" description, and not others?

2.3. Determinacy

The solution Kramer 2012 employs to salvage an innocent sense of description is to insist on the fundamental distinction that Dubiel wished would go away, the one separating description and explanation. Kramer asks us to follow Wittgenstein, "a writer who sharpens description where others call for explanation."³⁴ He supposes that this will enable interpretation without entailing the questionable sense of "realistic" descriptions, i.e. empirical descriptions. Instead, following Habermas's concept of validity claims, Kramer's idea is that descriptions will help produce realities independent of every particular description.³⁵

Some division of description and explanation along these lines has to be possible so long as one maintains that there is a substantial difference between

34. Kramer, *Expression and Truth*, 3.

35. *Ibid.*, 26.

first-order and second-order ontological avowal such that the former is permissible while the latter is not. Description has to be an innocent opening of possibilities, and explanation has to be the result of an explicitly fixed, closed-off conception of a piece. Several writers have identified this possibility-restricting dimension of explanation. David Lewin argues that use of the restrictive terms “merely, only, simply, naught but” in analytical vocabulary “either calls forth an unspecified aesthetic criterion” or becomes “confused with priority in a syntactic system.”³⁶ Although Lewin’s assessment of this possibility is negative—he calls it particularly “dangerous” with regard to Schenkerian and post-Schenkerian scholarship, as the syntactical dimension is so explicit—others sanction the possibility. Nicholas Cook’s 1987 monograph on musical analysis distrusts such “aesthetic determinism,” but he shows how it follows directly from the conception of analysis as justification held by theorists such as Boretz, Schenker, and Keller. In those cases an aesthetic determinism undergirds music analysis, allowing it to rise beyond mere description, but in Cook’s estimation this comes at the cost of “the ‘deletion of the listener’ as a free agent.”³⁷ Still, one must not swing too far in the other direction. If one were to actually undertake Meyer’s procedure for analyzing rhythm, Cook argues, the cumbersome way it enforces

36. Lewin, “Music Theory, Phenomenology,” 361.

37. Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis*, 223–4.

radical skepticism renders it most useful for *clarifying* problematic passages, that is, describing them in *preparation* for their explanation by another theory.³⁸

Theoretical indeterminacy, for instance that which is spurred by a recurring question of “ ‘where do I feel there to be downbeats, and relative to what?’ ” robs theory of its explanatory power.³⁹

Agawu’s complaint in 1993 that “an analysis that terminates in undecidability represents a retreat from theory” explicitly relies on this point. By “theory-based analysis” in tonal contexts, he invokes the priority of a syntactic system and the restriction or determination of possibilities:

While ambiguity is conceivable in the abstract, it is not clear that it remains so in practice. We can all compose abstract or white-note examples in which the dimensions interact in such a way as to produce equivocality in the mind of the listener. But once a specific musical context intervenes, and once an explicit metalanguage is brought into play, alternative meanings are arranged in a hierarchy. ... One might argue that the criterion of equal or comparable plausibility is too strict. We might answer that theory is only meaningful in a restricted context.⁴⁰

Critics of theory-based analysis have seized upon this idea of determinacy in order to undermine the restriction of possibilities involved in explanation or second-order ontological avowal, thus creating space for a more innocent sense of description. Eugene Narmour’s direct response to the aesthetic determinism

38. *Ibid.*, 80.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Kofi Agawu, “Music Analysis and the Politics of Methodological Pluralism,” in *Revista de Musicología* 16, no. 1 (1993), 406.

proposed by Cook and the criterion of comparable plausibility proposed by Agawu is to insist that “indeterminism must be introduced, which rules out, in principle, the notion of predictability.”⁴¹ He identifies why this is so, speaking specifically about Schenkerian theory, by faulting its supposition of a “deterministic, supersummative agency” that determines all local events as implausible.⁴² Regarding the procedure of reduction in Schenkerian theory, Narmour faults the lack of context-free rules of synonymy—in essence arguing that it is not sufficiently determinate to meet its own standards: “without this, there can be no adequate theory-building.”⁴³ Narmour goes on to propose a theory modeled after transformational grammar in order to accommodate both context-free and context-sensitive rules of synonymy, but ultimately he holds that both transformational grammar (including its musical analogues) and Schenkerian theory can only demonstrate properties about its object language, not the individual statements in that language.⁴⁴

For similar reasons, Alastair Williams rejects the utility of strands of analytical practice employing “the pervasive logic of equivalence and

41. Eugene Narmour, *Beyond Schenkerism: The Need for Alternatives in Music Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 126.

42. *Ibid.*, 33.

43. *Ibid.*, 53.

44. *Ibid.*, 202–3.

fungibility.”⁴⁵ So far, so good for the critics of determinacy. If the criticisms are on target, then there is a substantive difference between first-order and second-order ontological avowal such that description avoids the perils of explanation. This is what Kramer 2012 would like to see: “The immediate object of any interpretation is always a description of the proposed object rather than that object itself. The description thus has the different task of opening up interpretive possibilities without predetermining their outcome.”⁴⁶

However, it is worth considering how Narmour and Williams then propose to describe or analyze pieces, since if they end up accommodating the opposing notion *for what amount to the same reasons*, then there would be an occasion to reassess the supposed innocence of description and iniquity of explanation, as well as to reassess whether Kramer is conducting his ontological construction any differently than the analysts he imagines needing to press.

Regarding individual pieces, Narmour calls for a comprehensive representation—not merely opening the piece up to various interpretive possibilities, following Kramer, but also somehow *capturing all of them*: “ideally ... the idiostructure’s representation should capture all those characteristics that

45. Alastair Williams, “Torn Halves: Structure and Subjectivity in Analysis,” *Music Analysis* 17, no. 3 (1998), 284–5.

46. Kramer, *Expression and Truth*, 19.

make the first four bars of Schumann's piece its unique self."⁴⁷ Of course his statement is tempered by its use of the word *ideally*, but we must respect the point that the goal of representation in this case is to omit nothing, at least nothing that makes Schumann's piece its unique self, which is to say nothing that determines it. The reason that we must reject Agawu's "restricted contexts" for music analysis, or his or any Schenkerian's adoption of a metalanguage is that it insufficiently determines the piece. Narmour, in sum, is in favor of representational determinacy but opposed to the deeper involvement of theoretical determinacy, where the difference consists in the adoption of an unlikely metalanguage. And how is it that one assesses the likelihood or fitness of the metalanguage? On the basis of Narmour's comment about the four bars of Schumann: by whether it captures enough of the music itself.

Alastair Williams participates in the same negotiation between aspects of determinacy. Consider the quote referenced above regarding the pervasive logic of equivalence, now in a larger context:

The problems generated when zealous construction is imposed on music are well known: the intended order becomes arbitrary, unable to control individual elements which assert a life of their own. ... In this sense, the technique is an application of the pervasive logic of equivalence and fungibility characteristic of advanced industrial societies, whose monitoring of detail produces randomness and indeterminacy because events are endlessly exchangeable.⁴⁸

47. Narmour, *Beyond Schenkerism*, 164.

The problem? Zealous construction *being imposed on music*. The intended order failing to represent the music because its theoretical components assert a life of *their own* and not the music's. Endless detail producing *indeterminacy*.

The source of the problem is the zealous construction: again, the imposition of an unlikely metalanguage. Zealous imposition conjures trespass; trespass conjures agency violated.

We are loath to injure the music itself. Theoretically ambitious metalanguages often argue for their own adoption by attempting to downgrade their theoretical involvement from explanation to description. Jairo Moreno argues that the “disclaimers” Weber offers in the course of his analysis of the opening of Mozart’s “Dissonance” Quartet (K. 465) assume the “guise of description,” which is to attribute to Weber the intent to mitigate the reader’s wariness about his explanation by adopting the disguise of innocent description.⁴⁹

Tracing the escalation of confidence over the course of chapter 1 of Allen Forte’s *The Structure of Atonal Music* reveals a similar concern. Section 1.0 presents a musical example designed to convince us that we need new explanatory principles for atonal music to replace the role harmonic-

48. Williams, “Torn Halves,” 284–5.

49. Jairo Moreno, *Musical Representations, Subjects, and Objects: The Construction of Musical Thought in Zarlino, Descartes, Rameau, and Weber* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 136–7.

contrapuntal considerations played in constraining and determining meanings in tonal music. Section 1.1 begins in abstract generality with Babbitt's pitch-class sets, and section 1.2 outlines the rules for normal ordering. There are no musical examples in these two sections, because there is no argument for the metalanguage yet. Section 1.3 provides the first musical argument: three musical excerpts (by Berg and Webern) produce examples of temporally disparate sonorities that can be united by the pc-set transposition operation, one addressing a question of coherence within a movement, another addressing a question of coherence between movements. Section 1.4 presents the argument for inversion, the more theoretically involved operation. Following an excerpt of Schoenberg's, Forte presents an example from Ives's *The Unanswered Question* to argue for the descriptive adequacy of inversive equivalence—one of three examples by Ives in a book devoted almost entirely to music by Second Viennese School composers—and makes a special point of noting that it precedes Schoenberg's early atonal compositions. After a final example from Schoenberg, Forte precedes to section 1.5, where he develops his system of assigning numbers (e.g. 4–19) to the various prime forms.

At this point, the argument for adopting Forte's metalanguage is over. He has presented his arguments for transpositional and inversive equivalence by demonstrating unity in passages where we are most likely to expect it (thematic

recurrence or analogous points in movements), and he has also given us an early historical example. So far this all seems natural. Immediately after the argument for the metalanguage, i.e. during section 1.5, Forte criticizes Perle for describing the set Forte names 5–22 as “a diminished triad with conjunct semitone not only superimposed ... but also subimposed” for the reason that “ad hoc descriptions of this kind usually rest upon some analytical interpretations, as in the case cited here.”⁵⁰ Even though on the preceding page Forte has just finished arguing for the adequacy of inversional equivalence for descriptive purposes through analytical interpretations of Schoenberg and Ives, somehow Perle is sneaking ad hoc analytical interpretations into the innocent, neutral province of description.

If arguing for the theoretical adequacy of the metalanguage amounts to nothing more than further analysis, or another act of ontological construction holding that the music goes some *other* way, some way more determinate, or more respectful of the music itself, then so much is just another first-order ontological proposal. Narmour and Williams have not articulated reasons to adopt representative determinacy but to reject theoretical determinacy that are distinct from further exercises of representative determinacy.

We are left with a “flatness” between description and explanation along the lines articulated by Dubiel. Each notion does the work of determinacy, and

50. Allen Forte, *The Structure of Atonal Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 12n*.

each is evaluated on that same score: whether it captures enough of the music itself. Look to the left, and we see mere description; look to the right, and we see what happens, followed by what *really* happens, and even what's true *simpliciter*, even though each of these depends on the assumptions undergirding the supposedly neutral descriptions.

The ease with which we may transit between description and explanation may or may not ultimately prove beneficial, but it does tend against Kramer 2012's suggestion that description may open up interpretive possibilities without predetermining their outcome. If the continuum is "flat," we must reconsider the question posed at the conclusion of Section 2.2: whether the epistemological skepticism inspired by the rejection of positivism as an epistemological principle at the level of the second-order avowal could return to infect the first-order level, and thus whether the entire vocabulary from description to explanation to perhaps even truth should be legitimized entirely, partially, or not at all.

There is a positive possibility and a negative possibility, each of which relies upon grounding descriptions upon hearings, as opposed to an epistemologically implausible "music itself." The positive possibility, as presented by both practitioners and critics of analysis, supposes that theoretical differences can be heard—not just imaginatively heard, but *actually* heard, in some sense that can legitimize the discussion. The negative possibility supposes

that the more seriously we interrogate the realism underlying talk of *actual* hearings, the more we will recognize an unwanted ontological determinacy of hearings as something *given*, rather than constructed.

2.4. On Hearing: The Normative and Performative Facilitation of Ontological Construction

Roger Scruton's joint diatribe against analytical philosophy and the "false sciences and cabalisms of musicology," including at least Schenkerian theory, semiotic theory, and twelve-tone theory, rests on the central objection that, rather than misrepresent, they merely describe the wrong thing: "They offer to explain how the notes are *in themselves*, and not how they are *in the ear of the listener*."⁵¹

This is a charged issue for music analysis. Nicholas Cook is aware of the danger, and he is even in tentative agreement with Scruton when he faults other analysts for not pursuing such a union of the music itself with the music as heard: "Doesn't this imply that what the semiotic technique is really telling us about is not the music as such but analysts' interpretations of it?"⁵² Cook renews this objection against pc-set analysis: "Aren't we in danger of making precise

51. Roger Scruton, "Analytical Philosophy and the Meaning of Music," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46 (1987), 171.

52. Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis*, 181.

statements about musical scores which have only the vaguest connection with the music we experience?"⁵³

It is clear Cook wishes to strengthen that vague connection, but by how much? Theories that rely on a Freudian or psycholinguistic plumbing of the subconscious go too far. He supposes that the descriptive-explanatory axis must have been held to terminate in psychologistic premises for it to have inspired the fervency of the debate over the determination of the Tristan chord:

As I said, analysts explain this chord by deriving it from one prototype or another – a motivic formula, a II^7 or whatever. Now what does such derivation mean? It could simply mean ‘it is convenient to think of the Tristan chord as an elaboration of x’, and, as a matter of fact, I consider this to be the correct way to understand such a derivation. But this is clearly not what analysts have thought, because if so, the controversy over the chord could not have raged all these years; there would have been nothing to argue about. As it was, analysts furiously rejected each other’s interpretations because they were arguing over whether the chord was ‘really’ a diminished seventh or whatever ... In other words, they saw the process of deriving the chord from one prototype or another ... as in some way representing what the listener does too – though only unconsciously, of course.⁵⁴

Cook’s casual tossing off of the word *whatever* indicates his disdain for the sort of determinacy at work here. His objection is to psychologism, and perhaps to sophisticated “derivation” in general—but if he wants to maintain his emphasis on characterizing the music itself in tandem with the music as heard, he must

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., 222.

temper his doubts about theoretical determinacy. Surely an implausible psychologism must not be a prerequisite for the disputational or normative character of analytical discourse. For Cook, theory's ontological constructions must be more than matters of *convenience* if we are to maintain that there is some way that the music itself demands certain constructions over others, as he does here: "When it is not immediately obvious whether something is an upbeat or a downbeat, choosing between the two can seem pretty arbitrary—you feel that the analysis is forcing you to make judgments that are not demanded by the music itself."⁵⁵ It is not that we must repudiate the question of whether a sonority is *really* a diminished seventh; it is that the horizontal descriptive-explanatory axis must terminate in premises about the music, not about ourselves.

Kerman seizes on this matter of how the disputational character of analysis could be grounded. He faults Schenkerian theory for what amounts to deterministic overkill by doubting that its determinations can *actually* be heard:

It seems interesting, incidentally, and possibly significant that this apparently simple song still leaves room for debate as to the precise location of the principal structural tones. ... More serious interest might attach to this debate if someone would undertake to show how its outcome affects the way people actually hear, experience, or respond to the music. In the absence of such a demonstration, the whole exercise can seem pretty ridiculous.⁵⁶

55. *Ibid.*, 81.

56. Kerman, "How We Got into Analysis," 325.

It is worth noting that Kerman frames his challenge in terms of how analysis might possibly inform hearing, rather than how analysis might be said to proceed on the basis of hearing. Indeed, he presumably regards Schenkerian theory so implausible as a theory of perception so as to render the latter possibility demonstrably false. But since there is nothing constraining the adoption of imaginative hearings (and here we can cite Bryan Parkhurst's enumeration of the prospects and challenges attending the effort to turn words into "heards"),⁵⁷ Kerman's challenge only gains its force via its reliance on the avowal of *actually*: "how its outcome affects the way people actually hear." On this idea, there is some definite way that we hear—actually. Unless Kerman means to be advancing a psychologistic theory, he is beside Cook in arguing that the descriptive-explanatory axis should terminate in premises about the music itself and its power to demand or define our hearings.

Such is the positive possibility regarding the legitimacy of description and explanation: that theoretical differences can be heard not just imaginatively, but *actually*, in a way that legitimizes the identical avowals of *actually* and *really* at points further along the horizontal axis: this is a diminished seventh, this *really* is a diminished seventh, and it is *true* that this is a diminished seventh.

57. Bryan J. Parkhurst, "Hearing-As as Knowledge-How," paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Royal Musical Association, Music and Philosophy Study Group, King's College London, July 2013.

The negative possibility rejects this sense of the determination of hearings—not because it is unlikely, but as a result of the insufficient agency ascribed to the listener. After all, these are supposed to be hearings, not merely “heards.”

David Lewin’s sustained presentation and development of a model of music analysis that employs phenomenology presents a puzzle for the reason that he spends the latter part of his essay arguing for its insufficiency. Moreover, that insufficiency does not necessarily consist in a feature inherent to the model itself (called the *p*-model), but arises as a result of “the sociology of the matter,” were it to be adopted.⁵⁸ Brian Kane explores Lewin’s web of references in order to determine why Lewin would have been led to make such a sustained “close-but-no-cigar argument,” and he draws the insightful connection to what has been termed the West Coast interpretation of Husserl. Just as Lewin argues that adoption of the *p*-model would enforce the untenable assertion that “In such imaginings, ‘the music’ *Y* is profoundly and fundamentally *there*, as made by some *Z*, prior to any activity of *X*-now, even prior to *X*-now’s presence. For *X*, *Y* has *Gegebenheit* and *Dasein*, not just *Sinn* and *Anwesenheit*. Roughly speaking, *X* finds *Y* *given* and *there*, not just *sensible* and *present*,” Kane associates this with Dreyfus’s “West Coast” reading of Husserl, on the basis of Lewin’s own

58. Lewin, “Music Theory, Phenomenology,” 374. Also *Ibid.*, 378.

citations: “Dreyfus, on the other hand, is a critic of Husserl. Although he appreciates certain aspects of the phenomenological project initiated by Husserl, he ultimately critiques Husserl’s epistemology for being too disembodied and for getting the phenomena wrong.”⁵⁹

One way to address the puzzle is to read Lewin to be presenting the argument referenced earlier as “the negative possibility” regarding the legitimacy of ontological avowals along a description-explanation axis that terminates in *hearings*. If the problem really is the sociology of the matter rather than anything inherent in the model, then why must the model be thrown out as opposed to the sociology? (Likewise, if Lewin is drawing so heavily on Dreyfus’s reading of Husserl, why not just jettison Dreyfus?) Lewin waxes lyrical about how the sociology might be different—we might integrate scholarship, composition, and performance; we might stress skillful coping; we might prefer knowledge *in* music to knowledge *of* music—but there is a fundamental pessimism that spoils the rosy possibilities. The futility thesis is expressed by an argument about institutional discipline: student musicians “are being encouraged by our educational system to dissociate the understanding of music from its production and performance, to associate ‘musical understanding’ with

59. Hyer, “Excavating Lewin’s ‘Phenomenology,’ ” 29.

an ability to give approved responses in English, and/or in certain symbolic languages, to art works that are 'given' and 'there'"⁶⁰

The alternative picture Lewin gives is the one where analytical choices are demonstrated at the piano, where the disputational dimension of analysis can rely upon the *performance* or *reproduction* of certain hearings before they are certified as knowledgeable, expert, musical, or sensitive. Lewin is drawing attention to how deathly seriously we devote ourselves to the end of the descriptive-explanatory axis terminating in thorough avowal. If the other end of the axis terminates in hearings, as it would according to the *p*-model, then the *certified, true, or actual* conceptions of a piece would supervene on particular, fixed hearings, doing injury not merely to the music itself, but also to our own agency in creating those hearings.

This critique applies just as forcefully to more accepted modes of music theory and analysis that do not employ phenomenology. Lewin recognizes this and redoubles his critique. Traditional forms of musical analysis reinforce a disputational dimension that terminates in avowal, in the manner of voting or settling a political/legal dichotomy, rather than in performance:

When we contemplate such political/legal dichotomies, whether introspectively or in debate with other analysts, the discomforts we feel are symptoms of a deficiency in traditional analytic discourse. These

60. Lewin, "Music Theory, Phenomenology," 379.

discomforts arise whenever we make, about a listening experience, any statement of syntactic form, 'The X is'⁶¹

Lewin is arguing that music analysis, *in general*, runs the risk of reinforcing an unwanted ontological avowal that closes off possibilities and legislates the hearings of others. If we adopt the *p*-model, then at least we will have gained a method of flagging and disambiguating opposing analytical statements and perceptions. However, so long as we maintain an emphasis on what is *really* true or *actually* heard as a result of the sociology of the matter, or more specifically, so long as we present political/legal disputes to students in exams and ask them to vote in an acceptable way, then the implausible ontological determinacy at that second- or *n*th-order avowal will return to infect the first-order phenomenological report. The phenomenological object (the music) will have *Dasein* instead of *Anwesenheit*, Lewin argues, due to the implausible ontological determinacy that flows from self-certifying our analytical statements.

Of course, the possibility remains that we could voluntarily give up such self-certification in the face of the epistemological critiques issued by the New Musicology. But Lewin may be excused for his pessimism, as he is describing the sort of flatness between description and explanation that Dubiel argued for in 2000, and Allen Forte was surely speaking on behalf of many more when he

61. *Ibid.*, 357.

indicated that he wasn't having any of it.⁶² Indeed, just as Dubiel was not arguing for the utility of description, but instead for a radical dismissal of the entire joint descriptive/explanatory concept, neither does Lewin's proposal to transcend political/legal disputes through performance and skillful coping refute the utility of maintaining "rational discourse."⁶³ It is only that this rational discourse— unless the topic is the well-formedness of an analytical statement in some metalanguage— terminates in *values*:

The model can also distinguish other sorts of priorities that are helpful in avoiding fruitless legal/political controversy. ... I argue that discriminations of this sort are methodologically desirable, not because I believe that value judgments are unimportant in the critical context but— on the contrary— precisely because I believe they are so *very* important. We ought to be correspondingly clear about what those values *are*, to ourselves and— where the occasion demands it— to others. That is why we should not mistakenly confuse our values with formal properties of rationalist systems.⁶⁴

Formal properties of rationalist systems do not depend on values, of course, but any political/legal dispute that might transpire after their application *would* depend on the deployment of values, or a demonstration through performance. To ignite controversies on the basis of something as tautological as formal properties would be fruitless in Lewin's estimation.

62. Forte, "Responses to Plenary Session Papers," 1.

63. Lewin, "Music Theory, Phenomenology," 360. Also *Ibid.*, 367.

64. *Ibid.*, 373.

Such is the negative proposal: better not to legitimize the vocabulary of determinacy of the descriptive-explanatory axis so long as it terminates in objective “heards,” insufficiently conceived as “given” and “there,” rather than terminating in normativity or performativity. Or, to make the negative proposal into a positive proposal, one must foreground the role of normativity and performativity. Whereas Kerman’s positive proposal (albeit cast as a challenge) terminated in a psychologism about hearing, Cook’s interest in what analytical decisions might be said to be demanded by the music itself terminates in the attribution of some obligation to the music itself. The positive and negative proposals thus share normativity and performativity as common ground.

We might finally answer the question of whether the epistemologically implausible conception of deterministic, self-certified higher-order ontological avowals could return to infect first-order ontological construction with the reply that the best way to legitimize the vocabulary of ontological construction is to rely on some foregrounded conception of normativity and performativity, as well as on an attribution of some obligation to the music itself.

Cook, in his chapter on epistemologies of music theory in the 2002 *Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, summarizes the central epistemological question that has occupied scores of theorists since the eighteenth century as follows: “what is the nature of the non-propositional

knowledge acquired through the perception of art, and what are the criteria of adequacy or inadequacy, truth or untruth, that apply to it?"⁶⁵ After indicating that the text/context dichotomy applies no less to historical musicology, Cook continues, "but the situation is more uncomfortable in the case of music theory, because it is that much harder to make a confident distinction between the theory and the reality that it purports to represent. As we shall see, the issue finally resolves into one of how far music-theoretical language is to be understood as a mode of representation at all, as against the extent to which it is to be understood in performative terms."⁶⁶

Performativity, Cook argues, has been a viable option for grounding the epistemology of music analysis since the eighteenth century, and so much would be in agreement with Lewin's concerns. But whither representation? Must we regard the conception of music analysis as a form of representation, subject to normative concerns of adequacy and inadequacy "as against" an understanding in performative terms? Lewin's negative proposal, recast above as a positive proposal for the legitimacy of ontological construction, depended upon such performativity in order to *preserve* representation, "rational discourse," and the deployment of values.

65. Cook, "Epistemologies of Music Theory," 79.

66. *Ibid.*, 80-1.

Agawu's final contribution to the heated contest over the claims and purposes of music analysis argues forcefully for a conception of analysis as play. By 2004, the discourse he bids us to "get back in again" has undergone extensive renovation: we find that analysts are "released from the dubious responsibility of having to establish the authenticity of the analysis," that the discourse privileges the oral and aural over the written, and that "all of this boils down to an attitude, an ethical attitude, perhaps." Agawu's assessments mingle with sympathetic exegesis of Adorno, so although it is at times difficult to tell whether Agawu places his full voice behind certain claims, the footnote attached to this passage arguing that "the ethics of music analysis (as distinct from theory or criticism) is a subject awaiting proper discovery and comprehensive discussion by Anglo-American music theorists"⁶⁷ suggests Agawu's authority is behind this particularly important claim—that analysis boils down to attitudes, attitudes constrained by an ethical obligation to the music itself. Here we have a different proposal for the left-most terminus, so to speak, of the descriptive-explanatory axis: instead of hearings or "heards," we have the actual music itself.

But neither will Agawu's subscriptions to normativity and performativity lead him to repudiate representation. The entire sub-section on "Analysis as Composition" proceeds on the explicit claim that analysts construct

67. Agawu, "How We Got Out of Analysis," 284n26.

representations.⁶⁸ Part of the joy of the play, I take it, is the “invitation to a way of perceiving,”⁶⁹ which can be viewed as a mode of representation. The fictions constructed by the analyst are simply that—fictions, modes of representation—and yet they are “the ultimate facilitators of truth-telling.” The stakes would not be very substantial if the truth-telling concerned truths about the fictions—that is, about hearings or “heards.” Presumably these are fictions that tell truths about the music itself. Hence Agawu’s claim that “we need an ethical attitude toward constructing these fictions.”⁷⁰

Bryan J. Parkhurst has developed a useful model for glossing analytical discourse that draws on meta-ethical expressivism in an article titled “Fraught with Ought: An Outline of an Expressivist Meta-Theory.”⁷¹ One of the central insights of expressivism, drawing on Hume, is that causal and moral beliefs are fundamentally attitudes rather than propositions subject to proof or disproof. This much would model well the normativity and performativity of Agawu and Lewin, but the explicit point behind Parkhurst’s model is to excise propositional knowledge, or any sort of world-disclosing representation. Parkhurst argues that

68. *Ibid.*, 277.

69. *Ibid.*, 276.

70. *Ibid.*, 279.

71. Bryan J. Parkhurst, ““Fraught with Ought: An Outline of an Expressivist Meta-Theory.” *Music Theory Online* 19, no. 3 (2013), 19.3.6.

“the elemental statements of musical analyses, statements I call ‘analytical utterances,’ are not best understood as descriptions (either of music or of one’s mental states), but instead as normative claims about how one *ought* to hear music,”⁷² for the reason that he holds the intuition that “analytical utterances are meant to engender action and experience, not belief.”⁷³

The important question remains of whether we should be so willing to jettison representation and description. Among Parkhurst’s animating concerns are Marion Guck’s so-called incorrigible statements regarding properties such as appearing unexpected. He would like to sanction analytical utterances that are hardly more than avowals of unexpectedness (Guck’s unexpected C-flat), without requiring us to demand *evidence* for such a statement, as we would if it were treated as a belief. However, his proposal covers not just these statements, but rather the elemental components of all analytical utterances. Here is his model:

I attempt to understand analytical utterances as, at bottom, a way of using language to endorse a conceptual scheme and its attendant ways of hearing. To that end, I posit these equivalences: The sentence “*x* is (an) *f*” (offered as an analytical utterance) = an endorsement of norms that make it correct to hear *x* as (an) *f* = an endorsement of norms that, together with some facts, entail the imperative ¡hear *x* as (an) *f*!⁷⁴

72. Ibid., 8.

73. Ibid., 16.

74. Ibid., 21.

Parkhurst reminds us that his imperatival analysis does not preclude the involvement of facts; indeed, the analytical statement fundamentally expresses an attitude endorsing a set of norms, “together with some facts.” Parkhurst argues, “really, offering an analytical utterance means accepting a host of background norms and background facts.”⁷⁵ It is only that the categories of facts Parkhurst imagines serving in this role—facts about the composer’s intent, the music’s historical reception, the way to appreciate a work, or a fact set entailed by an analytical method (i.e. Schenkerian theory)—are facts about *us*, not about the music.

On the one hand, Parkhurst accepts that analysts may continue employing description: “I concede the point about descriptivity ... I’ve held that in offering an analytic utterance, a music analyst commits herself to the truth of some set of background facts. Often it will be obvious what those are, and so the analytic utterance can function to communicate (or assert, if you like) those very facts.”⁷⁶ Yet on the other hand, the space he has regained for description and assertion does not allow for world-disclosing or music-disclosing representation; instead the representational space he regains is for the assertion of historical facts (composer intent, historical reception) or stipulated facts (correct labeling of

75. Ibid., 23.

76. Ibid., 35.

objects according to the rules of a theory). His original statement of intent explicitly argued against the conception of analytical utterances as communicating descriptions of the music itself, which would foreclose first-order ontological constructions along of the lines of *this is how the music goes*, or at least diminish their ontological dimension to a merely hypothetical one.

This is not surprising, as Parkhurst is surely conscious of the heavy conceptual lifting required to proceed as if descriptions can capture the music itself. He cites Lewin as following Kant in recognizing that descriptions are irreducibly concept-laden, and so much is in agreement with the points developed above that description is not innocent or neutral any more than explanation is iniquitous. Although Parkhurst's model is an excellent model of the normative, performative, and the attitudinal dimensions of analytical practice, we might still return to the question posed several times above: what do we say about a discourse that *does* claim to represent the music itself, owing to an ethical claim about respecting the music itself? To what extent do we legitimize a vocabulary that runs along a horizontal descriptive-explanatory axis if its left-most terminus is the music itself? Parkhurst would have us legitimize the discourse insofar as we recognize it as fundamentally normative and attitudinal—that it's values all the way down, so to speak—but his model comes at the cost of any successful targeting of the music itself, and the point so far has

been that various writers have adopted sufficient epistemological caution without having to forego any reference to the *actual* music. And what else are these attitudes for? We might recall Marion Guck's problem about music loving: shouldn't our reason for entering the field of musical scholarship in the first place commit ourselves to some thesis regarding the agency of the music itself?

We saw above that arguments for or against the adoption of a metalanguage resolved into questions about how best to capture the music itself. We also saw the failure of descriptions to target hearings or "heards" in a convincing way, as they enforce an implausible determinacy about our concepts (or Parkhurst's background norms and facts) in violation of (or isolation from) the music itself. Kramer 2012 recognizes as much, even though it was his positive proposal that descriptions might open up interpretive possibilities without predetermining their outcomes. Elsewhere he admits that descriptions are even prior to hearings.⁷⁷

What we need, then, is a model that builds on Parkhurst's expressivist one without renouncing the possibility that analytical utterances are able to invoke the music itself, and not merely our hearings, or background norms about our commitments. In short, we need to find a way for analytical utterances—even if they are fundamentally attitudinal—to express a commitment to the music itself,

77. Kramer, *Expression and Truth*, 13.

not merely a commitment to our other background commitments— which would be the epitome of idleness.

When Dubiel asks us to dismiss the invidious distinction between description and analysis, he does not deposit his reader in an idle position lacking better alternatives. He instead describes a “thrilling” possibility: the “realization of the power of music to overturn ideas about it and of the power of thought about music to determine what music is.”⁷⁸ These are the possibilities that we wish to retain without suffering incoherence: that thought about music, construed along a horizontal descriptive-explanatory axis, bears the task of determining music, but that its left-most terminus is the music itself rather than our commitments, a music itself with sufficient agency to overturn our ideas about it.

78. Dubiel, “Analysis, Description, and What Really Happens,” 11.

CHAPTER III

AN OUTLINE OF A QUASI-REALIST META-THEORY

The elements that we would want to model in an expanded expressivist meta-theory would be the points developed above:

- (1) There is something more at stake than merely academic politics.
Discourse about music should aim to describe reality, as against unreality—how music goes, as opposed to how it might be said to go.
- (2) Our reason for participating in the discourse in the first place should commit us to some thesis about the agency and power of the music itself.
- (3) Hence there is nothing illegitimate about first-order ontological construction.
- (4) At the same time, the dilemma between positivism and fictionalism is formidable. We want to refrain from claiming that there are musical structures inherent in reality, considered separately from their creation or invocation by listeners. At the same time, our fictions do the work of truth-telling; they are not misguided fictions.

- (5) Hence the discourse we are describing is thoroughly normative: it's values all the way down, so to speak. Description does not supervene on hearings. Description is both normative and fundamentally basic. Hence the "flatness" or "horizontality" of the descriptive-explanatory axis.
- (6) So long as we avoid the epistemological self-certification cautioned against in (4)—for instance, the demonstration of "extra-human truths" criticized by McClary—then there is no reason to reject movement along such a horizontal axis: between representation, description, explanation, or even truth, so long as truth is glossed as a signal of our commitments.
- (7) Any further deployment of metalanguages amounts to a further deployment of first-order values. Thus "truth" is not best understood as a commitment to background norms (consisting only of further commitments) but as commitments to the music itself. The descriptive-explanatory axis terminates in premises about the music, not about ourselves.
- (8) Our obligation to conduct this discourse well stems from an obligation to avoid injuring the music itself. Moreover, the music can intervene and demand something of us.

- (9) Hence, discourse about the music itself is non-propositional, according to the anti-realism of (4) and the glossing of truth as commitments in (7), but we may still engage in realist-sounding analytical utterances. There is nothing to stop us from even regarding them as *quasi*-propositional.

Parkhurst's expressivist meta-theory does not model the sum of these insights. The biggest challenge facing his theory would be its refusal to sanction description, assertion, and claims to truth that, even if sufficiently tempered by the fundamental anti-realism of (4), still target the music itself, as opposed to our commitments to the set of norms and facts that go along with the adoption of a metalanguage. Indeed the adoption of Parkhurst's meta-theory might inspire one to adopt the "error theory" mentioned before: that any pretensions to claims (1) and (2) rest on a fundamental error and that, as against (3), first-order ontological construction is thoroughly flawed. (Parkhurst insists that the crypto-normativity he seeks to diagnose need not be viewed negatively, but the possibility remains available for one to conclude on the basis of his theory that analytic discourse merely amounts to lost motion.)

Simon Blackburn's *quasi-realism* is a special instance of expressivist meta-ethics that proceeds from the anti-realist standpoint that there is not an ethical structure inherent to the world itself while maintaining that there is a way to

sanction realist-sounding ethical talk, talk that purports to represent the ethical properties pertaining to real objects or agents. Richard Joyce summarizes

Blackburn's stance as follows:

Quasi-realism is best thought of not as a philosophical position but as a philosophical *program*. The quasi-realist is someone who endorses an anti-realist metaphysical stance ... but who seeks, through philosophical maneuvering, to *earn the right* for moral discourse to enjoy all the trappings of realist talk. Such a view may hold that although the underlying logical structure of the sentence "Stealing is wrong" is nothing more than "Stealing: Boo!", it is still legitimate for ordinary speakers to use such language as "Fred believes that stealing is wrong," "If stealing is wrong, then so is borrowing without permission," "Stealing would remain wrong regardless of what anyone thought of it," "The sentence 'Stealing is wrong' is true," and even, perhaps, "The property of wrongness is instantiated by stealing."⁷⁹

Although Blackburn's development of quasi-realism is quite his own, Joyce notes how it depends on a notion of moral projectivism first advanced by Hume:

Projectivism is best thought of as a causal account of moral experience. Consider a straightforward, observation-based moral judgment: Jane sees two youths hurting a cat and thinks "That is impermissible." The causal story begins with a real event in the world: two youth performing actions, a suffering cat, etc. Then there is Jane's sensory perception of this event (she sees the youths, hears the cat's howls, etc.). Jane may form certain inferential beliefs concerning, say, the youths' intentions, the cats' pain, etc. All this prompts in Jane an emotion: *She disapproves* (say). She then "projects" this emotion onto her experience of the world, which results in her judging the action to be *impermissible*. In David Hume's words: "taste [as opposed to reason] has a productive faculty, and gilding and staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation" (Hume [1751] 1983: 88). Here,

79. Richard Joyce, "Moral Anti-Realism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2009 Edition), Stanford University, article published July 30, 2007, under "Projectivism and Quasi-Realism."

impermissibility is the “new creation.” This is not to say that Jane “sees” the action to instantiate impermissibility in the same way as she sees the cat to instantiate brownness; but she judges the world to contain a certain quality, and her doing so is not the product of her tracking a real feature of the world, but is, rather, prompted by an emotional experience.⁸⁰

Joyce’s example of how a projectivist would tell a causal story about moral beliefs provides a plausible model for how we might explain the causation of musical beliefs. They are prompted by emotional experiences, but they are also observation-based. A listener makes inferential beliefs and projects her emotions onto the world on this basis. She judges the music to “contain a certain quality,” but this is not to be mistaken for deducing a “real feature of the world” in some positivistic sense. This causal account provides additional support for points (1) and (2) above. We might say it is not merely the case that we “should” be committed to the description of reality or that we “should” be committed to the power of the music itself, but it is also the case that a projectivist account provides an appealing *causal* account of how musical reactions arise from—and owing to—the music itself.

A listener drawing on the resources of quasi-realism would then seek to adapt Blackburn’s philosophical “maneuvering” to argue more directly for points (3) – (9) above. A few quotations from Blackburn will provide an outline

80. Ibid.

of how a quasi-realist meta-theory could be borrowed for the purpose of glossing music-analytic discourse.

Regarding (3), Blackburn holds that since we reach moral judgments in virtue of ethical saliences in the world, treating them as objective is reasonable. By ethical saliences, he means the collection of real features about the world (using Joyce's scenario: there is a cat, there are some youths, the cat is being kicked). The ethical structure, impermissibility, may not be a "real" feature of the world in the way that the cat is, but the moral vocabulary is still legitimate. Any reservations on this score, for instance those held by an error theorist, run the risk of depending on a dubious distinction between error-laden moralizing versus supposedly ontologically innocent "shmoralizing":

But it leaves an acute problem of identifying just where shmoralizing differs from moralizing: what shows us whether Mackie is moralizing or shmoralizing? Does it determine the issue that he will say things like 'there is no objective prescriptivity built into the fabric of the world'? Troubles multiply. First, it is clear that not all moralists will deny this (many moralists will not even understand it). Second, it seems gratuitous to infer that there are two different activities from the fact that there are two or more different theories about the nature of the activity. ... The error theory then shrinks to the claim that most ordinary moralists have a bad theory, or at least no very good theory, about what it is to moralize, and in particular that they falsely imagine a kind of objectivity for values, obligations, and so on. This may be true, but it does not follow that the error infects the practice of moralizing, nor the concepts used in ways defined by that practice.⁸¹

81. Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 150.

Regarding (4), a quasi-realist about music analysis would affirm a certain anti-realism with respect to implausible epistemological certainties without succumbing to the hapless paraphrase “here is what the music really is, even though it really isn’t.” The following quotation comes in response to a student’s question:

Q. 18. Aren’t you really trying to defend our right to talk ‘as if’ there were moral truths, although in your view *there aren’t any really?*

Ans. No, no, no. I do not say that we can talk as if kicking dogs were wrong, when ‘really’ it isn’t wrong. I say that it is wrong (so it is true that it is wrong, so it is really true that it is wrong, so this is an example of a moral truth, so there are moral truths).

This misinterpretation is curiously common. Anyone advancing it must believe themselves to have some more robust, metaphysically heavyweight conception of what it would be for there to be moral truths REALLY, and compared with this genuine article, I only have us talking *as if* there are moral truths REALLY. I deny that there is any such coherent conception.⁸²

Chapter 3 of *Ruling Passions* argues for the flatness of “Ramsey’s ladder,” which refers to the concept of the escalation from ‘*p*’ to ‘It is true that *p*’ to ‘It is really a fact ... that it is true that *p*.’ Later in the book Blackburn says,

In other words, if it is minimalism that justifies the ascent, then the ascent gets nowhere that is inaccessible to anyone of decent first-order ethical views. To say that an ethical view is true is just to reaffirm it, and so it is if we add the weighty words ‘really’, ‘true’, ‘fact’, and so on. To say that it is objectively true is to affirm that its truth does not vary with what we

82. Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, 319.

happen to think about it, and once more this is an internal, first-order ethical position.⁸³

Such a claim accords with (5), (6), and (7)—to say that an analytical claim is objectively true, in some sense beyond the trivially correct application of the rules of the metalanguage, does not vary with what we happen to think about it.

Finally, to support (8) and (9), what we happen to think about music depends on some obligation we have to the music itself—an obligation to avoid getting it “wrong.” Blackburn faces the frequent objection that he must license unfavorable statements such as: if we were to have other feelings about the matter, kicking dogs would be permitted. To some, this seems insufficiently realist. If we’re at least quasi-realist, kicking dogs has to be plain wrong; but if truth is only a further avowal of one’s commitments in light of the flatness of Ramsey’s ladder, then it seems a change in one’s commitments could license a change in the impermissibility of kicking dogs. Most of us would prefer to hold that the permissibility of kicking dogs only depends on what happens to the dogs, rather than on anything we might happen to think. Blackburn’s answer is that this is only a problem if we insist on imputing content about our own mental states to the proposition about the dogs (as against (7)):

The correct opinion about these things is not necessarily the one we happen to have, nor is our having an opinion or not the kind of thing

83. Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 296.

which makes for correctness. The standards governing projection make it irrelevant, in the way that opinion is irrelevant to the wrongness of kicking dogs. The temptation to think otherwise arises only if a projective theory is mistaken for a reductionist one, giving the propositions involved a content, but one which makes them about us or our minds.⁸⁴

Instead, to advance such a hypothetical about holding different commitments and to claim that it bears on the ethical saliences in question amounts to a peculiarly insidious first-order ethical view:

Suppose someone said 'if we had different sentiments, it would be right to kick dogs', what could he be up to? Apparently, he endorses a certain sensibility: one which lets information about what people feel dictate its attitude to kicking dogs. But nice people do not endorse such a sensibility. What makes it wrong to kick dogs is the cruelty or pain to the animal. *That* input should yield disapproval and indignation as the output.⁸⁵

On the other hand, with respect to music, the playfulness envisioned by Agawu and Lewin might encourage one to seriously entertain adopting alternative sensibilities or commitments. (Agawu says that analysis would ideally go on always and forever.⁸⁶) It would not be as ill to tentatively consider hearing a piece of music in a different way as it would be to tentatively conceive of kicking dogs as permissible—the reason being that we should take the matter of animal welfare more seriously than that of construing musical experiences.

Still, we may understand the effort to constrain our construction of music-

84. Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 219.

85. *Ibid.*, 218.

86. Agawu, "How We Got Out of Analysis," 270.

analytic fictions to require at least *some* seriousness, or *some* way in which getting it wrong violates the music itself. Blackburn comments on how aesthetic construction might lie somewhere on the emotional scale short of cases of harm and evil:

It is naturally the actions of other people that concern us the most. But ethics does not only concern actions: we may think that in some circumstances people ought to *feel* various ways. We go some way up the staircase when we moralize about moods, for instance resenting someone who fails to feel meditative gazing at the night sky, or uplifted by a mountain landscape, or tranquil by the lake. Again, there are levels of ascent here: as with the aesthete, a significant moral question is how far up the staircase, how quickly, it is appropriate to go. People who climb too quickly give us our bigots and fascists, and are as much of a nuisance as the lukewarm, who scarcely ever get off the ground.⁸⁷

At this point we have a quasi-realist meta-theory for music analysis, but a question remains of how far we should ascend the emotional staircase.

87. Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, 12.

CHAPTER IV

NEW ETHICAL CONSEQUENCES

The foregoing meta-theory has salvaged a disputational dimension of music analysis that does not rely on unlikely positivistic premises, nor on an implausible innocence of description, nor on a presumptuous psychologism about *actual* hearing. But on the other hand, we would be remiss to begin legislating each other's hearings once more. The weariness with which Korysn's polemic was received was probably inspired by the lack of a sense of danger: anyone who claims that *f* is how some piece of music *X* *really* goes is already thought to be skating on thin ice these days, but to also claim that other people should feel an obligation to discard their previous understanding and adopt this new one—this is highly unlikely in the wake of our hard-earned methodological pluralism.

What I have been more interested in is salvaging the disputational dimension of analysis only to the extent that one wishes it to apply. It need not apply in all cases. The more disputational we wish to take various analytical statements, the more fervently we should be understood as lodging a claim about our obligation to the music itself, or equivalently, as ascending the emotional ladder.

Blackburn replies to a student's question about whether truth and knowledge can really be considered to come so cheaply as follows. Although he certainly thinks truth tags along for free, he reserves a special place for moral knowledge as resulting from the inconceivability of changing one's mind: "I believe that the primary function of talking of 'knowledge' is to indicate that a judgement is beyond revision. That is, we rule out any chance that an improvement might occur, that would properly lead to revision of the judgement."⁸⁸

This is exactly the kind of certainty that we must reject, for the reasons articulated by the New Musicology. We must espouse a healthy fallibilism about analytical claims by remaining open to improvements. (Closed-minded reverence for the masterworks of the canon, expressed as an inability to conceive of how they could be improved under our given analytical frameworks, probably contributed to the pernicious recursive definitions of masterworks and structural coherence, as articulated by Kerman.⁸⁹) However, this does not refute the entire disputational dimension, only the strongest form entailed by climbing the emotional ladder all the way to the top.

88. Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, 318.

89. Kerman, "How We Got into Analysis," 315.

So it is that Dubiel's ladder, just like Ramsey's, is flat. It is hard to see what it means to say, following Tymoczko, that something is *really* going on versus what is epiphenomenal, if it's just values all the way down. The emotional ladder, however, stands vertical. How likely we are to be influenced by each other's hearings depends on where we are on the ladder. If I am on the ground, whether I would choose to follow Tymoczko up the ladder at least a few rungs would appear to matter hardly at all—why not give it a try? If I am already a few rungs up the ladder, however, it might seem as though any change in my position is going to have little to do with how fervently Tymoczko shouts at me from the top rung of his ladder or whether he manages to convince me that his vocabulary is more correct. No, just like kicking dogs is going to be permissible or impermissible only in virtue of what happens to the dogs, any change in my position will come on account of what hearings or ontology I consider the music itself to demand.

How could music have that much agency? And how could listeners have that much freedom to choose whether or not to respect it? James Currie suggests that we risk ignoring the music itself not at *its* peril, but at *our* peril. If we do not dance the steps that the music demands, we risk falling over: "After all, a waltz might confuse its steps by trying to be a march, and, as I mentioned before, bad dancing can disturb us by making us witness how easily we can convince

ourselves that we have enacted a transformation when we are, in fact, about to fall over.”⁹⁰

David Foster Wallace tosses off a casual reference to music in the course of characterizing a special type of cerebral literature that appears to reach out and direct its own critical interpretation: “This is probably analogous to a piece of music that both demands and defines the listener’s movements, say like a waltz.”⁹¹

There may be a reason why both writers reached for the waltz: it unambiguously tells us what to do with our bodies. It further implies that dancing all the steps correctly is sufficient to complete or dispense with our obligation. But just as there is no reason the matter should end with dance forms, neither is there a reason we should stop deciding how we ought to dance. We should recognize how other pieces of music might call out and tell us what to do. The more we do so, the better we will be dancing, and the higher we will be ascending the emotional ladder. We will be having a richer, more musical experience. Perhaps this is the final insight: no matter how implausible the idea of “the music itself” might be as an epistemological principle, if we treat it seriously as an agent offering an ethical constraint on our first-order ontological

90. Currie, “Music After All,” 194.

91. Wallace, “The Empty Plenum,” 217.

avowals, we will have gained both a way of dancing better as well as a reason to continue searching for ever further ways to dance.

APPENDIX

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