6 Are Moral Judgments Semantically Uniform? A Wittgensteinian Approach to the Cognitivism - Non-Cognitivism Debate

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Abstract

Cognitivists and non-cognitivists in contemporary meta-ethics tend to assume that moral judgments are semantically uniform. That is, they share the assumption that either all moral judgments express beliefs, or they all express non-beliefs. But what if some moral judgments express beliefs and others do not? Then moral judgments are not semantically uniform and the question "Cognitivist or non-cognitivist?" poses a false dilemma. I will question the assumption that moral judgments are semantically uniform. First, I will explain what I mean by the assumption (section 2). I will call this assumption SUM, the *s*emantic *u*niformity of *m*oral judgments. Second, I will provide some examples in order to illustrate that SUM cannot be taken for granted (section 3). Third, I will try to understand, using ideas from Wittgenstein, why SUM has nevertheless so often been taken for granted (section 4). Fourth, I will discuss some authors in contemporary meta-ethics who have noted the false dilemma between cognitivism and non-cognitivism and evaluate the solutions they propose for overcoming it (section 5). Fifth, I will indicate, again with some help from Wittgenstein, how meta-ethical research about moral judgments is possible without the assumption that morality is semantically uniform (section 6).

1. Introduction

The question whether moral judgments express beliefs is one of the most discussed questions in contemporary meta-ethics. Cognitivists think that moral judgments express beliefs; non-cognitivists think that they express "non-beliefs", for instance emotions or prescriptions. Throughout their debate runs the assumption that moral judgments are semantically uniform: either all moral judgments express beliefs, or they all express non-beliefs.[1] In that regard, the term "non-cognitivism" is misleading. The term suggests that everyone who is not a cognitivist is thereby a non-cognitivist. The way in which non-cognitivism is commonly understood, however, does not support that suggestion: non-cognitivism is not just the denial of cognitivism, not just the view that not all moral judgments express beliefs, but the stronger view that all moral judgments express a non-belief.[2] That means that there is some logical space between cognitivism and non-cognitivism: it is logically possible both to deny that all moral judgments express beliefs *and* that all moral judgments express non-beliefs. What if some moral judgments express beliefs and others do not? Then moral judgments are not semantically uniform and the question "Cognitivist or non-cognitivist?" poses a false dilemma. If that is the case, important consequences follow for the way in which meta-ethical debates function. Many cognitivists argue for cognitivism by arguing against non-cognitivism (and the other way round). The reasoning is: if non-cognitivism can be proven wrong, then cognitivism is right (and the other way round). But if there is some logical space between cognitivism and non-cognitivism, if they are contraries (and can both be false) rather than contradictories, this way of arguing for a position by arguing against its contender will not work.

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[1] There are also hybrid positions. These will be discussed later.
[2] See, in this regard, definitions of non-cognitivism in Copp (2001, 9), Fisher (2011, 179) and Miller (2013, 6).

I will question the assumption that moral judgments are semantically uniform. First, I will explain what I mean by the assumption (section 2). I will call this assumption SUM, the *s*emantic *u*niformity of *m*oral judgments. Second, I will provide some examples in order to illustrate that SUM cannot be taken for granted (section 3). Third, I will try to understand, using ideas from Wittgenstein, why SUM has nevertheless so often been taken for granted (section 4). Fourth, I will discuss some authors in contemporary meta-ethics who have noted the false dilemma between cognitivism and non-cognitivism and evaluate the solutions they propose for overcoming it (section 5). Fifth, I will indicate, again with some help from Wittgenstein, how meta-ethical research about moral judgments is possible without the assumption that morality is semantically uniform (section 6).

2.   The Assumption: The Semantic Uniformity of Moral Judgments (SUM)

Michael Gill (2009) maintains that twentieth-century meta-ethicists have typically proceeded from the assumption that morality is uniform. Gill illustrates how that assumption works in moral psychology. While internalists think that moral judgments are intrinsically motivating, externalists think that moral judgments are not intrinsically motivating. But is it not possible that some moral judgments are intrinsically motivating while others are not, that, in other words, morality is not psychologically uniform? Gill indicates that his diagnosis about the uniformity of morality could also be investigated in moral ontology: would it not be possible that some moral facts are reducible to natural facts and that others are not? Or in moral epistemology: maybe some moral judgments can be justified and others cannot. Or in moral semantics: is it possible that some moral judgments express beliefs and have truth-value while others express non-beliefs and have no truth-value?

Gill describes the dominant approach of meta-ethicists as a two-stage process. The first stage consists of gathering examples of moral language use, and the second consists of "trying to show that the best analysis of the evidence gathered in the first stage was that morality had a certain conceptual shape" (Gill 2009, 217). If one assumes that all moral judgments share a conceptual shape, that is, that they *must* be semantically uniform, a small set of examples may suffice to find out what that conceptual shape is. According to Gill, the fact that meta-ethicists have not bothered to collect data in a comprehensive and systematic way indicates that they have at least implicitly accepted SUM (Gill 2009, 217). Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2009) provides further evidence for Gill's claims. On the basis of quotes from prominent meta-ethicists such as A. J. Ayer, Richard Hare, Simon Blackburn, John Mackie and others, he convincingly shows that they all seem to take the semantic uniformity of morality for granted (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009, 237-239). That would not be a problem if SUM were self-evident or could easily be proven. But that, I will argue, is not the case.

3. Is SUM Self-Evident? Some Examples

Consider three examples:

(1) John and Jack are walking down the street. John sees a woman being attacked. He wants to help her, but he is in a wheelchair. He cannot do anything. He thinks that Jack has not seen the attack and says: "Somebody's being attacked there." Jack reacts indifferently: "She probably asked for it." He clearly does not intend to do anything. John is irritated and pokes him in the back, saying: "That woman needs help."

(2) James and Julia are watching television. Julia is pregnant. They are watching a documentary that shows how criminals cut open the bellies of heavily pregnant women and take out their babies to sell them. A pregnant woman is being interviewed. Because

the police did nothing to stop the criminals, her husband has set up a neighborhood watch group, but he has recently been killed by the criminals. The woman is mortally afraid, she knows that the criminals have made her and her baby their target. Julia cries: "That woman needs help!"

(3) Jenny is terminally ill and suffers unbearable pain. She has requested euthanasia. A committee assesses her request. The advantages and disadvantages of euthanasia and Jenny's specific case are being amply discussed. A member concludes: "That woman needs help."

In each of these examples, someone says: "That woman needs help." What does this sentence express? A belief, a prescription or an emotion? If my choice were limited to these three, I would say: a prescription in (1), an emotion in (2) and a belief in (3). Maybe some will think that in all three cases the sentence expresses a belief, an emotion or a prescription. In any case, if "That woman needs help" is a moral judgment in all three cases, a defender of SUM must not only hold that the sentence has the same semantic function in these three cases (something that seems not self-evident at all), but also that "That woman needs help" *and all other moral judgments in all other possible examples have the same semantic function.* That is not impossible, but it is far from self-evident.[3] On the contrary, SUM appears as a substantial and vulnerable claim, which does not mean that it is probably false, but that it cannot simply be assumed.

Some will undoubtedly remark that this conclusion only holds if "That woman needs help" is, in all three cases, a moral judgment. Defenders of SUM may not so much try to show that the statement has the same semantic function in the three examples, but rather that it only

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[3] Consider, in this regard, a remark by Wittgenstein from *The Blue Book*: "Now, I don't say that this is not possible. Only, putting it in this way immediately shows you that it need not happen. This, by the way, illustrates the method of philosophy" (BB 12).

expresses a moral judgment in one of the examples. If "That woman needs help" is only a moral judgment in the third example, the examples do not allow one to question the claim that all moral judgments express beliefs. However, this line of defense is problematic. Intuitions on what moral judgments are differ: I see "That woman needs help" as a moral judgment in the three examples, but not everybody does. Those who think that only the third example involves a moral claim have to be able to make out what moral judgments are without appealing to intuitions (because they differ) and without appealing to the notion of moral judgment as belief (otherwise, the reasoning would be circular: you assume that moral judgments express beliefs in order to show that they do). Again, SUM appears as a substantial and vulnerable claim which is in bad need of defense. First, a defender of SUM has to be able tell us what moral judgments are without appealing to their semantic function (belief or non-belief). Second, (s)he has to show that all possible moral judgments have the same semantic function. Even if that is possible, it seems clear that the meta-ethicist's task here is a substantial rather than a trivial one. Those who want the advantages of SUM, for example the possibility to extrapolate findings on the semantic function of moral judgments from a small set of examples to "moral judgments" in general, have to earn them. I do not claim *that* SUM is false, but I do claim that that possibility should not *ab initio* be excluded by meta-ethicists.

4. SUM as a Symptom of a Generalizing Tendency

If indeed many meta-ethicists presuppose SUM, and if it can be made plausible on the basis of some examples that SUM is not self-evident at all, the question is: why is SUM so ubiquitous in meta-ethical debates? To answer that question, I will turn to Wittgenstein, who discusses in *The Blue Book* "our craving for generality" (BB 17). "Our" refers to philosophers, who appear

to be extremely sensitive to this craving, which is, according to Wittgenstein, the result of a number of tendencies. One of these is

> The tendency to look for something in common to all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term. – We are inclined to think that there must be something in common to all games, say, and that this common property is the justification for applying the general term "game" to the various games; whereas games form a *family* the members of which have family likenesses. Some of them have the same nose, others the same eyebrows and others again the same way of walking; and these likenesses overlap. The idea of a general concept being a common property of its particular instances connects up with other primitive, too simple, ideas of the structure of language. (BB 17)

What is striking about this quotation is that it seems to be preeminently applicable to the meta-ethical cognitivism – non-cognitivism debate as I have sketched it, characterized as it is by the tendency to look for something that all moral judgments have in common. Meta-ethicists who presuppose SUM seem to think that all moral judgments *must* have a semantic function in common, because only then can the application of the term "moral judgment" to particular judgments be justified. Michael Ridge, for instance, writes that "competence with a predicate presupposes a rough-and-ready conception of necessary and sufficient conditions for the predicate's application" (Ridge 2006, 314). If the application of a predicate asks for necessary conditions, all things to which the predicate can be rightfully applied must have something in common: they have to meet the necessary condition(s). That way of reasoning is misguided

according to the later Wittgenstein: we do not call games "games" on the basis of one or more characteristics that they have in common (PI §66).[4]

Wittgenstein mentions a second tendency of which our craving for generality is the result. This tendency is

> … our preoccupation with the method of science. I mean the method of reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive natural laws; and, in mathematics, of unifying the treatment of different topics by using a generalization. Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. (BB 18)[5]

This can also be applied to the cognitivism – non-cognitivism debate. This debate is in the first place a debate in analytic philosophy. In an article on the differences between the analytic and the continental tradition, Neil Levy writes that continental philosophy "models itself on modernist art, just as analytic philosophy models itself on modern science" (Levy 2003, 301).[6] Although I do not want to deny that this statements testifies to a certain craving for generality, it surely indicates the orientation of many contemporary analytic philosophers, and therefore also of many meta-ethicists who place themselves in the analytic tradition.

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[4] I refer to the *later* Wittgenstein here because the later Wittgenstein accuses himself of succumbing to the craving for generality in his earlier work. Oskari Kuusela writes on the early Wittgenstein: "But on the basis of the conception of conceptual unity which he assumed, it seemed legitimate to extend an insight derived from a certain example or examples he had contemplated to cover *all* propositions. … As Wittgenstein notes, if one proposition is a picture, then it seems we can say they all are, since they must share the same essential features, whereby philosophy's task then is to grasp this comprehensive essence" (Kuusela 2011, 611-612). The later Wittgenstein writes: "The basic evil of Russell's logic, as also of mine in the *Tractatus,* is that what a proposition is is illustrated by a few commonplace examples, and then pre-supposed as understood in full generality" (RPP I §38).

[5] On Wittgenstein and science, see De Mesel 2015a, section 4 and De Mesel 2015b, section 3.

[6] For an overview of similar views (of, among others, John Searle), see Overgaard, Gilbert and Burwood (2013, 120-124).

In addition to the scientific orientation of many meta-ethical debates and the tendency to look for what moral judgments have in common, there is a third reason to think that contemporary meta-ethics displays a craving for generality: meta-ethicists have noticed it themselves. Simon Kirchin, for instance, concludes his introduction to meta-ethics with some remarks on "Meta-ethics and the Generalizing Tendency". This tendency, he writes, is "an issue that does not get the attention it deserves, but pervades the whole structure of meta-ethics …" (Kirchin 2012, 177).

Kirchin's observation gives weight to the idea that SUM may not be an isolated case, a mistaken assumption of some philosophers who have accidentally overlooked something, but rather a local symptom of a craving which characterizes an important part of contemporary philosophy. According to Wittgenstein, this craving does not do credit to philosophy. I have mentioned the "primitive, too simple ideas of the structure of language" with which it allegedly goes together. And there is more to worry about:

> This tendency [our preoccupation with the method of science] is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness. I want to say here that it can never be our job to reduce anything to anything, or to explain anything. …
>
> Instead of "craving for generality" I could also have said "the contemptuous attitude towards the particular case". If, e.g., someone tries to explain the concept of number and tells us that such and such a definition will not do or is clumsy because it only applies to, say, finite cardinals I should answer that the mere fact that he could have given such a limited definition makes this definition extremely important to us. (Elegance is *not* what we are trying for.) For why should what finite and transfinite numbers have in common be more interesting to us than what distinguishes them? Or rather, I should not

have said "why should it be more interesting to us?" – it *isn't*; and this characterizes our way of thinking. …

The idea that in order to get clear about the meaning of a general term one had to find the common element in all its applications has shackled philosophical investigation; for it has not only led to no result, but also made the philosopher dismiss as irrelevant the concrete cases, which alone could have helped him to understand the usage of the general term. When Socrates asks the question, "What is knowledge?" he does not even regard it as a *preliminary* answer to enumerate cases of knowledge. (BB 18-20)

Wittgenstein, to say the least, is not favourably disposed towards the craving for generality (but see footnote 15: although the craving is based on a prejudice, it is not a *stupid* prejudice). The most important reason for that is that a craving for generality goes together with a contemptuous attitude towards particular cases. That observation, however, is not enough to show that the particular is more important or more interesting than the general, as Wittgenstein sometimes suggests. If a craving for generality goes together with a contemptuous attitude towards the particular, then presumably a craving for particularity will go together with a contemptuous attitude towards the general, and why would the latter be more justified than the former?[7] Why could the general not be more interesting than the particular? Wittgenstein provides another argument for preferring the particular over the general: the emphasis on the common element in all the applications of a general term has led to no result. But this argument is not convincing either, for the same could be said about an emphasis on the particular. As long as it is not clear

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[7] Wittgenstein seems guilty here of what Richard Rorty has called "generalized protest against general ideas", of which he accuses Heidegger and Nabokov (Rorty 1989, 150).

what it means for a philosophical investigations to have a "result", the accusation seems rather gratuitous.

Although Wittgenstein has not succeeded in showing that the particular is more important than the general (and how could such a very general claim ever be supported?), he has succeeded, in my view, in showing that the advocates of the general, who try to import scientific methods into philosophy, unwarrantedly regard as self-evident the primacy of the general over the particular. Wittgenstein's critique is successful in so far as it denounces *the exclusive focus on what is general.* That focus undoubtedly leads to a contemptuous attitude towards particular cases. Precisely that attitude has caused SUM to be so ubiquitous in meta-ethics: there *are* particular cases, examples which in principle allow us to question our theories (as we have seen in the examples in section 3), but the *attitude* taken towards these examples often prevents this fundamental questioning.

To illustrate that, let me return to Gill's description of the meta-ethicist's procedure. On the basis of a small set of examples, the meta-ethicist generalizes her findings and concludes, for example, that moral judgments express beliefs. What happens when she is confronted with a particular case, for example (1) or (2), which in principle would allow her to question her cognitivist theory? In the light of Wittgenstein's remarks quoted above, it may be the following. The meta-ethicist starts from what is general, that is, the theory, and looks at the example through the glasses of this theory. The particular example then appears, from the very beginning, as an obstacle or a problem with which the theory has to deal. One often admits that the particular example *seems* at first sight to threaten the theory, but one then tries to show that, on closer scrutiny, *in fact* it does not. We see a remarkable paradox here: while the theory is often built on the intuitive assessment of some examples and the extrapolation of that assessment to all moral judgments, the intuitive suddenly becomes less relevant when it comes

to examples that may threaten the theory.[8] The meta-ethicist could then try to show that some intuitions are better than others and that the intuitions that confirm the theory belong to the better ones, but such an argument often becomes circular and is, ironically enough, intuitively implausible. Another problem traditional meta-ethicists have with intuitively threatening counterexamples is that they force theorists to make their theories ever more complex. In order to incorporate the counterexamples, a theory that was originally aimed at exemplifying scientific ideals of elegance and simplicity has to be endlessly adapted. The craving for generality then turns against one of its initial motivations.

I hope to have shown that some of Wittgenstein's remarks in *The Blue and Brown Books* can be applied to many contemporary meta-ethical debates, and to the cognitivism – non-cognitivism debate in particular. There is a generalizing tendency in contemporary meta-ethics, a tendency that is exemplified by the assumption of SUM. That conclusion will become important in what follows: the evaluation of some recent attempts to escape SUM. In so far as these attempts are aimed at escaping SUM but do not shake off the generalizing tendency or even confirm it, they remain vulnerable to the Wittgensteinian critique outlined above.

5. Meta-ethics without SUM: Some Proposals

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[8] What I write here about meta-ethical theories also holds for theories in other philosophical disciplines, such as the philosophy of language. Wittgenstein writes: "For it is the characteristic thing about such a [philosophical] theory that it looks at a special clearly intuitive case and says: '*That* shews how things are in every case; this case is the exemplar of *all* cases.' – 'Of course! It has to be like that' we say, and are satisfied. We have arrived at a form of expression that *strikes us as obvious.* But it is as if we had now seen something lying *beneath* the surface. The tendency to generalize the case seems to have a strict justification in logic: here one seems *completely* justified in inferring: "If *one* proposition is a picture, then any proposition must be a picture, for they must all be of the same nature." For we are under the illusion that what is sublime, what is essential, about our investigation consists in its grasping *one* comprehensive essence" (Z §444).

Gill is not the only meta-ethicist to have remarked that the dilemma between cognitivism and non-cognitivism may be a false one. Others have made proposals to escape the false dilemma and/or SUM.

5.1 Loeb: Incoherentism

One of these is Don Loeb, who defends a position called "moral incoherentism". According to Loeb, the persistence of the debate between cognitivists and non-cognitivists, the fact that neither of the two positions has become predominant, shows that both positions capture important elements of our moral language (Loeb 2008, 360). According to Loeb, moral judgments do not express beliefs *or* emotions *or* prescriptions, but they have a cognitivist *and* a non-cognitivist component. Both components are essential for our moral language, but they cannot be theoretically reconciled, which implies that our moral language is semantically incoherent. Moral talk is like talk about round squares (Loeb 2008, 357). Loeb admits that, so far, his position is nothing but a hypothesis. He emphasizes the necessity of empirical research on moral language use. The more data we will have, the clearer the incoherence of our moral language will become.

5.2 Ridge, Copp and Others: Hybridism

It is possible to agree with Loeb that moral judgments have cognitivist and non-cognitivist components without sharing his conclusion that this makes moral language incoherent. That is what hybrid forms of cognitivism and non-cognitivism do. Examples of such theories have been worked out by, among others, David Copp (2001) and Michael Ridge (2006, 2014). The advantage of hybrid theories, at least according to their defenders, is that they can deal with typical arguments against (non-)cognitivism. Ridge, for example, claims that his "ecumenical

expressivism" is not vulnerable to the Frege-Geach problem that threatens pure, traditional forms of non-cognitivism because ecumenical expressivism recognizes that moral judgments also (but not in the first place) express beliefs (Ridge 2006, 309). Because Ridge prioritizes non-beliefs, his position, although hybrid, is closer to non-cognitivism. Copp, on the other hand, accords priority to beliefs, and his hybrid position is therefore rather cognitivist (Copp 2001, 1, 5). Copp claims that his "realist expressivism" can do what traditional cognitivists could not, namely do justice to the intuition that, for example, the judgment "The death penalty is wrong" expresses disapproval for the death penalty that is not reducible to the *belief* that the death penalty is wrong.

Both Loeb's incoherentism and Ridge's and Copp's hybridism recognize that the dilemma between cognitivism and non-cognitivism is a false one, because moral judgments contain both cognitivist and non-cognitivist elements. They allow us to say, for example, when confronted with the examples in section 3, that "That woman needs help" contains a cognitive component in all three cases, or that in (1) it expresses not only a prescription but *also* a belief, because the fact that a sentence expresses a prescription does not necessarily exclude it from also expressing something else. In that sense, a more nuanced description of the semantic function of particular moral judgments becomes possible. But the fact that incoherentism and hybridism succeed in avoiding the dilemma between cognitivism and non-cognitivism does not suffice for them to escape either SUM or the generalizing tendency. *All* moral judgments are an incoherent or coherent combination of cognitive and non-cognitive elements, and the incoherentist's or hybridist's task is to describe what that combination looks like *for all moral judgments.* The generalizing tendency forces them to point out which component is primary in all moral judgments. In that way, incoherentist and hybrid theories create a new false dilemma. Either they accord primacy to cognitive elements and defend a form of cognitivist hybridism,

where cognitivism is understood as the position that all moral judgments *primarily* or *in the first place* express beliefs. Or they accord primacy to non-cognitive elements and defend a form of non-cognitivist hybridism, where non-cognitivism is understood as the position that all moral judgments *primarily* or *in the first place* express non-beliefs. Thus, on the one hand, incoherentism and hybridism may lead to a more nuanced understanding of the distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism, but, on the other hand, they still exclude the possibility that in some moral judgments, such as in example (2), the non-cognitivist component is primary, while in others, such as in example (3), the cognitive component is primary. In other words, morality is still semantically uniform, and moral judgments still have to have something in common, although what they have in common (a particular combination of cognitive and non-cognitive components) will be a bit more complex than is commonly assumed. That is possible, and it is not my aim to refute incoherentism or hybridism here. But if we are looking for a meta-ethics without the vulnerable assumption of SUM, we have to look elsewhere. Maybe Gill can help us.

5.3 Gill. Pluralism

Gill proposes what he calls the "variability thesis" as an alternative to SUM:

> The Variability Thesis holds that while some parts of ordinary moral discourse are most accurately analyzed as involving a certain meta-ethical commitment, other parts of ordinary moral discourse are most accurately analyzed as involving the meta-ethical commitment that has traditionally been taken to be its meta-ethical competitor. (Gill 2009, 216)

Applied to the semantic function of moral judgments, the thesis holds that moral judgments in some parts of ordinary moral discourse express beliefs, while moral judgments in other parts of ordinary moral discourse express prescriptions, and so on. Gill takes it to be possible to characterize the parts without reference to the semantic function of the judgments contained in them.

Gill discusses "different person variability" and "different context variability". "'Different person' variability asks us to take seriously the idea that the thought and language of the former [those who believe in a divine command theory] really do involve a commitment to moral absolutism and that the thought and language of the latter [those who believe in a socially constructivist view] really do involve a commitment to moral relativism" (Gill 2009, 219). And: "'Different context' variability implies that the use of moral terms in some contexts is best captured by, say, a relativist analysis, and that the use of moral terms in other contexts is best captured by an absolutist analysis" (Gill 2009, 222). These forms of pluralism, as well as others, are also discussed in Sinnott-Armstrong (2009, 240-250). Sinnott-Armstrong discusses a form of pluralism in which moral judgments about certain topics (pedophilia, for example), are absolutist while the judgments about other topics are relativist. Other ways to divide moral discourse into parts are mentioned in Brännmark (2016, 482-483). Distinctions can be made, for example, between (1) public and private morality, or (2) interconnected complexes of practices and activities such as "family life", "business", "friendship", "war" or "health care".

Thus, depending on who says it and in what context, depending on which part of moral discourse the statement belongs to, the semantic function of "That woman needs help" may differ: if the statement is made in a professional context, for example, it will be cognitivist, and if it is made in a private context, it will be non-cognitivist. The semantic function of moral

judgments is not described in general, because a general description is not possible or will be uninformative ("moral judgments express beliefs or non-beliefs"). Rather, a description of the semantic function will take place on a lower level, the level of the parts of our moral discourse.

Gill (2008) discusses Loeb's proposal. He accuses Loeb of having succumbed to SUM because, starting from the (according to Gill) plausible observation that some parts of our moral discourse are semantically incoherent, Loeb generalizes to the thesis that the whole of our moral discourse is essentially incoherent (Gill 2008, 392). Gill reasons as follows: if you do not assume SUM, then you cannot, on the basis of a small set of examples, extrapolate your findings to the whole of moral discourse. Thus, what we need is more examples of moral language use. The more data we have, the more likely it is that we will be able to prove the variability thesis: moral judgments in some parts of our moral discourse will then turn out to express beliefs, others prescriptions, and so on. In thinking about a meta-ethics without SUM, Gill thinks in the direction of a pluralistic meta-ethics built on the semantic variability of morality (SVM), in which the variability thesis does not function as an unwarranted assumption, but as a thesis supported by empirical research.

5.4 Sinnott-Armstrong: Pyrrhonism

Sinnott-Armstrong (2009) investigates different forms of meta-ethical pluralism (which he calls "variantism") built on SVM and concludes that they all suffer from fatal defects. Because this also holds for theories presupposing SUM, we have to suspend belief here, as befits the Pyrrhonist: we simply do not know whether morality is uniform. This suspension of belief seems, however, to have been provisional. In "The Disunity of Morality and Why It Matters to Philosophy" (2012), Sinnott-Armstrong and Thalia Wheatley defend, partly on the basis of empirical research, the claim that morality is *not* uniform. Sinnott-Armstrong"s Pyrrhonism no

longer concerns the choice between SUM and SVM, but the choice between different variants of SVM, and even this suspension is provisional: empirical research will help us to decide which variant of SVM is right:

> These problems can be avoided by a more fine-grained bottom-up method. Researchers need to isolate smaller classes of judgments within one region of a map of "morality" … If they get results, then they cannot assume that these results extend to other kinds of moral judgments. (Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley 2012, 374)

Here, Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley come very close to what Gill expects of future research in meta-ethics: that it will support one or another form of pluralism. In what follows, my critique on Gill will therefore be a critique on Sinnott-Armstrong as well.

Gill's position is discussed by Kirchin. As we have seen, Kirchin is aware of a generalizing tendency in meta-ethics. In the last chapter of his introduction to meta-ethics, he admits that all meta-ethical positions that he has introduced generalize. According to Kirchin, there are good reasons for generalizing, both in meta-ethics and in philosophy more broadly (Kirchin 2012, 180). Kirchin provides three reasons not to accept meta-ethical pluralism. First, he asks whether we can "be confident that we can easily carve our everyday moral thought and language into areas" (Kirchin 2012, 184). Because Gill nowhere suggests that the division into areas or parts will be easy, Kirchin's argument seems unconvincing. Second, Kirchin contends that "(meta-ethical) consistency and coherence across all aspects of our moral lives is a good thing" (Kirchin 2012, 184). He immediately nuances that claim, stating: "This idea, I take it, has a strong hold over us. … However, whether this is a reason to reject meta-ethical pluralism is moot" (Kirchin 2012, 184). Precisely because Kirchin himself admits that it is a moot

question whether this is a reason to reject meta-ethical pluralism, a lack of consistency and coherence across all aspects of our moral lives does not seem to be a good reason to reject pluralism. Moreover, Kirchin's reference to an idea that "has a strong hold over us" is reminiscent of Wittgensteinian formulations such as "irresistibly tempted" and "craving for". For Wittgenstein, the strong hold that an idea has over us, the fact that we are irresistibly tempted to accept it, is not a reason to accept it or resist questioning it. On the contrary, it makes it all the more necessary to question the idea.

Kirchin provides a third reason for not accepting meta-ethical pluralism, but he admits that "this point again may not cause us immediately to see pluralism as false, but it should give pluralists a lot to think about" (Kirchin 2012, 185). The point is: "… people can be wrong, and often are wrong, about the status and nature of their own moral activity" (Kirchin 2012, 185). This is true, and it chimes with some of Wittgenstein's remarks: what we are inclined to say is often wrong, and therefore mere raw material for philosophy (PI §254); being engaged in an activity and describing its nature or status are entirely different tasks (Z §111). But although this point is unobjectionable from a Wittgensteinian perspective, I cannot see why pluralists have a disadvantage here when compared to non-pluralists. After all, one of the problems with SUM that motivates pluralism is that non-pluralists extrapolate a theory about the whole domain of moral language from their intuitive assessment of a small set of examples.

Thus, the three problems that Kirchin has with meta-ethical pluralism do not seem to be real problems, at least not from a Wittgensteinian perspective. It remains the case that meta-ethical pluralism, as defended by Gill and Sinnott-Armstrong, has some clear advantages. First, it explains, as incoherentism and hybridism do, why the dilemma between cognitivism and non-cognitivism is a false one. Second, it does not presuppose SUM, and this is an advantage over incoherentism and hybridism. On the other hand, pluralism has some disadvantages. First, it

replaces a dependence on SUM by a dependence on SVM. In other words, another assumption is introduced, namely the assumption that a general description of the semantic function of moral judgments is impossible or uninformative and that moral discourse can be divided into parts in such a way that some parts will only contain moral judgments that are best analyzed cognitively while others will only consist of moral judgments in which non-cognitive elements prevail. But let us take, for example, the idea that moral judgments made in professional contexts are cognitive, while judgments made in private contexts are non-cognitive. It is not difficult to come up with counterexamples, and I suspect that the same will be true for every "area" that can be specified without reference to the semantic function of the moral judgments contained in it.

Gill's proposal has the advantage of recognizing that SVM cannot, like SUM in traditional meta-ethical theories, simply be taken for granted, that it has to be proven. One may however question, second, whether future empirical research will, as Gill thinks, help to prove or even support it. Loeb also hopes that his theory, which is irreconcilable with Gill's, will be supported by empirical research. As long as that research has not been carried out, however, there is nothing but hope, and the claim that the results will support the theory are empty.[9] More importantly, it is not wholly clear how the results of empirical research *could* support incoherentism or pluralism: is it not far more likely that the data will always be open both to a uniform and to a pluralistic or even incoherentist interpretation?

Apart from problems with the importance Gill attaches to empirical research in meta-ethics and the dependence on SVM that his pluralism introduces, there is a third reason not to applaud his pluralism. It escapes SUM, but it does not escape the generalizing tendency. Gill's

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[9] For empirical research that seems to point in Gill's direction, see Goodwin and Darley (2008, 2012) and Wright, Grandjean and McWhite (2013).

main question is still: what do all moral judgments have in common? His answer is: probably nothing, but empirical research will show us whether that is true. Then he says: if indeed they have nothing in common, we have to find out what subsets of moral judgments have in common, and then we can describe the judgments within these subsets in the same way traditional meta-ethics thought itself capable of describing *all* moral judgments. In other words, Gill transfers the question as to what moral judgments have in common to a lower level, a level of areas within the moral domain. There *must* be a level at which moral judgments share a conceptual shape, and it is on this level that meta-ethics works. Gill still craves generality. His ideal seems to be a finite or infinite conjunction of the following form: all moral judgments in area A of moral discourse (and this area can be characterized without reference to the semantic function of the moral judgments that are part of it!) express x, all moral judgments in area B of moral discourse express y, etc. In general, Gill and Sinnott-Armstrong argue for a more fine-grained method which does not simply take SUM for granted, and to that extent their arguments are convincing. However, they also seem to take over the general orientation of traditional meta-ethical research, which is an almost exclusive concern with what moral judgments (or, in their case, the judgments in some particular area of the moral domain) have in common. The generalizing tendency is still there.

6.   Meta-Ethics without a Generalizing Tendency? A Wittgensteinian Approach

Wittgenstein's problems with the generalizing tendency tend to be overlooked in discussions about the implications of Wittgenstein's (later) thought for meta-ethics: some think that Wittgenstein's later thought supports a form of cognitivism (McDowell 1998; Lovibond 1983), others (Blackburn 1993; Glock 2015) take it to support non-cognitivism (for an overview of the debate, see Glock 2015). I believe that, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, we should take

seriously the possibility that some moral judgments express beliefs while others express non-beliefs, the possibility of a meta-ethics without SUM. As we have seen, some have explored this possibility, but they still succumb to the craving for generality. Is a meta-ethics without SUM doomed to preserve this craving?

As we have seen, Wittgenstein thinks that the craving for generality is the result of "the tendency to look for something in common to all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term". We are prone to think that moral judgments *must* have something (or a set of features) in common in virtue of which they are moral judgments. Wittgenstein presents, in *The Blue Book*, an alternative to that idea, and he develops it further in his *Philosophical Investigations:* the idea of family resemblance. What if moral judgments form a family and display family likenesses? Gill (2008, 394; 2009, 221, footnote 6) and Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley (2012, 369) mention this possibility, but they do not to do anything substantial with it, while precisely this idea, which Wittgenstein himself seems to associate with moral concepts, could have helped them to see some limitations of their meta-ethical pluralism.[10]

First, let me briefly sketch what family resemblance is. Wittgenstein provides the following example. Must all activities which we call "games", such as board-games, card-games, ball-games and Olympic Games, have something in common in virtue of which they are called "games"? Is there always winning and losing? Skill? Competition between players? An entertaining aspect? Wittgenstein concludes that what makes games games may not be a

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[10] Wittgenstein links family resemblance to moral concepts in the following passage: "And this is the position in which, for example, someone finds himself in ethics or aesthetics when he looks for definitions that correspond to our concepts. In this sort of predicament, always ask yourself: How did we *learn* the meaning of this word ('good', for instance)? From what sort of examples? In what language-games? Then it will be easier for you to see that the word must have a family of meanings" (PI §77). There is a dispute about how to understand this remark and whether it supports the idea that Wittgenstein thought of moral goodness as a family resemblance concept. For elaboration and references, see Kuusela forthcoming-a.

common element or a certain combination of necessary and sufficient conditions, but "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (PI §66).[11]

How can the idea of family resemblance help to escape some limitations of meta-ethical pluralism? The first problem has already been mentioned. The main question of pluralists is: what do moral judgments have in common? Because they find that they cannot simply assume that all moral judgments have something in common, the question is transferred to a lower level: what do moral judgments belonging to a certain subset of moral judgments have in common? As we have seen, there are different candidates for these subsets. Whatever division into areas one opts for, however (see 5.3 for some possibilities), it remains to be shown, and cannot simply be assumed (as Gill and Sinnott-Armstrong recognize), that all moral judgments belonging to the subset have a semantic function in common (unless, of course, the areas are characterized by reference to the semantic function of the moral judgments that are part of it, but that is not what the pluralist wants, because it is trivial that the subset of cognitivist judgments contains only cognitivist judgments). Why think, for example, that all judgments made by a certain person (Gill's different person variability) will have the same semantic function? It does not seem difficult to construct cases such as (1), (2) and (3) (see section 3) in which the same person's judgments have different functions in different circumstances. What about different context variability? Again, why would it be implausible to say that, for example, in the context where a committee assesses a request for euthanasia (the context described in example (3)) someone makes a moral judgment that expresses an emotion rather than a belief? Similar worries apply to the idea that judgments about certain topics (pedophilia, for example) will

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[11] The idea that "game" is a family resemblance concept does not entail that games have nothing in common. Sluga writes: "Wittgenstein does not maintain that games have nothing in common – he refers to them as 'procedures', and it is manifest that they are all activities. But this falls short of a definition, since there are many activities which are not games. The claim is that there is no set of conditions which all and only games satisfy, and hence no analytic definition of 'game' in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions" (Sluga 2006, 121).

share a semantic function: one could easily imagine examples in which an emotionally laden judgment about pedophilia is made alongside examples in which the judgment is purely cognitive. The other proposals are subject to similar doubts: it is unlikely, for example, that all moral judgments in the public sphere are cognitive, while all judgments in the private sphere are non-cognitive.

If these doubts are well-grounded, the worry that not all moral judgments may have a semantic function in common reappears at the level of subsets: it is likely that not all moral judgments belonging to a certain subset of the moral domain will have a semantic function in common, and the problem that pluralists wanted to avoid turns up again. The idea of family resemblance helps to see things differently. Instead of asking "What do moral judgments (or moral judgments within a certain area of the moral domain) have in common?" and looking for a common semantic function (a task that may well be hopeless), the meta-ethicist could ask "What family likenesses do moral judgments (or moral judgments within a certain area of the moral domain) display?" It may then turn out that being primarily non-cognitive, for example, is a family trait of moral judgments about animal suffering, shared by most but not all of these judgments. This would be an informative conclusion, and it would not be undermined (as a conclusion about a common semantic function would) by the possibility of moral judgments about animal suffering that are primarily cognitive. The most that pluralists could do in the light of the latter possibility is to say, on the basis of commonalities, that all judgments about animal suffering are either primarily cognitive or primarily non-cognitive, because their semantic functions only have that disjunction in common. That is not very informative. On the basis of family resemblances, however, one could come to conclusions such as "Moral judgments (about

animal suffering) are almost never exclusively cognitive" or "It is characteristic of moral judgments (about animal suffering) to have an important non-cognitive component".[12]

The idea of family resemblance also allows us to make clearer a second limitation of meta-ethical pluralism, at least of the forms of pluralism I have discussed: its belief in an empirical approach. Gill and Sinnott-Armstrong say: we do not know whether moral judgments have a semantic function in common, and therefore we need empirical research. Analogously, one may ask to what degree empirical research could contribute to an answer to the question of whether all games have something in common or to the division of games in different subsets. A Wittgensteinian answer is: empirical research can be useful in helping us to produce a "surveyable representation" of the use of a concept like "game", and it is on the basis of such a surveyable representation that we can answer the question of whether all games have something in common and how they can be categorized (PI §122).[13] But two things are crucial here. First, a surveyable representation does not force us to answer the question in a particular way. Whether we regard something as common or as similar, whether we categorize it in this way or in that, is often to a certain degree the result of a decision which the data cannot take for us, and this is preeminently the case in domains like ethics, where we seem only to have a small chance of arriving at univocal data. Second, a set of data about our actual word use does not amount to a surveyable representation of it. Much more is needed. It is, for example, not only important what we *actually* say, but also what we can and cannot say. Wittgenstein writes: "Our method is not merely to enumerate actual usages of words, but rather deliberately to invent new ones, some of them because of their absurd appearance" (BB 28). This "inventing of new usages of

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[12] What Wittgenstein writes about descriptions of the meaning of the word "God" will then also hold for descriptions of the semantic function of moral judgments: "In this description the word 'sometimes' will frequently occur, or 'often', or 'usually', or 'nearly always' or 'almost never'" (CV 94).
[13] On surveyable representations in moral philosophy, see De Mesel 2014.

words" is epitomized in Wittgenstein's language games: he asks his readers to imagine a non-actual situation in order to shed light on the ways in which words can and cannot be used. What also helps to construct surveyable representations are comparisons, analogies and metaphors. Wittgenstein writes: "What I invent are new *comparisons*" (CV 16). And elsewhere: "A philosophical problem can be solved only in the right surrounding. We must give the problem a new surrounding, we must compare it to cases we are not used to compare it with" (PO 457). The aim of comparisons, analogies and metaphors is not only to show similarities between words and sentences (or concepts and propositions), but also to show where the differences lie. Wittgenstein does not deny that empirical research may be important for producing surveyable representations of moral judgments, but he does deny that empirical research can do the work that Gill and Sinnott-Armstrong expect it to do, that it will have a predominant influence on our descriptions of the semantic function of moral judgments.

We have seen two ways in which Wittgensteinian concepts such as "family resemblance" and "surveyable representation" may help to counteract the generalizing tendency in pluralistic meta-ethical theories. The main question is no longer what moral judgments have in common, but rather which family likenesses they display. That question does not exclude the possibility that all moral judgments might have something in common, but it no longer starts from the assumption that they *must* have something in common (SUM) or from the assumption that they have nothing in common (SVM). The question no longer forces us to prove or support either SUM or SVM, because it simply *has no need* for such support or proof to be meaningfully answerable.

What I have proposed so far are guidelines for a meta-ethical approach in which the focus on what moral judgments have in common is replaced by a focus on family likenesses. However, as we have seen, the aim of surveyable representations (and of Wittgenstein's later

philosophy as a whole) is not only to shed light on (family) likenesses, but also to point out differences (PI §130 and §132).[14] To paraphrase a fragment from the *Blue Book* quoted earlier: why would similarities be more interesting to us than differences? If we are only interested in a moral judgment in so far as it is similar to another judgment, do we then not show a contemptuous attitude towards the particular case? Maybe moral judgments have something in common and maybe we can, on the basis of what subsets of moral judgments have in common or on the basis of family likenesses between moral judgments, demarcate some areas within the moral domain. After all, why would we not be able to find something like a greatest common divisor within moral language? But why would finding that greatest common divisor be the ultimate ideal of the meta-ethicist's investigation of moral language? Is our ideal something like the general statement that "Moral judgments express x or y or z"?

From a Wittgensteinian perspective, the answer to these questions is: the exclusive focus on similarities is dogmatic and one-sided. In his biography of Wittgenstein, Ray Monk refers to a conversation between Wittgenstein and his friend Maurice Drury:

> "Hegel seems to me to be always wanting to say that things which look different are really the same", Wittgenstein told him. "Whereas my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different." He [Wittgenstein] was thinking of using as a motto for his book the Earl of Kent"s phrase form *King Lear* (Act I, scene iv): "I'll teach you differences." (Monk 1991, 536)

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[14] That aim has often been overlooked. Wittgenstein's comparison of philosophical methods to therapies, for instance, has often been understood as if Wittgenstein wrote that philosophy is a form of therapy, in other words, as if his comparison does not allow us to see certain important differences between philosophical methods and therapies. See De Mesel 2015a.

"His book" is *Philosophical Investigations.* The fact that Wittgenstein thought of using "I'll teach you differences" as a motto for that book testifies of the philosophical importance that he attached to showing differences. We have seen that Wittgenstein often suggests that the particular is philosophically more important or more interesting than the general, but that his arguments for that claim are dubious. Similarly, there seems to be no good reason for saying, in general (and, one might say, dogmatically), that differences are philosophically more important or more interesting than similarities. But we do not need that claim: it suffices to recognize that in philosophy we cannot simply assume that only similarities are important or interesting. We will then inevitably underestimate the relevance of the particular case. Here again, a preoccupation with the method of science is dangerous: if one out of a thousand scientific measurements deviates, the deviation will be considered statistically irrelevant. The weight of a particular case is often negligible in science, but not in philosophy. On the contrary: the philosopher who dismisses as irrelevant the particular case, will never understand the usage of the general term (BB 19-20).

What does Wittgenstein's emphasis on differences mean for meta-ethics? The advice is quite simple: in investigating the semantic function of moral judgments, we should not only focus on similarities between moral judgments, but also pay attention to differences: differences between moral judgments and other judgments, differences among moral judgments across different subsets of the moral domain and differences among moral judgments within the same subset. In combination with empirical research and the construction of language games in which the possibilities of moral discourse are being explored, this approach is richer than the dominant approaches discussed in this chapter.[15] (That does not mean, of course, that meta-ethicists are

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[15] A serious worry about the Wittgensteinian approach outlined in this chapter needs to mentioned (although it cannot fully be addressed here), and I would like to thank Oskari Kuusela for bringing up this point. I noted earlier that pluralists such as Gill and Sinnott-Armstrong hope that empirical research will ultimately allow them to make

no longer allowed to look for similarities. My advice is supplementary.) Moreover, under the impulse of a stronger emphasis on differences, the *status* of meta-ethical theories may have to be understood differently (see also footnote 15). What these theories say about moral judgments, for example "Moral judgments express beliefs", will no longer be a condition that *all* moral judgments *must* meet in order for the theory to be philosophically acceptable. Wittgenstein writes:

> For we can avoid unfairness or vacuity in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, as an object of comparison – as a sort of yardstick; not as a preconception to which reality *must* correspond. (The dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy.) (PI §131)

The theory is no longer a pair of glasses through which we look at particular cases, but becomes a yardstick with which to compare particular cases, with an eye on both similarities and differences. I do not want to suggest that meta-ethicists have been blind to differences so far. They have been looking for differences, but in the first place for differences between meta-ethical theories, that is, differences between what they think moral judgments have in common.

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statements such as "All moral judgments in area A are primarily (non)-cognitive", while a family resemblance approach could result in statements such as "Most moral judgments (in area A) are primarily (non)-cognitive". Both claims seem to be contingent empirical claims about actualities, not philosophical claims about necessity or (im)possibility. According to Wittgenstein, the prejudice that, as philosophers, we need to say something more than "Most moral judgments …", is not a stupid prejudice (PI §340): as philosophers, we want to say something that is universal and necessary, something about the essence or nature of things. The worry is: is the Wittgensteinian approach, as outlined here, a form of empiricism, excluding necessary philosophical statements such as "Moral judgments express beliefs"? Not necessarily, provided that the necessary philosophical statements are understood as the later Wittgenstein conceived of them. According to Wittgenstein, a philosophical claim or account has to be understood as a model, and models have the logical role of objects of comparison. As Oskari Kuusela notes in his chapter for this book, a model represents the object of philosophical investigation, "but without claiming that all the cases that fall under a relevant concept … must conform to this particular mode of representing them … Instead, the mode of representation or model is something which actual cases are compared with for both similarity and dissimilarity". The model is a clarificatory device, not a thesis about necessary features of reality. See, for elaboration, also Kuusela 2013 and forthcoming-b.

7 Conclusion

SUM is an assumption in contemporary meta-ethics. First, SUM is not self-evident, and this has an important consequence: as long as the possibility of there being some logical space between cognitivism and non-cognivitism is not ruled out, an omnipresent way of arguing in meta-ethics, namely arguing for cognitivism by arguing against non-cognitivism (or the other way round), is unavailable to the meta-ethicist. Second, SUM is not necessary, and meta-ethics without SUM is possible.[16] To shake off the generalizing tendency (of which SUM is, according to my, Wittgensteinian analysis, a symptom), meta-ethicists are advised, first, and in spite of the tradition, to look for family likenesses rather than commonalities between moral judgments. Second, the importance of differences should not be downplayed. I do not so much advocate a shift of emphasis from similarities to differences, but an extra emphasis. The extra emphasis does not amount to a ready-made method, but it has, I believe, yielded at least this important result: by focusing on differences between moral judgments in three simple examples, an assumption which runs through almost the whole meta-ethical debate has been shown to be extremely vulnerable.

"Do not only think about similarities, but also about differences" is a simple piece of advice which may seem trivial. The omnipresence of SUM and the impotence of meta-ethicists to free themselves of the generalizing tendency show, however, that even (or maybe especially) in a philosophical discipline which is argumentatively extremely well-developed and complicated, the obvious is sometimes lost sight of. In Wittgenstein's words:

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[16] I have not offered detailed arguments concerning the ontological, epistemological and psychological uniformity of morality. A lot of what has been said, however, may serve to question these kinds of uniformity too.

> The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes.) The real foundations of their inquiry do not strike people at all. … And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful. (PI §129)[17]

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