

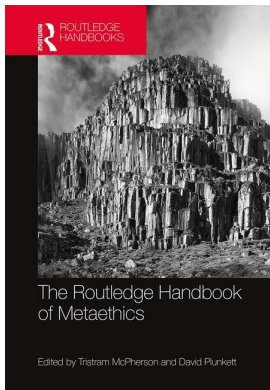
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### Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism

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## Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism

Matthew S. Bedke

### A PROFOUND DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

Of all the ways of dividing up the metaethical terrain, arguably the greatest chasm lies between cognitivism and non-cognitivism. To see what is at issue, consider the following claims:

- Rousseau should have thanked Hume.
- Stepping on gouty toes is (morally) wrong.
- Forcing people into an agrarian lifestyle is (morally) obligatory.
- Pleasure is intrinsically good.
- That you are jealous of Sarah is not a good reason to kick her.

These claims can be thought of as sentences in English or as psychological judgments. As we shall see, ‘cognitive’ and ‘non-cognitive’ make most sense when labeling different types of psychological judgment. But the issues I wish to discuss are similar regardless of whether we consider linguistic meanings or psychological states, and I find them easier to introduce in the context of linguistic meanings.

So let us start with sentences and let us suppose someone sincerely asserts “Pleasure is intrinsically good.” If you are in a particularly reflective mood, you might set aside the issue of whether pleasure is indeed intrinsically good—an issue in normative ethics—and wonder instead *what it means to say* that pleasure is intrinsically good, or for that matter, *what it means to say* that pleasure is intrinsically value-neutral, or to say that it is intrinsically bad.

Cognitivism and non-cognitivism offer two different answers to your questions. Put simply, cognitivism says that “Pleasure is intrinsically good” *purports to describe* pleasure in some way by calling it intrinsically good. This descriptive purport is meant to be a very common sort of meaning that many pedestrian sentences enjoy. If one says “Hume

is frustrated,” for example, the expression ‘is frustrated’ is fairly uncontroversially *about* a certain psychological state of mind; it *stands for* a state of mind. And you probably think “Hume is frustrated” *ascribes* that state of mind to Hume, and that is how the whole sentence then purports to *describe* how things are.

Cognitivism would say all these things about our normative sentences. For example, there is some worldly feature that ‘is intrinsically good’ is about, or that it stands for, and the sentence ascribes that feature to pleasure so that the whole sentence “Pleasure is intrinsically good” purports to describe how things are.<sup>1</sup>

We could add some wrinkles to the story. For example, we could say that the way a sentence describes things is by expressing a proposition, and it is more fundamentally the proposition that describes or represents possible states of the world. We might also wonder whether a normative sentence could describe things differently depending on the context in which it is used. Maybe when I say an action is wrong I describe it in one way (e.g., as being condemned by *my culture’s* norms) whereas others who call it wrong describe it in a different way (e.g., as being condemned by *their culture’s* norms). Wrinkles aside, the key thought for cognitivism is that the sentences purport to describe how things are.

Non-cognitivism takes an entirely different approach. It comes in two parts. First, it rejects cognitivism. Applied to “Pleasure is intrinsically good,” the thought is that this sentence does not purport to describe pleasure in any way. The meaning of ‘is intrinsically good’ does not involve being about anything, or standing for anything, so the sentence is not ascribing any worldly feature to pleasure.

Second, it offers a positive story about meaning. I will elaborate later, but the rough thought is that some normative expressions have an intrinsically action-guiding meaning. Applied to “Pleasure is intrinsically good,” we would say its meaning has some intimate connection with the *motivation* to bring about pleasure, or with *endorsing* pleasure, or *commanding* people to bring about, preserve, or protect pleasure, or some such. Applied to “Stepping on gouty toes is wrong,” its meaning is connected to the motivation to not step on gouty toes, or to disapprove of doing so, or commanding people not to do so, or some such.

Having said all this, I hasten to add that there is no consensus as to exactly how to formulate the divide more precisely, or even if the distinction I just attempted to draw survives critical scrutiny. The bulk of this chapter is dedicated to such issues. Near the end, I briefly canvass some of the arguments for and against one camp or the other.<sup>2</sup>

### THE HYPOTHESES: LINGUISTIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL

Let me begin by recommending more precise formulations of cognitivist and non-cognitivist hypotheses. First, taking normative language as the object of study, here are two distinct positions concerning linguistic meaning.

*linguistic cognitivism*: normative expression ‘N’ has descriptive content as a matter of its conventional meaning, so it can help sentences in which it features describe a possible state of the world via its conventional meaning.

*linguistic non-cognitivism*: (negative part:) normative expression ‘N’ has no descriptive content as a matter of its conventional meaning, so it cannot help sentences in which

it features describe a possible state of the world via its conventional meaning; (positive part:) the meaning of ‘N’, or a sentence in which it features, is to be understood in a more purely action-guiding way.

These hypotheses are schematic. Substitution of terms for ‘N’—e.g., ‘is good’, ‘ought to’, ‘is a reason to’, etc.—delivers non-schematic hypotheses for particular expressions. Historically, the debates tend to focus on certain bits of moral language, though the same distinctions will crop up in other normative areas, including rationality, prudence, aesthetics, epistemology, and so on.<sup>3</sup> Rather than wrestle with questions of scope, I will draw examples from the sentences listed at the outset to characterize the two camps.

Turning to normative judgments and taking them as the object of study, we have the following distinct positions.

*psychological cognitivism*: normative judgments affirming normative status N are belief-like attitudes that represent some possible worldly feature by affirming status N.

*psychological non-cognitivism*: (negative part:) it is not the case that normative judgments affirming normative status N are belief-like attitudes that represent some possible worldly feature by affirming status N; (positive part:) they do, however, have a more conative, action-guiding nature.

As before, these hypotheses are schematic, allowing substitution of various statuses (being wrong, being good) that can be affirmed in thought. And the central issues are very similar to those found in the linguistic hypotheses. Instead of talking about the sentence “Stepping on gouty toes is wrong,” we would talk about the psychological judgment that *stepping on gouty toes is wrong*. On one view, it is a belief that represents stepping on gouty toes as exhibiting some possible worldly feature. On another view, the judgment does not represent the action as exhibiting any worldly feature; instead, it is a conative attitude toward the action, akin to having a negative attitude toward stepping on gouty toes, planning not to step on gouty toes, or something along these lines.

Note that I put the linguistic hypotheses in terms of *description*, whereas I put the psychological hypotheses in terms of *representation*. This is not to mark any deep distinction between description and representation, but merely to help us bear in mind that the linguistic and psychological hypotheses are distinct. That is, the psychological version of one does not entail its linguistic correlate, and vice versa.

Also worth noting, the hypotheses do not make cognitivism and non-cognitivism logical contradictories. The contradictory of cognitivism would be the negative component of non-cognitivism. But to be faithful to the non-cognitivist tradition, we need to incorporate an action-guiding element into the non-cognitivist hypothesis.

### POSITIVE HYPOTHESES FOR NON-COGNITIVISM

It is standard to recognize three ways of filling in the non-cognitivist’s positive position on the action-guiding qualities of thought or language.

One of them is the *emotivism* of A. J. Ayer (1936). According to him, normative language ‘emotes’ or ‘evinces’ a speaker’s attitudes such that the meaning of “Stepping on gouty toes is wrong” is similar to “Stepping on gouty toes” said with a special tone

of horror, or followed by special exclamation marks that conventionally indicate the speaker's horror. Some philosophers have suggested that the language of booing and cheering provides an apt analogy, in which case our exemplary sentence has a meaning similar to "Boo stepping on gouty toes!"

Another option is the *prescriptivism* of R. M. Hare (1952). For him, the primary kind of meaning a bit of moral, evaluative language adds to a sentence is like the kind of mood found in imperatival sentences. A command like "Don't step on gouty toes!" nicely illustrates the imperatival mood, and on Hare's suggestion, "Stepping on gouty toes is wrong" has a meaning similar to this command. 'Is wrong' does not add any descriptive content to the sentence, but rather adds *something like* an imperatival mood.

The most popular option is the *expressivism* of Simon Blackburn (1984; 1993; 1998), Allan Gibbard (1990; 2003), Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons (2006a; 2006b), and Mark Timmons (1999). Expressivism includes two theses. First, a perfectly general thesis in the philosophy of language: the meaning of a term or sentence is understood in terms of the state of mind it is used to express.<sup>4</sup> Second, a thesis about the state of mind expressed by some normative expression 'N': the state of mind expressed by 'N', or expressed by the atomic, assertoric sentences in which it features, are not beliefs with representational contents but conative states.

To illustrate, under expressivism the meaning of "Stepping on gouty toes is wrong" has to do with the state of mind it is used to express in assertoric contexts. Which state of mind does it express? Well, to satisfy the action-guiding dimension of meaning it must be a conative state of mind, like some negative attitude toward stepping on gouty toes (Blackburn, and probably Horgan and Timmons), or a plan not to step on gouty toes (Gibbard), or some such.

When we turn to consider how normative judgments might be action-guiding, expressivists have a ready answer. They can say that normative judgments just are the non-cognitive state of mind expressed by the corresponding sentences. The judgment that *stepping on gouty toes is wrong* is then something like a negative attitude toward stepping on gouty toes, or a plan not to do it, or some such.

Looking at the emotivism of Ayer, or the prescriptivism of Hare, it is less obvious that they even have a psychological hypothesis to offer. This is especially true for prescriptivism. If normative language is like the language of commands, perhaps there is no such thing as a normative judgment *per se*, just as (arguably) there is no such thing as a command that is merely thought.

Given these remarks, we are in a position to appreciate an alternative taxonomy to the one I suggested above. It would characterize cognitivism as the view that the meaning of a normative sentence involves *expressing belief-like, representational psychological states*, and non-cognitivism as the view that they *express more desire-like, non-representational states*. This taxonomy would blend the linguistic and psychological issues that I have tried to keep separate. To be sure, blending them makes a lot of sense if we put attitude expression front-and-center in a theory of linguistic meaning, as expressivists do. But the broader debate between cognitivism and non-cognitivism should not be yoked to the expressivist's controversial theory of meaning. That is not to say that expressivism has a bad theory of meaning. It is merely to point out the expressivism is one version of non-cognitivism and the broader debate should not be articulated using its guiding assumptions.

So, let us stick with our more general taxonomy. Doing so brings into relief some important points. First, *if* description- and representation-relevant aspects to meaning are not tied to attitude expression, *then* arguments for linguistic non-cognitivism do not need to show that non-belief-like states are expressed, and arguments for linguistic cognitivism do not need to show that belief-like states are expressed. Second, it is possible to combine linguistic non-cognitivism with psychological cognitivism, or vice versa, though consideration of such mixing and matching is beyond the scope of this entry.

### THE LAY OF THE LAND

At this point, it might help to situate the camps in the broader metaethical landscape.

The clearest example of a cognitivist metaethic, and the target of most non-cognitivist arguments, is some form of realism. Realists not only think that moral language and thought purport to describe or represent, but they think there are mind-independent moral properties and facts that we sometimes describe or represent accurately. Some realists think those properties and facts are natural (Boyd 1988; Brink 1989; Copp 1995; Finlay 2014; Jackson 1998; Railton 1986; Schroeder 2007), others think they are non-natural (or simply *sui generis*) (Cuneo 2007; Enoch 2011; Fitzpatrick 2012; Moore 1903; Shafer-Landau 2003). But realists are cognitivists, both psychologically and linguistically.<sup>5</sup>

So are error theorists. They think that some extant normative discourse either tries to attribute mind-independent normative properties, or presumes such properties are exhibited. They differ from realists in claiming that, in fact, *nothing* exhibits such properties, and perhaps nothing *could* exhibit such properties. As such, the discourse is shot through with error (Joyce 2001; Mackie 1977; Olson 2014).

Some positions are harder to locate on the cognitivism, non-cognitivism map. Take constructivism (Street 2010). As I understand it, its distinguishing characteristic is that some normative truths are constructed from some perspective on the world. Different constructivist positions will differ over the truths constructed (e.g., all normativity vs. just moral normativity), exactly what construction amounts to (e.g., following a procedure of deliberation from some actual perspective, generating claims from some idealized perspective), and the perspective that provides the materials of construction (e.g., practical rationality, some domain of normative judgments, the attitudes of one's culture, the attitudes of an ideal observer). If that is the nub of constructivism, it is neutral on the cognitivism, non-cognitivism divide. Constructivists are free to add that normative claims purport to describe or represent a constructed reality (thereby being cognitivist), but they need not do so.

One version of cognitivist constructivism deserves special mention here: speaker subjectivism. On that view, we take the actual attitudes of an individual as the materials of construction, and we simply say that correct normative claims for that speaker are accurate *descriptions* of her/his attitudes. If so, "Forcing people into an agrarian lifestyle is morally obligatory" is used to describe in roughly the same way as "Forcing people into an agrarian lifestyle is *approved of by me*." And both are presumably accurate descriptions (and so presumably true) when said by A, just in case A has the requisite positive conative attitudes toward forced labor.



It should be clear that non-cognitivism is not speaker subjectivism (Ayer 1936; Horgan and Timmons 2006b). For non-cognitivism says that the normative sentence is not in the business of describing anything, let alone describing the speaker's attitudes. It is doing something else that *might* have a lot to do with speakers' attitudes, but it is not describing those attitudes. As a result, non-cognitivists do not need to concede that a normative sentence, as said by A, accurately describes (and is presumably thereby true), just in case A has the requisite conative attitudes.

Another position difficult to locate on our map is *hermeneutic fictionalism*. Concerning linguistic meanings, I think there are two ways of understanding the view. One hermeneutic fictionalist position is this: in asserting normative sentences, we are *pretending* there are normative facts and properties or *making believe* that there are. An analogous situation might be that of the actor pretending that various things are true on stage, but prepared to deny them when the curtain falls. Another option is that there is an "in the fiction" operator supplied by the contexts in which we normally assert such sentences, so that, say, "Stepping on gouty toes is wrong" would normally be said in a context that gives the sentence the same content as "According to the moral fiction, stepping on gouty toes is wrong." An analogous situation might be discourse about the characters and goings-on of the Harry Potter series. In such discussions, we know we are not taking a stand on how things are with the real world, nor are we pretending to do so. The context in which we speak supplies an "in the fiction" operator.

Both views, it seems to me, are at least consistent with linguistic cognitivism. For it looks like *the language* has descriptive content. It is just that the *speakers* of the language typically use it in a special way, or use it in contexts that supply a special operator. So, I tentatively count them as linguistic cognitivists. As for psychological theses, it looks like an attitude of make-believe or pretend might count as a non-representational state, so at least that version of hermeneutic fictionalism has affinities with psychological non-cognitivism (see Kalderon 2005).

Last, I should mention so-called *hybrid views*, which try to combine aspects of the two camps. For example, they might wish to combine linguistic cognitivism with only the positive part of linguistic non-cognitivism to generate this hypothesis: some expression 'N' both has descriptive content and also has an action-guiding dimension to its meaning. For more, see Teemu Toppinen's chapter "Hybrid Accounts of Ethical Thought and Talk." As I proceed, I will set hybrid theories to one side.

### TAXONOMIC TROUBLES AND CREEPING MINIMALISM

Everything I have said so far is subject to dispute. Consider again the early non-cognitivist positions of Ayer and Hare. If we take their analogies with emotings and commands seriously, we can end up with much stronger *negative* non-cognitivist theses than the ones I suggest—not the lack of descriptive or representational content, but the *lack of truth-aptness* (Ayer 1936; Shafer-Landau 2003). For neither "Boo stepping on gouty toes!" nor "Don't step on gouty toes!" is truth-apt. And if normative sentences are not even truth-apt, then they are not true (and not false), and presumably there is no reason to posit normative facts, properties, etc.

In the salad days of non-cognitivism, non-cognitivists were happy to deny the truth-aptness of normative sentences, and happy to deny the existence of normative properties

and facts. But the vast majority of contemporary non-cognitivists think normative sentences and judgments are truth-apt, that some are true, that there are normative facts, properties, and even moral knowledge! Some of the philosophers I have put in the non-cognitivist camp have registered some discontent with the label precisely because it is associated with the old-school denial of truth-aptitude, truth, and the rest. Simon Blackburn prefers the labels ‘quasi-realism’ and ‘projectivism’, where quasi-realism is the project of earning the right to truth-, fact-, and property-talk when one is not a realist, and ‘projectivism’ refers to the view that moral properties and facts are projected from our sentiments (Blackburn 1996a; 1996b). Allan Gibbard has noted that the “touchstones” of cognitivism are things he embraces: normative claims can be true or false, normative questions have a right answer, and sometimes those right answers are knowable (Gibbard 2003). And Horgan and Timmons have a view they call *cognitivist expressivism* (Horgan and Timmons 2006a).

What gives? Well, most of the philosophers I label ‘non-cognitivists’ are engaged in a project of accommodation. They see how deeply engrained truth-, fact-, and property-talk are in moral discourse, and they think that non-cognitivists can think and talk in those terms, too.

It looks like they are right to accommodate, at least if they wish to maintain their normative views. For consider a non-cognitivist about ‘wrong’ who thinks that stepping on gouty toes is wrong. He says as much in English. Now suppose he goes on to say that *it isn't true that stepping on gouty toes is wrong*, or *there is no fact of the matter whether stepping on gouty toes is wrong*, or *stepping on gouty toes does not bear the property of being wrong*. By saying such things, it looks like he is taking something back—he does not think that stepping on gouty toes is wrong after all. So, in order to sustain his view that stepping on gouty toes is wrong, he has to admit that it's true, that there are moral facts and properties, etc. In fact, he might have to admit that the sentence *accurately describes* the moral facts. If he denies this, again, it looks like he is taking something back.

Herein lies a problem. If non-cognitivists and cognitivists are all on board with moral truths, properties, descriptions, etc., what is the difference between them? James Dreier calls the general problem *the problem of creeping minimalism* (Dreier 2004; see also Rosen 1998; Timmons 1999). I think it is easiest to see the problem if we start with a contrast between minimalist and correspondence theories of truth. A correspondence theory says something like this: for “S” to be true is for there to be some worldly fact F, and for “S” to correspond with F. On this view, accepting the truth of *any* sentence, whether it is about science or morals, commits you to a word-world relation of correspondence between language and fact.

By contrast, minimalism eschews any general analysis of truth in favor of something along the following lines: there is nothing more to the concept of truth aside from the following schema and its substitution instances:

“S” is true iff S.

For the minimalist, “Snow is white” is true if snow is white, and “Forced labor is wrong” is true if forced labor is wrong, but there need not be a robust word-world relation, whether it be correspondence with fact or anything else, that the truth of each sentence is committed to. That is good for a non-cognitivist who wants to maintain the truth of the normative



sentence without thereby incurring any metaphysical or semantic commitments beyond what he already committed to in thinking or saying that forced labor is wrong (which, for him, might be no more than opposing forced labor and expressing this opposition in language).

And now here comes the creep. Just as the non-cognitivist wanted to talk about truth on the cheap, he might also want to talk about fact, property, and maybe accurate description on the cheap. He could give minimalist theories of these, too, using the following schemas and their substitution instances:

It is a fact that S iff S.

*a* has the property of being F iff *a* is F.

“*a* is F” accurately describes *a* iff *a* is F.

If such minimalist theories are right, then you can talk of normative truths, facts, properties, descriptions, and the like without incurring any metaphysical or semantic commitments than you already incur with your first-order normative opinions. Adding these extra ways of talking does not a cognitivist make (or such talk does not make one a cognitivist *as opposed to* a non-cognitivist).

Non-cognitivism can thereby complete their accommodation project. At the same time, it makes it hard to draw a distinction between the two camps. We cannot say one camp affirms normative truths, facts, properties and the other does not. Maybe we cannot even say one camp affirms descriptive content and the other does not. Maybe there is no sustainable distinction to draw.

Then again, it would be very strange if there were nothing to the cognitivist, non-cognitivist distinction. One option is just to reject minimalism about the vocabulary you would like to use to make the distinction. You might be inclined to reject minimalism about representation and description, for example.

Alternatively, James Dreier himself has suggested what he calls the “explanation” explanation as a way of maintaining a distinction in the face of fairly aggressive minimalist creep. Here is what he says: “The point, I think, is that expressivists are distinguished by their claim that there is nothing to making a normative judgment over and above being in a state that plays a certain ‘non-cognitive’ psychological role, a role more like desire than it is like factual belief. In particular, to explain what it is to make a moral judgment, we need not mention any normative properties” (Dreier 2004: 39).

His general idea is that there are least two sorts of things one can say when asked to *explain what it is* to make a moral judgment. The cognitivist cites properties. The non-cognitivist cites states with a certain desire-like psychological role (see also Fine 2001). Allan Gibbard (2003: 19–20, 187) also draws distinctions between the two camps in terms of the explanations they offer. When considering the interesting motivational or decision-making role that normative judgments have, for example, Gibbard says that normative judgments are *plans* for what to do, whereas (some) realists would maintain that normative judgments are special representational beliefs with the power to motivate.

Stepping back, these versions of the “explanation” explanation appear to grant all parties talk of normative truth, fact, property, description, etc., but one party (the non-cognitivist one) says these ways of talking *do not help explain* the nature of normative

judgments. Presumably, the non-cognitivist would want to say that, when explaining the nature of some *non-normative* judgments, like the judgment that snow is white, truth, fact, property, description, etc. *are* explanatory. It remains unclear exactly how this fits with minimalism about all these notions. If you are a minimalist about properties, for example, how can it be explanatory in one context but not another? One would think that minimalism about properties saps it of explanatory power in every context, or at least gives it the same explanatory power in every context.

Before moving on, let me mention a slightly different approach. Mark Timmons (1999, chapter 4) distinguishes morally engaged from morally disengaged contexts. In morally engaged contexts, cognitivists and non-cognitivists can both make liberal use of truth-talk and the rest as a perfectly (semantically) appropriate way of expressing their normative views without thereby being metaphysically or semantically committal. This much sounds like minimalism. In disengaged contexts, however, non-cognitivists would want to disavow commitment to normative truths and the like, while cognitivists would like to maintain it, for in such contexts truth-talk and the like is more metaphysically and semantically committal.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to further discuss what looks like a contextualist theory of truth and the like.

### WHAT ARE BELIEFS? WHAT ARE DESIRE-LIKE STATES?

Notice that much of the above has focused on psychological issues. One common theme has been that cognitivists explain the nature of normative judgments by saying that they are representational beliefs while non-cognitivists say they are non-representational, desire-like states. Now, we might ask, what is it to be a representational belief as opposed to a desire-like state?

In the background here is a folk psychological distinction between the different *roles* of beliefs and desires. The different roles are often characterized in terms of differing *directions of fit* (Anscombe 1957, section 32; Humberstone 1992; Searle 1984: 8; Smith 1994: 115). In brief, a representational belief is meant to fit the world, whereas a desire is meant for the world to fit it. Less briefly, the thought is that A's belief that P tends to come into existence when A is in an epistemic state indicating that P, and the belief tends to desist when A is in an epistemic state indicating that not P, whereas A's desire that P couples with true beliefs to tend to cause the agent to make it the case that P, and it tends to persist in the face of an epistemic state indicating that not P.

Plugged into our psychological hypotheses, cognitivists hypothesize that normative judgments have a certain role—the mind-fit-world role, or *thetic* role (terminology proliferates here)—whereas non-cognitivists hypothesize a different sort of role—a world-fit-mind role, or a *telic* role. This gives us some indication of what to look for if we are to discern whether psychological cognitivism or non-cognitivism is true of some judgment: look for evidence that bears on the role played by the judgment.

But there is another way of thinking about the distinction between belief-like and desire-like states. Rather than (or perhaps in addition to) thinking of beliefs as having a certain sort of role, Horgan and Timmons (2006a) have suggested that we count a judgment-type as belief if it exhibits some key generic properties associated with belief-type states. Here are some of the properties they discuss:

- Beliefs have the phenomenology of categorizing or classifying some item based on sufficient reason for so categorizing or classifying.
- Beliefs are semantically assessable for truth and falsity.
- Beliefs have contents that bear logical entailment relations with the contents of other beliefs.

Horgan and Timmons think that normative judgments tick these boxes. They conclude that normative judgments are beliefs.

There is a wrinkle. For they also want to stress that judgments that tick these boxes can lack what they call *overall descriptive content*, or, using our terminology, they can lack *overall representational content*. As I understand the view, a judgment like *stepping on gouty toes is wrong* can be a genuine belief, and yet to think the action wrong is not to represent it as having any worldly features. Such beliefs they call *ought-commitments*, whereas beliefs with overall representational content they call *is-commitments*. Importantly, Horgan and Timmons also think that ought-commitment beliefs have a more motivational, action-guiding role than do is-commitment beliefs.

Shall we conclude that certain normative judgments are beliefs, albeit ought-commitment beliefs rather than is-commitment beliefs? On the one hand, Horgan and Timmons have noted some interesting features that normative judgments share with states that are uncontroversially beliefs. On the other hand, it seems the hard work is not deciding whether to label these as non-belief-type states, or as ought-commitment beliefs. The hard work is explaining why a non-representational state has the key generic properties of belief that Horgan and Timmons rightly note—the phenomenology of categorization, semantic assessability for truth and falsity, and logical entailment relations. A cognitivist could argue that it is harder to explain why normative judgments have these properties with the hypothesis that they are non-representational states. This brings us to the arguments.

## ARGUMENTS

With some idea of what is at stake in these debates, what reason is there to embrace one position rather than the other? Here, I briefly mention some considerations, and direct the reader to other entries in this volume where appropriate.

### **For cognitivism: Commonalities with other cognitivist discourse**

Grammatically, normative language resembles language that is uncontroversially descriptive. Its sentences can take the declarative mood, they can be asserted, and they can embed in complex constructions. The sentences seem truth-apt, and some of them seem true. We can use the sentences to formulate valid arguments. We have genuine normative disagreements, and sometimes we think our normative views might be mistaken.

On the psychological side, normative judgments have a phenomenology much like categorization or classification. We can use normative premises in good, apparently theoretical, reasoning, exploiting logical entailment relations between the contents of our judgments. We call normative judgments beliefs in everyday speech, and we think such judgments are truth-apt and some of them true by virtue of having true contents.

The cognitivist hypotheses can deliver all these things in the same way one delivers them for non-normative, descriptive discourse. The key question is this: are non-cognitive explanations of these things *worse*? The jury is out, but all agree that non-cognitivism faces some significant challenges. For example, cognitivists think they have a relatively easier time explaining normative disagreement, for it is a familiar sort of disagreement between incompatible representations of the world, whereas non-cognitivism must posit something like disagreement in attitude (Gibbard 2003; Parfit 2011; Stevenson 1963). For more on this, see Gunnar Björnsson's chapter "The Significance of Ethical Disagreement for Theories of Ethical Thought and Talk."

Also, cognitivism might have an easier time accounting for the possibility of fundamental normative error, for that would be a failure to accurately represent or describe real features of the world, whereas non-cognitivists have tried to give an account of *the thought* that one's fundamental normative views might be in error as the thought that one's conative attitudes might be improved. This is to employ the standards of one's conative attitudes to pass judgment on some of those attitudes, and in so doing to imagine that improvement is possible by those standards (Blackburn 2009; Egan 2007).

Disagreement and error might be the deepest concerns for non-cognitivism. But lately, some more formal objections have received the most attention. Let me turn to them now.

### The Frege-Geach problem(s) for non-cognitivism

Consider a constellation of issues about the compositionality of meaning, validity, and inference raised by Peter Geach and John Searle (Geach 1960; 1965; Searle 1969). Geach asks us to consider the following argument:

1. If tormenting the cat is bad, getting your little brother to do it is bad.
2. Tormenting the cat is bad.
- C. Getting your little brother to torment the cat is bad.

This looks like a valid argument, poised for a theoretical inference. As we have seen, non-cognitivists have had various things to say about what (2) means. It is like emoting or commanding, or it expresses a non-cognitive attitude. But we need to ask what (2) means as embedded in the antecedent of (1). Qua antecedent, it does not appear to be emoting a negative attitude, or commanding anything, nor is it expressing a negative attitude. That is, if someone just accepts (1), he does not thereby have any negative attitude toward tormenting the cat, nor does he command anything. So we need to know: under non-cognitivism, what do all these premises mean such that the argument as a whole avoids equivocation, is valid, and can be used in inferential reasoning (c.f. Dreier 1996)?

As you can see, "the" Frege-Geach problem—or "the" problem of embeddability—is really a constellation of problems for non-cognitivism. Most basically, we want to know what logically complex sentences featuring normative expressions mean. We also want accounts of validity, inference, etc. that jibe with that theory of meaning, and some assurance that it makes sense to package all of this in the propositional, declarative surface structure that the language manifests (as opposed to, say, a more transparently imperatival structure or emotive structure).

There are some interesting non-cognitive answers to this challenge (Blackburn 1984; Gibbard 1990; 2003), but nothing is settled here (Schroeder 2010b; van Roojen 1996). For more on this, see Jack Woods' chapter "The Frege-Geach Problem." For those who develop a taste for these issues, there is a nicely focused aspect of the problem to study: *the negation problem* (Dreier 2006; Hale 2002; Schroeder 2010a).

### For non-cognitivism: Motivational internalism

The single most important consideration weighing in favor of non-cognitivism—and particularly in favor of *psychological* non-cognitivism—is the motivational profile of certain normative judgments. Suppose Able judges she ought to visit her grandmother in the hospital, and Bea that she ought to donate to the charity drive on the radio. Are they motivated to do these things, at least a little? If so, is the motivation contingent? In answer, many have thought that there is some non-contingent connection between ought judgments and the motivation to act accordingly. Similar points can be made for other normative judgments.

Non-cognitivists think they have a better explanation for this motivational profile. For they can say that the motivational connection exists because a judgment that one ought to phi is a conative state, something like a desire to phi. No surprise, then, that one is non-contingently motivated to act accordingly. If, on the other hand, the judgment is a belief that represents one's phiing as having some worldly feature, it is puzzling why there would be anything more than a contingent motivation to phi. Beliefs do not normally motivate without coupling with appropriate contingent desire-type states.

There are two difficulties with this line of argument. First, it is heavily contested exactly what the motivational explanandum is. Here are some options.

- Necessarily, if A judges that she ought to phi, A is motivated to phi (insofar as she is rational).
- Necessarily, if A judges that she ought to phi, A is normally motivated to phi (insofar as she is rational) (Blackburn 1998; Dreier 1990; Korsgaard 1986; Timmons 1999).
- Necessarily, if A judges that she ought to phi, A's judgment has the purpose of helping to motivate her to phi (insofar as she is rational) (Bedke 2008).
- It is not possible to have a community of rational agents, none of which are (normally) motivated by their first-person ought judgments (Bedke 2008; Dreier 1990; Lenman 1999; Tresan 2009).
- A's judgment that she ought to phi has an entirely contingent connection to motivation.

Now, if the first option, known as strong motivational internalism, captures the motivational data, psychological non-cognitivists are in a good position to explain it. But even non-cognitivists shy away from a very strong motivational internalism in light of the so-called *amoralist* counterexample (Brink 1989). An amoralist (or a-normativist) is someone who sincerely makes the relevant first-person normative judgment but who is utterly unmoved by it. If such an agent is possible, strong motivational internalism is false. And it is widely thought that such an agent is possible.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have the entirely contingent connection to motivation. That strikes many as too weak. A person's normative judgments normally tell us

something about their cares and concerns, what they are for and against, and how they are likely to behave. So you might think that some weak, but non-contingent, motivational internalism captures the data. Unfortunately, weak internalisms are a problem for both camps. To the extent the motivational data are anything other than the data we find with standard desire-like states (strong internalism) or standard belief-like states (entirely contingent), it just isn't clear whether *either* of our theories are particularly well poised to explain them.

Let us back up and suppose that the data supports some strong-ish motivational connection. You might think that this would at least *favor* psychological non-cognitivism. But even this is contested. For some maintain that certain representational beliefs are either capable of motivating without the need of any independent desires, or that such beliefs are able to spawn independent desires *ex nihilo* (Shafer-Landau 2003; Smith 1994). That is, they deny the folk theory of belief-desire psychology. You can guess which beliefs are the special ones: normative judgments with the interesting motivational profile. They are special beliefs in that they do not need to couple with contingent, independent, and *ex-ante* existent desires to generate motivation.

At this point, I leave it to the reader to ponder just what the motivational data are and how best to explain them. I also direct your attention to David Faraci and Tristram McPherson's chapter "Ethical Judgment and Motivation."

#### **For non-cognitivism: Endorsement internalism**

More directly relevant to the linguistic issues is what I like to call *endorsement internalism*. According to endorsement internalism, normative language has some tight connection to the speech acts of endorsement, or approval (or disapproval or disapprobation as the case may be) (Gibbard 1990). We get some sense of the position when we consider the oddity of saying "Stepping on gouty toes is wrong, but I have nothing against it." This is largely underexplored territory (but see Woods 2014). The menu of options we found under motivational internalism is likely to repeat here, and it is a good question what sort of linguistic hypothesis accounts for the data.

### **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

I have just scratched the surface of the considerations that need to be explained. I focus on the above issues because they seem to directly address the general question: cognitivism or non-cognitivism? Other arguments in this literature take a divide-and-conquer strategy. For example, one could mount separate arguments against different versions of cognitivism, and thereby argue in favor of some version of non-cognitivism. One might, for example, argue that non-naturalist realism is subject to epistemic and metaphysical concerns of various sorts, while naturalist realism is undermined by Moore's open question argument (Moore 1903) and, more recently, moral twin earth arguments (Horgan and Timmons 1992). I must leave all these other metaethical battles for discussion elsewhere in this volume.

What we have, though, is an important distinction that cuts deep in the metaethical landscape and reaches out to nearly every area of philosophy. A lot of work has gone into these debates. Yet many issues remain ripe for further exploration.



## NOTES

1. We can set to one side what sort of worldly features are ascribed. Perhaps some normative sentences ascribe a monadic property, others relations between agents and actions, others relations between sets of possible worlds, etc.
2. Another excellent resource on these issues is the SEP entry “Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-cognitivism” (van Roojen 2015).
3. Gibbard (2012) now defends expressivism about semantic discourse.
4. Exactly what this position amounts to is disputed. Some say we are to assign mental states as semantic values in a formal treatment of the language (Rosen 1998; Schroeder 2010a). Others say we are to draw a meta-semantic distinction: sentences have whatever semantic values they have in virtue of expressing states of mind (Chrisman 2012; Ridge 2014). Another option is to locate the view in a more deeply pragmatic theory of meaning (Price et al. 2013). This is not the place to pursue these issues (but see Carballo 2014 and Elisabeth Camp’s chapter “Metaethical Expressivism”).
5. There are difficult cases with the so-called non-metaphysicist or quietist positions (Parfit 2011; Scanlon 2014), which typically align themselves with cognitivism but have unclear associations with description and representation.
6. Chrisman (2008) offers another approach: distinguish the camps in terms of whether they give normative judgments pride of place in practical reasoning or theoretical reasoning. It is unclear whether this captures the debate, and whether we can sustain the distinction between practical and theoretical reasoning without recourse to description- and representation-talk.

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## RELATED TOPICS

Chapter 5, “Metaethical Expressivism;” Chapter 14, “The Frege-Geach Problem;” Chapter 15, “Hybrid Accounts of Ethical Thought and Talk;” Chapter 17, “The Significance of Ethical Disagreement for Theories of Ethical Thought and Talk;” Chapter 19, “Ethical Judgment and Motivation;” Chapter 22, “Mind-Dependence and Moral Realism;” Chapter 33, “Metasemantics and Metaethics.”

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