Moral Disagreement and the Importance of Meta-Ethics
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Introduction

It is not uncommon for a philosopher to adopt a position and claim that, though she believes it is true, it makes no practical difference. This seems plausible in some cases. External world skeptics, for example, need not be any more likely to get hit by busses than the realists with whom they disagree. Of course, even in this case we should wonder how a skeptic reconciles the fact that she moves out of the way of busses with her belief in skepticism.

One form of reconciliation involves insulating one’s practical decisions from one’s philosophical commitments. One can simply refuse to consider one’s practical decision-making as evidence for or against one’s philosophical views. One can also argue that one’s practical decisions can be re-interpreted in light of one’s philosophical position and this makes no practical difference.¹ So, for example, the skeptic does all the same things the realist does when it comes to avoiding busses, but the skeptic just conceives of what she is doing differently. In this case, the skeptic’s philosophical views and her practical decisions are still insulated from one another in an important way because how the skeptic thinks about what she is doing does not change what she does. So, the fact that she avoids busses concede no ground to the realist.

Call the strategy of insulating one’s practices from one’s philosophical commitments, in either of the above ways, “The Move.” So, in the above example, we

¹ For example, the external world skeptic can say that the word ‘know’ is ambiguous or contextual. The sense in which she knows the bus is there or knows she ought to move is different from the sense of ‘know’ used when she claims she does not know there is an external world.
can say that, upon realizing there is a tension between her skepticism and her practical decision to avoid busses, it is open to my skeptic to “make The Move.”

Many prominent moral non-cognitivists make The Move when confronted with the need to reconcile their non-cognitivist interpretation of moral judgments with their practice of making moral judgments. Simon Blackburn, for example, argues that his non-cognitivist anti-realism does not make much of a difference to his first order substantive moral views and moral practices. Blackburn states (underline is mine),

….moral anti-realism is often seen as a dangerous doctrine, a more or less surreptitious denial of the importance of ethics or of the possibility of genuine first order ethical theory…I incline to a historical or cultural diagnosis of this piece of false consciousness. It seems to me that there is always a temptation to absorb ethics into the most convenient example of respectable inquiry. In the heyday of theology, the will of God determined ethics. When ‘logic’ held sway philosophers conceived of themselves as investigating the logic of moral discourse…When logic loses ground and naturalism is in the ascendant the model is that of the scientist: just as the analytic chemist breaks open the hidden nature of water, so the philosopher as scientist breaks open the hidden nature of the good. His equations – justice is the difference principle, goodness is happiness, or whatever – then derive authority from their similarity to the respected scientific activities on which they are models. But any authority so derived is hollow, of course, and the models merely serve to disguise the fact that in advancing such equations we are just moralizing, no more and no less….By all means we may urge and argue that all and only societies that embed the difference principle are just, or that all and only actions that promote happiness are good. But we should remember that only a loss in understanding at what we are doing comes from thinking of ourselves as thereby identifying, in a scientific spirit, the property that is justice or goodness, as opposed to describing, from a moral perspective, the properties of just and good institutions or actions. (Blackburn, 1991)

Blackburn just did The Move. For he is clear that he thinks his meta-ethical positions might make a difference only to how we understand what we do. He thinks we

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2 I think this particular example is best understood to involve a tension between someone who acts every day, over and over as though there really are busses out there, but who genuinely claims in philosophical discussions and in print, that she has no knowledge of such things.
can rest easy that this will not change the fact that we can go on doing what we are doing, just as before.

In this paper, I attempt to understand why The Move has become so popular amongst recent moral non-cognitivists. I argue that an important component of this explanation is that moral non-cognitivists misunderstand the function of moral discourse, primarily the function of moral disagreement. Early non-cognitivists, like C.L. Stevenson argued that non-cognitivism offers a better account of the function moral disagreement. Stevenson argued that his emotivism helps us see that moral disagreements are disagreements in attitude or emotion and not disagreements in belief. (Stevenson, 1963) Interestingly, though, Stevenson did not think there was any need to make The Move. In fact, Stevenson thought non-cognitivism would help us improve our practices surrounding moral disagreement precisely because we will better understand what is actually going on when we disagree. (Stevenson, 1963) My working hypothesis is that the subsequent failure of non-cognitivism to make good on Stevenson’s hope led recent non-cognitivists to make The Move.

In section one, I explain the distinction between moral cognitivism and moral non-cognitivism. I also explain how the moral cognitivism/non-cognitivism debate underlies the dispute between moral realists and anti-realists. In section two, I distinguish two arguments from moral disagreement that have been leveled against moral realism. The first threatens the moral realist’s commitment to the objectivity of morality and, so, is not relevant to the main argument of this paper. The second threatens the moral realist’s commitment to cognitivism and is the focus of this paper. I think the second argument fails and in section three I explain why. The reason is that, despite
what most non-cognitivists as far back as Stevenson have thought, the cognitivist can offer a plausible account of moral disagreement. I then turn the tables on the non-cognitivist and argue that it is the non-cognitivist who cannot adequately account for the phenomenon of moral disagreement. It is worth noting that my argument against non-cognitivism is really an amended version of the non-cognitivist’s own argument from moral disagreement against cognitivism. This is a potentially important fact because it points to a deep difference between cognitivist and non-cognitivist characterizations of moral disagreement and, potentially, disagreement more generally (e.g. in the natural and social sciences).

In the concluding section, I suggest that understanding these different ways of characterizing moral disagreement helps us understand why moral non-cognitivists make The Move. Cognitivism is crucial to any moral realist position because it underlies our characterization of moral disagreement as an opportunity for discovery and improvement. When thoughtful, sincere and relatively informed interlocutors disagree about morality it is an opportunity to discover a better moral position. The non-cognitivist cannot hold this position. A non-cognitivist understands moral disputes to be a clash of non-cognitive attitudes (e.g. desires, approvals, or emotions). Even when thoughtful, sincere and relatively informed interlocutors disagree about morality a non-cognitivist cannot hold that this is an opportunity to discover a better moral position. For even one’s second order judgment about which moral position is better must be given a non-cognitivist analysis. Instead, the non-cognitivist must see moral disagreement as an opportunity to either part ways or coordinate our attitudes. Of course, the non-cognitivist can use the

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3 Here I should be explicit that I think cases where the disagreement was simply because the disputants were talking past each other because they disagreed about non-moral facts are uninteresting and irrelevant to the debate. Both sides agree that can happen.
language of “making progress” and “discovering a better moral position.” But, to the non-cognitivist this must be “just moralizing.” I think this is one reason why recent non-cognitivists make The Move. Non-cognitivism does not sit well with the practice of moral disagreement.

[Note: I think that to the extent that moral disputes are the result of conceptual confusion, or just talking past one another, Philosophy plays a foundational role in resolving such disputes. When the disputes are less a matter of simple conceptual confusion, philosophers still have a role to play in helping us discover which position is best. If I have time, I hope to explain why I still agree with my first Philosophy professor, Paul Sagal, who thought that “Philosophy Is Not a Trivial Pursuit”.]

I. Moral Cognitivism and Moral Non-Cognitivism

Moral cognitivists and moral non-cognitivists[^4] disagree over the primary function of moral discourse. By “moral discourse” I mean the sort of discourse that occurs when we make moral judgments, engage in moral inquiry and engage in moral debate. There are a number of questions we can ask about all three of these practices. In addition, moral discourse occurs in other contexts. For example, we use moral discourse when we educate children. So, the function of moral discourse is, itself, a complicated topic. In the debate between cognitivists and non-cognitivists, though, the question about the function of moral discourse really amounts to the question of whether moral judgments have truth conditions. Do moral judgments primarily serve to express mental states, like beliefs, that describe the world and, so, are truth-apt?

[^4]: From here on I will use “Cognitivism” and “Cognitivist” to refer to Moral Cognitivism and Moral Cognitivists. Similarly, I will use “Non-Cognitivism” and “Non-Cognitivist” to refer to Moral Non-Cognitivism and Moral Non-Cognitivists.
Consider a moral judgment like “It was wrong for ISIS to burn the pilot.” Non-cognitivists think that when people utter sentences like this, they are typically not saying something that even purports to be true or false. Instead, the primary function of such judgments is to express attitudes similar to approval or disapproval. In contrast, cognitivists think that the primary function of moral judgments is to express attitudes, like beliefs, that can be true or false.

That we sometimes use language to express attitudes like approval or disapproval is uncontroversial. When my colleague invites me into his office to listen to an old Genesis album, I might listen for a moment and then say “This is stupid.” In that case, I am using a sentence to express my disapproval of the band. I could very well have just made a yucky face and a disapproving grunt. But, if my wife asks me where her keys are and I say “Your keys are next to the coffee maker” I have just said something that is either true or false. If it is true, then my wife will soon be on her way to work. If it is false, we could both be tearing the house apart for an hour. The issue between the cognitivist and the non-cognitivist concerns whether moral judgments like “It was wrong for ISIS to burn the pilot” are more like the first example or more like the second.

The distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism has become somewhat more complicated recently because there are so many subtly different versions of non-cognitivism. All non-cognitivist positions share two core theses. The first is that *predicative moral sentences do not have substantial, or robust, truth conditions*. The second is the thesis that *moral utterances do not express states of mind that represent the world in the way beliefs, or other cognitive states, represent the world*. The different

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5 Alternatively, we could say that moral predicates do not denote properties and predicative moral sentences do not, therefore, predicate properties of subjects. See Van Roojen (1996)
non-cognitivist positions can be distinguished based on their various interpretations of these two core theses.

A.J. Ayer, for example, held a strong interpretation of the first thesis. (Ayer, 1996) According to Ayer, moral sentences like “It was wrong for ISIS to burn the pilot” are not apt for truth or falsity because they do not serve any descriptive function. As such, saying “It was wrong for ISIS to burn the pilot” is no different from saying “ISIS burned the pilot” in a particular tone while making certain gestures and facial expressions. (Ayer, 1996) Stevenson held a weaker version of the first thesis. (Stevenson, 1963) For Stevenson, calling a judgment true is simply a way of agreeing with it. Accordingly, some non-cognitivists, following Stevenson, have adopted a deflationary theory of truth and held that predicative moral sentences can be true or false. However, this thesis still counts as a version of the first core thesis because a deflationary theory of truth entails no commitment to a property, like “being true”, that distinguishes true from false sentences. This is why most philosophers, whether cognitivist or non-cognitivist, will say that all non-cognitivists deny that predicative moral sentences have any substantial truth conditions.

We see the same complication in the case of the second thesis. Ayer thought that moral utterances do not express mental states that represent the world the way beliefs do.\(^6\) Crudely put, the function of a belief is to represent the world and, so, beliefs have the function of fitting the world, not the other way around. Other mental states, like desires or approvals do not merely represent the world, but express feelings or wants. In this way, desires and other non-cognitive states aim to make the world fit them, not the other

\(^6\) Notice that the difference between Ayer and Stevenson concerns only whether the predicate “is true” attaches only to states that represent the way beliefs do. Ayer thought it did and Stevenson disagreed.
way around. Stevenson agrees with Ayer, but adds that the primary function of moral utterances is to express non-cognitive states. According to Stevenson, moral utterances can express mental states like beliefs and, so, describe the world. For example, consider the sentence “It is wrong for a Tuareg man to threaten the social hierarchy.” Though descriptive, that function is secondary to the typical non-cognitive function of the moral utterance. Complicating things further, Alan Gibbard (1991) thinks that moral judgments express mental states that are like acceptance states. In particular, they express the acceptance of a system of norms. This acceptance involves an emotional disposition to feel guilt if one violates the norms, resentment when others violate the norms and also the disposition to judge when it is appropriate to feel these emotions. Gibbard’s view is complex, but it should be clear that Gibbard, Stevenson and Ayer all hold the second core thesis because all of these theories hold that moral utterances express mental states (emotion or acceptance) with a very different direction of fit from belief states.

The debate between cognitivists and non-cognitivists underlies many, but not all, of the debates between moral realists and moral anti-realists. Moral Realists think there are moral facts. Different species of moral realism provide different bases of support for the commitment to moral facts. Moral anti-realists deny that there are moral facts. Different species of anti-realism provide different bases of support for this denial. All moral realists are cognitivists. All non-cognitivists are moral anti-realists. Finally, most, but not all, moral anti-realists are non-cognitivists. The following table is useful for

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7 Talk of “representation” here is extremely tricky because, arguably, emotions and desires still involve representational states. So, I do not mean to deny that desires and emotions are representational. The difference will be in the direction of fit those representational states exhibit. I am using “representation” here to describe only representations the way beliefs represent, whatever that amounts to.

8 From here on I will use “Realism” and “Realist” to refer to moral realism and moral realists. Similarly, I will use “Anti-realism” and “Anti-realist” to refer to moral anti-realism and moral anti-realists.
keeping track of the relationship between the cognitivism/non-cognitivism debate and the realism/anti-realism debate:

**Table 1.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitivist</th>
<th>Realist</th>
<th>Anti-Realist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example: Cornell Realism</td>
<td>N. Sturgeon, D. Brink, R. Boyd</td>
<td>Example: Error Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>J.L. Mackie, R. Joyce</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Cognitivist</td>
<td>xxxx Does not exist xxxx</td>
<td>Example: Emotivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A.J. Ayer, C.L. Stevenson</td>
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Non-cognitivism does not, strictly speaking, entail the denial of moral facts. However, because of the content of the two core theses, non-cognitivism underlies a common brand of anti-realism. The most obvious way to see why is to consider the notion of moral error. (Cite Sturgeon) The moral realist’s commitment to moral facts allows her to hold that a moral judgment could be wrong. But, because of the two core theses, non-cognitivists cannot hold that a moral judgment can be wrong. Non-cognitivists are committed to holding that there can be no moral knowledge. Insofar as knowledge requires belief, the non-cognitivist must hold that no moral judgment is a candidate for knowledge because the belief condition on knowledge can never be met. In contrast, a cognitivist anti-realist, like Mackie (1977), will agree that there are no moral facts and, so, no moral knowledge. However, this is because the truth condition on knowledge can never be met. According to Mackie, all moral judgments are false. An

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9 It is consistent to hold the two core theses of non-cognitivism, but also hold there are moral facts. It would just be the case that moral discourse was wholly unrelated to those facts. As far as I know, no one holds this position.
error theorist, like Mackie, retains a notion of moral error because the error theorist is a cognitivist. But, the non-cognitivist must reject moral error. As Blackburn states, “our moral judgments and assertions aren’t under the kind of causal control of the facts that gives point to – even if it doesn’t fully justify – talk of ‘correspondence’ between our judgments and the world when we consider truth (and knowledge) in other areas.” (Blackburn, 1984) In short, non-cognitivism leads to anti-realism because it undermines the assumption that moral discourse and practice is even a candidate area of knowledge and genuine inquiry. For a non-cognitivist, we may be able to know what moral practices people in engage in, but we cannot have knowledge of moral facts.

II. Two Arguments from Moral Disagreement

Many non-cognitivists reject cognitivism, and so realism, because they think it offers a poor explanation of moral disagreement. However, cognitivist anti-realists, like Mackie, have also thought that the phenomenon of moral disagreement poses problems for the realist. So, we can distinguish between cognitivist and non-cognitivist arguments from disagreement. Our focus will be the second.

Cognitivist arguments against moral realism can be traced back to Mackie’s argument from relativity. (Mackie, 1977 pg. 36) The argument rests on the claim that it is uncontroversial that moral disagreement occurs, both within cultures and across cultures. Further, it is claimed that these disagreements are often apparently unresolvable and concern fundamental questions of the sort we would not expect if there were moral facts. That is, in cases where there is disagreement over the facts, we tend to see an eventual resolution or, at least, a route by which we might achieve a resolution. We see no such
thing in the case of moral disagreements. Further, anti-realism offers a better explanation for the kind and number of moral disagreements that there are. As Mackie states, “disagreement about moral codes tends to reflect people’s adherence to and participation in different ways of life” and not the other way around. (Mackie pg. 36) So, moral realism is probably not true and anti-realism probably is true. For our purposes, the argument can be simplified as follows.

P1. If moral realism were true, we would expect moral views to converge over time.

P2. No such convergence is forthcoming.

C. So, moral realism is probably not true.

In conjunction with the alternative anti-realist explanation, Mackie then concludes that his anti-realism is more acceptable than moral realism. Some moral realists respond by rejecting P1. However, the vast majority of recent controversies are over whether any of the interpretations of P2 are true. (Doris and Plakias, 2007)

Since Mackie’s argument does not threaten cognitivism, I will only note that Mackie’s conception of moral disagreement has an important feature. According to Mackie, moral disagreements still bear an important similarity to non-moral disagreements in other areas like the natural sciences. Moral disputes and non-moral disputes both involve disputants who put forth conflicting accounts of the world. The only difference between the moral and the non-moral case, according to Mackie, is that in the moral case both parties are talking about features of the world that simply do not
exist.\textsuperscript{10} Further, one reason to believe this is because it is the best explanation for why we fail to see resolutions to moral disagreements. For Mackie, there are no moral features of the world regulating our judgments. Talk of correspondence between our judgments and the world is pointless because there is nothing to which our judgments can correspond. Mackie thinks the phenomenon of moral disagreement supports this position.

Non-cognitivist arguments against moral realism are different. They can be traced back to Stevenson’s argument from moral disagreement. (Stevenson, 1963) Stevenson’s argument rests on the claim that many moral disagreements arise because the disputants are applying different moral standards to the same situation. But, according to Stevenson, a cognitivist must then hold that the parties simply mean different things when they use moral terms. Since these moral disagreements are ubiquitous, the cognitivist would have to say that many moral disagreements are not genuine moral disagreements. Instead, the cognitivist must hold that the disputants are talking past one another. But, (at least most of) these disagreements are genuine moral disagreements and not cases where the parties are simply talking past one another. So, cognitivism cannot adequately account for many genuine moral disagreements. Non-cognitivism can account for how these are genuine cases of disagreement. So, non-cognitivism has more explanatory power than cognitivism and, thus, has the advantage.

When making this argument, Stevenson cites G.E. Moore and it is instructive to understand why. In Principia Ethica, Moore rejects both desire accounts of good and hedonism. On a desire account, ‘good’ is defined as ‘that which is desired’. On a

\textsuperscript{10} To be more precise, I should say that when both parties are advancing different and conflicting moral positions, like conflicting views on how one ought to raise children, then both parties are saying something false. If one of the parties is simply denying the truth of a moral claim, Mackie can hold that that disputant is correct – at least, insofar as the disputant is simply denying that a moral claim is true.
One of them says that good is nothing but the object of
desire, and at the same time tries to prove that it is not
pleasure. But from his first assertion, that good just means
the object of desire, one of two things must follow as regards
his proof. 1) He may be trying to prove that the object of desire
is not pleasure…But what does that have to do with the question
in dispute? His opponent held the ethical proposition that
pleasure was the good, and although he should prove a million
times over the psychological proposition that pleasure is not the
object of desire, he is no nearer proving his opponent to be wrong.
The position is like this. One man says a triangle is a circle: another
replies ‘A triangle is a straight line, and I will prove to you that I am
right: for’ (this is the only argument) ‘a straight line is not a circle.’
(Principia Ethica, 11)

In this passage, Moore’s target is, of course, not just desire accounts and hedonistic
accounts of good. Rather, it is any kind of definitional naturalism in ethics. A
definitional naturalist thinks that the meaning of a moral term, like ‘good’, can be given
in naturalistic terms. Moore claims that this will actually dissolve moral disagreement,
instead of explain it.

The argument seems to be that if my standards for a thing being good are X, then
when I say that something is good, I am simply saying it is X. Similarly, if your
standards for a thing being good are Y, then when you say that something is not good,
you are just saying it is not Y. Moore’s objection is that when we disagree over a
thing’s goodness, the thing can be both X and not-Y, so there is no genuine disagreement.
We are just talking past each other. The disagreement has dissolved instead of being
resolved.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11} Moore adds that in this situation, it is impossible to prove any definition wrong or even to deny such a
definition.
Moore was, of course, a cognitivist. Further, he did not seem to think this argument caused any problems for cognitivism. Instead, Moore famously held that good is a simple, unanalyzable, non-natural property. Stevenson gives a strikingly similar argument, though, when he rejects cognitivism. Stevenson states,

> What is this “vital” sense of “good”? The answers have been so vague, and so beset with difficulties, that one can scarcely determine. There are certain requirements, however, with which this “vital” sense has been expected to comply – requirements which appeal strongly to our common sense….In the first place, we must be able sensibly to disagree about whether something is “good”. This condition rules out Hobbes’s definition. [viz. ‘good’ means ‘desired by me’] For consider the following argument: “This is good.” “That isn’t so; its not good.” As translated by Hobbes, this becomes: “I desire this.” “That isn’t so, for I don’t.” The speakers are not contradicting one another, and think they are, only because of an elementary confusion in the use of pronouns. The definition, “good” means desired by my community, is also excluded, for how could people from different communities disagree?

Stevenson’s examples show that by “sensibly disagree” he means disputants are not simply talking past one another, but are in conflict. Though Stevenson focuses on Hobbesian and Humean accounts, he is clear that he intends this argument to apply to any naturalistic account. In this way, Stevenson’s argument echoes Moore. For any two naturalistic accounts of good, for example, those who seem to disagree over which one is correct are really just talking past each other. But, the parties do disagree. So, naturalist accounts fail to account for genuine, or sensible, moral disagreement. However, in light of these considerations, instead of only rejecting naturalism Stevenson also rejects cognitivism.

The reason Stevenson rejects cognitivism is largely because he thought that moral disagreement makes more sense on a non-cognitivist, specifically an emotivist,
understanding of moral discourse. Stevenson thought moral disagreements look more like, what he called, disagreements in attitude than disagreements in belief. A disagreement in belief occurs when two disputants hold incompatible beliefs (Mr. A believes p and Mr. B believes not-p) and “neither is content to let the belief of the other remain unchallenged”. (Stevenson, 1963 pg 2) A disagreement in attitude, in contrast, occurs when one disputant (Mr. A) favors something that another disputant (Mr. B) disfavors and “neither is content to let the other’s attitude remain unchanged.” (Stevenson, 1963 pg. 2) By “attitude” Stevenson means “any psychological disposition of being for or against something.” (Stevenson, 1963 pg. 2-3)

Stevenson uses the following example to motivate his claim that non-cognitivism better explains moral disagreement.

Suppose that the representative of a union urges that the wage level in a given company ought to be higher – that it is only right that the workers receive more pay. The company representative urges in reply that the workers ought to receive no more than they get. Such an argument clearly represents a disagreement in attitude. The union is for higher wages; the company is against them, and neither is content to let the other’s attitude remain unchanged. In addition to this disagreement in attitude, of course, the argument may represent no little disagreement in belief. Perhaps the parties disagree about how much the cost of living has risen and how much the workers are suffering under the present wage scale. Or perhaps they disagree about the company’s earnings and the extent to which the company could raise wages and still operate at a profit. Like any typical ethical argument, then, this argument involves both disagreement in attitude and disagreement in belief. It is easy to see, however, that the disagreement in attitude plays a unifying and predominating role in the argument. (Facts and Values, pg. 4)

Stevenson argues that disagreement in attitude plays the predominating role in determining what information is relevant to the arguments for either side. For example, if the company points out that the workers were paid much less fifty years ago, this will
be deemed irrelevant to the debate. Note that Stevenson defines relevance as whatever is “likely to lead one side or the other to have a different attitude, and so reconcile disagreement in attitude.” (Stevenson, 1963 pg. 5)

In addition, Stevenson argues that moral disagreements do not terminate when disagreement in belief terminates, but only when disagreements in attitude terminate. For example, if the company and the union agreed on all the beliefs introduced into the argument, but maintained the same attitudes, neither side would think the disagreement resolved. (Stevenson, 1963 pg. 5)

I think all of the points Stevenson makes, particularly these last two, are weak. However, my focus is on his main argument against cognitivism because versions of this argument are still offered by prominent non-cognitivists. (Blackburn, 1991 and Gibbard (1990), pg. 16-22)

As we have seen, Stevenson rejects definitional naturalism because it fails to account for moral disagreement. Further, non-cognitivism can offer a better account of moral disagreement. So, non-cognitivism has more explanatory power than naturalism. The argument is incomplete because Stevenson has not addressed Moorean non-naturalism. In Facts and Values, Stevenson treats Moore’s non-naturalism as a last resort for a cognitivist. If one’s position in the cognitivist/non-cognitivist debate requires one to hold that moral properties are simple, unanalyzable properties known by intuition, then one would do better to reject one’s cognitivism. (Stevenson, 1937)

We can reconstruct Stevenson’s main argument, then, as follows.
P1. Naturalism is objectionable because it cannot account for sensible moral disagreement.

P2. Non-naturalism is objectionable due to metaphysical and epistemological extravagance.

P3. Naturalism and Non-naturalism are the only two options for the cognitivist.

C1. So, cognitivism is objectionable.

In conjunction with the non-cognitivist alternative explanation for moral disagreement, Stevenson concludes that non-cognitivism is more acceptable than cognitivism.

III. Turning the Tables on the Non-Cognitivist

There are a number of ways to object to Stevenson’s main argument as I have presented it. However, I think one reason Stevenson influenced subsequent philosophical work is because he offered something attractive in his account of moral disagreement. In some ways, Stevenson’s argument is similar to Mackie’s in that it offers a clear answer as to why ethical disputes are so difficult to resolve. In Stevenson’s case, genuine moral disputes are just not the sort of thing that get resolved in the way disagreements in belief get resolved. If we lose sight of non-cognitivism, we will be confused when we compare genuine moral disagreements to other kinds of disagreements. However, this feeling of clarity obscures the fact that the non-cognitivist cannot account for how there is really any disagreement at all. In this section, I argue that P1 in my reconstruction of Stevenson’s argument is false and that the alternative non-cognitivist explanation of moral disagreement is objectionable.

12 Notice, for example, how on this reconstruction Stevenson did not consider the possibility of an error theory.
Consider how a cognitivist can reply to Stevenson’s argument against cognitivism (Stevenson’s defense of P1 above). Stevenson, following Moore, objected that if A and B disagree over whether something is good, then insofar as they are applying different standards of goodness A and B are simply talking past one another. For example, say John claims “Morgan is a good person.” Imagine that by ‘good’ John means that Morgan follows the law of God and the example of Jesus Christ. Say I disagree because I think Morgan is not living a life that is maximizing utility. Now, if John and I were both god-fearing Christians, or we were both committed act-utilitarians, we could resolve our dispute by simply gathering more empirical evidence about Morgan. In that case, the moral disagreement would only be apparent. Our disagreement would really be over some non-moral fact like whether Morgan went to church or not.

However, the present case is different. In this case, John and I are applying different standards for good or, in Moore and Stevenson’s terms, we mean different things by ‘good’. However, the problem is that we do not seem to simply be talking past one another, since we have a genuine dispute about Morgan. Stevenson claims to recover the genuineness of the debate because he claims that, since our standards for deploying the term ‘good’ to Morgan vary so widely, the disagreement must be in our favorable or unfavorable (non-cognitive) attitudes towards Morgan. In this debate, John is for Morgan and I am against.

But, now, consider an analogy with natural kind terms. Say John and I are two theorists talking about water but disagreeing over its nature. John claims a particular sample of liquid is water because he has analyzed it and it is composed of H2O. I, on the other hand, disagree about the nature of water. I think water has some other composition,
So, I say the sample is not water. We are applying different standards, just as in the moral case, but we are clearly not talking past each other. Rather, we disagree over the composition of water.

In the water case, the temptation to say we have a genuine disagreement stems from the fact that we are assuming that John and I live in, at least roughly, the same linguistic community and we can trace the causal chain between H2O, or whatever constitutes water, and our use of the term ‘water’. In short, the meaning of ‘water’ is not solely dependent on what descriptions individual members of a linguistic community associate with it. Stevenson’s argument for P1 offers no reason why we cannot extend this same view of meaning to moral terms, like ‘good’. John and I have recourse to other methods for determining whether our accounts of the meaning of ‘good’ are plausible. It is not simply up to me, or John, what ‘good’ means.

It might be tempting to say that this response depends on extending a causal theory of reference to a theory of meaning (i.e. that I have to accept a causal theory of meaning). According to the causal theory of reference, the referent of a term is determined by an initial dubbing (either via perception or a reference-fixing description) and communicative exchanges that form a causal link between uses of the term and the initial dubbing. (Putnam 1975, 1981 and Kripke 1980) I can only gesture at an argument here, but I think my defense of cognitivism allows me to remain neutral between at least some descriptivist accounts of meaning (e.g. Frank Jackson’s) and a causal theory of meaning. According to Jackson, on one dimension of meaning, the meaning of a term will depend on something like a description (e.g. the platitudes accepted by competent speakers of the language), but it will also depend on what
particular things occupy the functional role denoted by a term. (Jackson, 1998) The only claims my defense of cognitivism need are: 1. The meaning of a term is determined by more than what descriptions individual users of that term associate with it, and 2. In a moral disagreement, sameness of meaning does not require disputants to associate all the same descriptions with a term. I think 1 and 2 are consistent with both a causal theory of meaning and descriptivism, at least Jackson’s version.

So, P1 is a weak premise because two interlocutors can apply different standards for deploying a term, yet not talk past each other. Stevenson and Moore focused simply on the fact in many moral disagreements, speakers deployed different standards. What they failed to notice is that this is not enough to show that the speakers simply mean different things and, so, talk past one another. So, cognitivism can still make room for sensible disagreement.

The situation, though, gets worse for the non-cognitivist. This is because when we consider Stevenson’s Moorean-inspired argument against cognitivism (the defense of P1) we should look again at how, exactly, a non-cognitivist accounts for genuine moral disagreement.

Assume Stevenson is right that a moral disagreement counts as genuine, or sensible if the two parties are not simply talking past one another. Assume, also, that Stevenson is right to make this a requirement that any account of the meaning of moral terms must meet. Stevenson argued that the non-cognitivist can, and the cognitivist cannot, account for why many moral disagreements are genuine.

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13 How much overlap genuine moral disagreement requires is a question I have not answered.
If moral disagreements are disagreements in attitude, then if one disputant is for something and another is against it, they are not talking past one another. Though Stevenson does not say, he seems committed to the claim that this will be assured by the function of the non-cognitive attitudes. In genuine moral disagreements, emotions for and emotions against (or approvals and disapprovals) will be about one and the same thing. We should ask, though, whether we have any reason to be so assured.

Attitudes against homosexuality, for example, can vary from disgust to outrage to pity. Attitudes for homosexuality can vary from empathy to respect to admiration. These lists are by no means exhaustive. The non-cognitivist owes us an account of how non-cognitivism will avoid the same problem brought against the cognitivist. Why will it not often be the case that the object of, for example, the pity Bob feels for anyone who is homosexual (an against feeling for homosexuality) be very different from the object of the admiration Joe’s feels for anyone who is homosexual?  

The problem, though, gets worse and becomes stark when we consider second order moral views. In Republic I, Socrates and Thrasymachus disagree about the value of justice. They seem to agree about which actions would count as just and unjust (344b-c), but they disagree over whether it is worth being just. Thrasymachus praises the life of injustice and rejects the life of justice. Socrates defends the life of justice and rejects the life of injustice. So, Socrates has favorable attitudes towards justice and Thrasymachus has unfavorable attitudes towards justice. It should be clear that a non-cognitivist would have to say that Thrasymachus is simply misusing the term “justice”. (Sturgeon, 1986)

For the primary function of moral terms, their emotive meaning, just is to express

14 Bob could be pitying anyone who is gay for not being more like God and Joe could feel admiration for how hard it is to live in a world where one is the object of so much hate. Do Bob and Joe disagree in attitude?
associated non-cognitive attitudes (like emotions). The non-cognitivist must hold, then, that the debate between Socrates and Thrasymachus is not a genuine disagreement because the term is being used equivocally in the disagreement.

IV. Conclusion

Early non-cognitivists, like Stevenson, seem to have thought that the correct meta-ethical position will help us understand our moral practices like our practice of engaging in moral disagreements. One reason to do this is so that we might improve how we resolve those disagreements and make progress. But, of course, non-cognitivists think that progress cannot be genuine moral progress, but only changes for which we have some (non-cognitive) pro-attitude. Stevenson’s treatment of moral disagreement exhibits a kind of optimism about the non-cognitive project. In the introduction to Facts and Values, Stevenson addresses the importance of meta-ethics,

The need of such a specialized approach to ethics is readily seen. When we say that so and so is good, etc., we usually try to avoid dogmatism by giving reasons for what we say; and in many cases we have a dependable half-knowledge of how to go about this. But we are not always aware of the potential complexity of the reasons, or of the extent to which the reasons we manage to give can be supplemented by further reasons. Nor do we clearly understand just what is involved in saying that our reasons “justify” our conclusions. An analytical study, temporarily letting us see our issues in a neutral perspective, is needed to provide us with something rather more than this sort of half-knowledge….An unanalyzed half-knowledge may have one of two effects. It may lead us to an illusory conviction of having said the last word on a normative issue, this conviction being attended by a contempt for those who fail to see the “obvious cogency” of our arguments. Or it may lead us, when controversies attending our “last word” eventually become discouraging, to a growing conviction that reasoning about ethical matters is never really worthwhile. Such convictions are not easily dispelled; but it is not too much to say, I think, that they spring in good measure from ignorance, and from a kind of ignorance that analytical ethics can hope to correct.

(Stevenson, 1963 vii)
The importance Stevenson places on ethical theory contrasts sharply with Blackburn’s comments quoted in the introduction of this paper. Blackburn aims to limit the effect his non-cognitivism will have on our moral practices, including our practices of moral disagreement. This difference is odd.

I think understanding the non-cognitivist account of moral disagreement and its problems, helps us begin to understand this difference. One promise of emotivism was that it would free us from misunderstandings that we easily fall into when we unreflectively engage in our common moral practices. It would then provide a better, more accurate framework for understanding these practices. This would, in turn, allow us to improve our practices.

My arguments are intended to show that there is an initial obstacle to this project. The obstacle is that central to most moral disagreements is the idea that two parties are holding conflicting points of view and at most one can be correct. This is the basic orientation of a party to a moral disagreement. It also allows us to see moral disagreements as opportunities for discovering a better moral position.

Non-cognitivism aimed to provide a more accurate way of understanding what is actually going on in most of these cases and, then, recover features like this, but with an improved understanding. I suspect non-cognitivists who encounter this obstacle can see the temptation to make The Move. It is open to say that an account moral disagreement can be true and be an awkward fit when one considers her practice of moral disagreement. It leaves one wondering, though, why the non-cognitivist was ever trying to make a fit at all.
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