In a refreshing and lively new book, *Ethics without Ontology*, Hilary Putnam aims to show that the respect given to ontology over the past several decades, since the publication of Quine’s “On What There Is,” has had disastrous consequences for just about every part of analytic philosophy, including ethics (2). He argues that ethics and mathematics are “objective” but that the attempt to explain their objectivity in ontological terms, by invoking such things as “Platonic forms” or “abstract entities,” is “deeply misguided” (2, 3–4). He views ethics, not as a system of principles, but as a ”system of interrelated concerns” (22), a system that aims to deal with the solution of practical problems” (28). And he says that this conception of ethics does not “lend itself” to “inflationary or reductive nor yet to nominalistic ontologizing” (32). This article tries to understand Putnam’s views about ethics and to determine what the import of his views is for the metaethical debate between moral realists and antirealists.

Putnam’s target is not ontologizing as such. It is certain “inflationary” and “deflationary” metaphysical views that he dubs “Ontology,” with a capital “O” (21). He thinks the pursuit of an Ontological account of the objectivity of ethics obscures the fact that there is a “whole circle of related concerns” that are “constitutive of ethics” (29); and it leads one to think that it is possible to justify or vindicate ethics from the outside (32) by finding a single unifying account that explains its objectivity, as if one could see “ethics as a noble statue standing at the top of a single pillar” (28). He calls his view “pragmatic pluralism” (21). In Wittgensteinian terms, it holds that “the truth can be told in language games that we actually play when language is working” (21).

I find it difficult to see exactly what metaethical position Putnam means to defend. There is evidence that he intends to propose a form of moral realism similar to the “quietistic” or “minimally theorized” view that has been proposed by Ronald Dworkin, or perhaps to the non-reductive naturalism that has been
proposed by Nicholas Sturgeon. Yet despite the fact that his official position eschews Ontologizing, I shall suggest in the end that it is more plausible to interpret his position as a kind of deflationism. It appears to reduce the truth of a moral claim to, roughly, the justifiability of making it, given the concerns of the moral life and given the standards of practical reason (71–72). I say this in the spirit of inviting clarification rather than with much confidence. His view certainly doesn’t appear reductive at the beginning of the book, for he rejects reductionist and other deflationary strategies in metaethics (19–21), and he suggests that ethical truths are adequately vindicated by giving ethical reasons to explain their truth (3). As I will explain, however, it is difficult to reconcile the views he takes early in the book with claims he makes later on.

The book consists of two series of lectures. The first series, the Hermes Lectures of 2001, gives its name to the book and addresses the central issues of ethics and ontology. The second series, the 2001 Spinoza Lectures, addresses a kind of “postmodern’ skepticism about reason-talk,” including skepticism about “rational persuasion in ethics” (110–111). I shall restrict attention to the Hermes Lectures.

1. Moral Realism and Antirealism

Moral realism is a view about the moral claims we make, including, for example, claims about what is morally right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust. For present purposes, take realism to be the view that (a) moral claims express beliefs that are true or false, depending on how things are, morally speaking, and that (b) some such beliefs are true. Mentalists can disagree about many things, but they agree in holding that some moral claims are actually true.

As I shall use the term, a “quietist” is a moral realist who holds that it is a mistake to say anything substantive in non-moral terms to attempt to explain what makes true the moral claims that are true; quietism holds that moral reasons can be given to explain the truth of a true moral claim but that no other kind of explanation is available. Assume, for example, that one ought morally to keep one’s promises. The quietist would be content with a standard kind of moral explanation for this, an explanation of the kind we might give in a moral discussion. A quietist would reject any kind of philosophical or metaphysically ambitious explanation such as an explanation that postulated a special kind of fact or property.

Putnam appears to be a moral realist. He rejects “antirealism” in ethics (1). He says that ethics is “objective” (2). He holds that there are “ethical truths” (73). He appears, moreover, to accept a Dworkinian style of quietism, for he argues, as I have said, that it is a mistake to attempt to provide an Ontological explanation of the objectivity of ethics. He thinks it is a mistake to attempt to explain the objectivity of ethics by “providing reasons which are not part of ethics for the truth of ethical statements” (3). These passages give us some