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# Cognitivism, Non-Cognitivism, and Skepticism about Folk Psychology*

In recent years it has become more and more difficult to distinguish between metaethical cognitivism and non-cognitivism. (Dreier 2004; van Roojen 2004) The distinction most often used to separate the two camps, until recently at least, was their position on the meaningfulness of moral statements and the applicability of truth-predicates to those statements. Cognitivists are said to hold that moral claims are both meaningful and truth-apt, and the early non-cognitivists, such as Ayer and Stevenson, certainly denied this. However, in recent years, this distinction has broken down. For example, proponents of the minimalist theory of truth hold that moral claims need not express beliefs in order to be (minimally) truth-apt, and yet some of these proponents still reject the traditional cognitivist analysis of moral language and thought. (Horwich 1993; Blackburn 1984 and 1998)[1] Thus, minimalism complicates attempts to draw a clear line between the two views by looking at truth-aptness.

Further, the quasi-realist project embraced by the leading non-cognitivists, Allan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn, attempts to show how moral claims can be both meaningful and true. Gibbard goes so far as to claim that we can speak of natural moral properties. (Gibbard 2006) However, Gibbard and Blackburn also claim that even if we can speak of moral truth and meaningful moral sentences, important differences between their position and the cognitivist's remain. So there must be another way of distinguishing between cognitivism and non-cognitivism.

In the wake of quasi-realism, a new method of distinguishing between cognitivism and non-cognitivism has emerged. It distinguishes between the two camps according to how they classify the states of mind expressed by moral statements: either they are beliefs or they are pro-attitudes like desires. In other words, the dispute between cognitivists and non-cognitivists is at bottom a dispute over the correct way to characterize our *psychology*. (Horgan and Timmons 2000; Smith 2002). In this paper, I will argue that this distinction too is in danger of collapse; in the light of a reasonable skepticism about folk psychology, the distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism must be once again re-conceptualized, or abandoned.

The essay has five parts. First, I attempt to characterize the nature of the debate between those cognitivists who believe that moral judgments are beliefs and those non-cognitivists who believe that moral judgments are pro-attitudes. Second, I look at some of the reasons given to support and to deny the claim that moral judgments are beliefs. In the third section, I show that these arguments, and others like them, fail because they depend on an implausibly strong conception of what beliefs are. I argue for what I call a moderate skepticism about concepts of folk psychology such as belief. In the fourth section, I consider a few objections, and in the final section, I discuss where this skepticism leaves the debate between the cognitivist and non-cognitivist in metaethics.

## 1. The psychological theories of the cognitivist and the non-cognitivist

When a person says "Torture is wrong," what state of mind does she express? Is it a belief that torture has the property of being wrong? Or is it a desire (or desire-like pro-attitude) that no one should torture? One can sort most of the major metaethical views into one of two camps based on how they answer this question: on one side are the cognitivists, whose

proponents include, among many others, John McDowell, Michael Smith, Frank Jackson, Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons; on the other side are the non-cognitivists, or, as they generally prefer to be called, the expressivists[2], whose primary contemporary proponents are Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard.

Simon Blackburn emphasizes the importance of the psychological distinction between cognitivism and its critics in this way:

> I think that naturalism demands this [expressivist] view of ethics, but in any case it motivates it. It does so because in this package the fundamental state of mind of one who has an ethical commitment makes natural sense. This state of mind is not located as a belief (the belief in a duty, right, value). We may *end up* calling it a belief, but that is after the work has already been done. …The question is one of the best theory of this state of commitment, and reiterating it with a panoply of dignities – truth, fact, perception, and the rest – is not to the point. The point is that the state of mind starts theoretical life as something else – a stance, a conative state or pressure on choice and action. (Blackburn 1997, 168-69) [emphasis in original]

On Blackburn's view, the psychological character of the mental state that best characterizes moral judgment is quite different from that of a belief. Blackburn describes that mental state as akin to other conative states such as desiring and wishing. Moral judgment does have some characteristics that are belief-like, but the underlying psychological features of moral judgments place them in the category of pro-attitudes, not beliefs.

Many cognitivists agree that the crucial issue is a psychological one. Cognitivists distinguish themselves from non-cognitivists in their insistence that moral judgments are indeed a species of belief, and are not themselves conative states (though they may be related to conative states in various ways). Michael Smith, for example, says that cognitivism is "the view that when we make a moral judgment we thereby express our beliefs about the way these moral facts are. In forming moral opinions we acquire beliefs, representations of the way the world is morally." (Smith 1994, 9) So many cognitivists and non-cognitivists agree that the crucial

question dividing them is the correct characterization of the psychological state expressed by a sincere utterance of a moral statement. Is this state a belief or is it something else, something desire-like?

Consider an objection to the foregoing characterization of the difference between these views. Neither of the two most prominent non-cognitivists, Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard, is altogether opposed to calling moral judgments "beliefs" (nor, as I mentioned earlier, are they entirely comfortable with the "non-cognitivist" label). So perhaps it is a mistake to see the primary difference between cognitivists and non-cognitivists in psychological terms. Perhaps we should take the fact that non-cognitivists do not want to directly deny that moral judgments are beliefs as evidence that there is no disagreement between cognitivists and non-cognitivists on matters of moral psychology.

I think, however, that both cognitivists and non-cognitivists take there to be a real difference of opinion on the psychological character of moral judgment and specifically its relationship to belief. In the passage quoted above, Blackburn indicates that the non-cognitivist's receptivity to the label "belief" for moral judgment is conditioned on a recognition that *if* we call moral judgments beliefs, we must still recognize that moral judgments have a completely distinct psychic structure and evolutionary history from the states of mind philosophers usually call belief. The primary aim of Allan Gibbard's *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* is to describe this type of psychological state, which he calls "norm-acceptance," and to show how it may be distinguished in psychological, evolutionary, and philosophical terms, from ordinary beliefs. In his more recent book, *Thinking How to Live*, Gibbard expressly avoids making any commitment on the issue of whether or not moral judgments should be called beliefs. However, he does say this: "At the outset, in any expressivist's scheme, the initial states

of mind are explained not as beliefs with such-and-such content, but in some other way. They are explained psychologically, as sentiments or attitudes, perhaps, or as universal preferences, states of norm-acceptance – or states of planning. The expressivist then tries to show that these states of mind act much like beliefs …" (Gibbard 2003, 180-81) So it is not a mistake to say that the debate over cognitivism and non-cognitivism is a debate over how moral states of mind are to be characterized psychologically. However, it does seem to be the case that Gibbard and Blackburn have a fairly relaxed view about the label "belief".

There is a further question: given that at least some parties to the debate recognize that the question of whether moral judgments are beliefs is an artificial one – a placeholder, perhaps, for other questions – does it matter whether we continue to use the term "belief" to characterize the differences between cognitivists and non-cognitivists? Does it do any harm to retain talk of belief as long as we keep in mind that what we are talking about is not really whether or not moral judgments *are* beliefs, but rather whether they are judgments with certain properties which happen to have been traditionally associated with beliefs? My view is that focusing on the question of what is and is not a belief has been an obstacle to progress in metaethics; an analysis of what we mean by belief is unlikely to help settle a substantive metaethical dispute. I return to this point in the final section.

It does seem that many (though not all) cognitivists and non-cognitivists agree that the difference between them is in large part psychological. Cognitivists and non-cognitivists agree on something else. They both hold that moral judgments have certain features, some of which are apparently desire-like and some of which are apparently belief-like. (Ridge 2007) As the debate has evolved, philosophers on each side have attempted to explain away the apparently desire-like or belief-like feature while maintaining that the underlying judgment is, properly

speaking, either a kind of desire or of belief, albeit one with some unusual properties, or *apparently* unusual properties.

Most participants in the debate accept, among other things, that moral judgments have, or at least appear to have, the following two features:

(Φ): A sincere avowal of moral judgments is typically accompanied by a motivation to act on that judgment. Φ is one (weak) way of formulating the principle of moral internalism. Although there is a great deal of disagreement about internalism – some think that it is a conceptual truth, while others think that it is only a contingent truth -- most agree that, at the very least, any analysis of moral judgments must be capable of explaining the connection these judgments *often* have with action. (Zangwill 2003) Where non-cognitivists have embraced this feature as evidence for their views, cognitivists have employed various strategies to explain it (or to deny it, while explaining its apparent plausibility).

(ψ): Rules of inference apply to the utterances that express moral judgments in much the same way that they do to the expressions of belief; for example, the meaning of a moral statement in indirect discourse are the same as the meaning of that moral statement in direct discourse, and thus logical inference involving embedded moral statements is possible. This principle is accepted by contemporary non-cognitivists in response to what is now known as the Frege-Geach problem (Geach 1965): according to early non-cognitivist theories, the meaning (or "meaning") of moral statements depends on the speaker's state of mind when she makes them.[3] However, some apparently valid arguments involving embedded moral claims could not be recognized as valid according to these non-cognitivist theories. Contemporary non-cognitivists accept Geach's challenge, and try to show that moral judgments, despite being

desire-like, are expressed as statements that are capable of entering into the same inferential relationships as descriptive statements. (Blackburn 1984, Chp. 6; Gibbard 2003, Chp. 3)

Moral judgments are puzzling because Φ and ψ are generally thought to be, if not contradictory, then at least conflicting, characteristics. Non-cognitivists think that only if moral judgments are desire-like could Φ be true: that is, since belief is not capable by itself of moving an agent to act, moral judgments must be feelings of some sort: desires, wishes, hopes, urges, or the like. Cognitivists think that only if moral judgments are beliefs could ψ be true: that is, since only beliefs have the proper structure required for inferential manipulation and stable meaning, moral statements must be expressions of belief. Each side takes one of these principles as primary and attempts to explain how the other principle might either be or appear true, despite the fact that Φ is associated with pro-attitudes and ψ with beliefs. In the next section, I consider a sample of the reasons that philosophers have given for either claiming or denying that moral judgments are beliefs.

## 2. What reasons are there for classifying moral judgments as beliefs?

In a series of recent articles, Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons have developed a cognitivist view in metaethics that seeks to accommodate the desire-like features of moral judgment within the framework of belief. (Horgan and Timmons 2000, 2006b, 2006c) Horgan and Timmons do this by challenging what they take to be a common, but unsupported assumption about the nature of belief: that the content of belief must be *descriptive*. On their view, beliefs are of two sorts: descriptive and non-descriptive. Moral beliefs are non-descriptive:

> [W]hereas descriptive beliefs involve an is-commitment – a how-it-is-with-the-world commitment with regard to a core descriptive content – moral beliefs

> involve a different type of commitment – a how-it-ought-to-be-with-the-world commitment with regard to a core descriptive content. (Horgan and Timmons 2000, 132-133)

Horgan and Timmons agree that moral beliefs have both features ψ and Φ described above. Moral beliefs possess feature ψ by virtue of being beliefs, and they possess Φ by virtue of being non-descriptive. An ought-oriented commitment is just the sort of commitment, they claim, that can explain moral beliefs' powers to move us to act. This is because (at least some) moral beliefs, unlike ordinary beliefs, are "hot" cognitions – that is, they are infused with motivational force. Horgan and Timmons recognize that on a traditional Humean view of psychology, beliefs cannot be "hot" – only pro-attitudes can; however, their approach to understanding belief is explicitly revisionary. A careful phenomenological approach to belief, they think, reveals features and possibilities implicit in our folk concept of belief but rarely explicitly recognized.

Horgan and Timmons emphasize the similarity of their account to Blackburn's non-cognitivist account in many respects, but they differ with him in their insistence that moral judgments are "genuine" beliefs. They give two arguments for this claim. First, they emphasize that moral judgments possess ψ. This reason by itself cannot be sufficient, for Gibbard and Blackburn have offered sophisticated (if contentious) analyses of how some pro-attitudes might possess ψ. Second, they argue, in agreement with Michael Smith, that moral judgments share the distinctive phenomenological features of belief, features that non-beliefs such as desire cannot possess, viz.:

> [T]hey involve an involuntary, categorizing, way of psychologically coming down on some issue of moral concern, on the basis of considerations that are experienced as rationally requiring the judgment – where this judgment is experienced as truth-apt, and hence as naturally expressed in thought and language by sentences in the declarative mood. (Horgan and Timmons 2006c, 269)[4]

Michael Smith emphasizes some other putatively distinct phenomenological features of belief: that beliefs, and not desires, are experienced as being measurable and comparable on a variety of scales. He says that beliefs are experienced as having differing degrees of certitude, robustness, and importance[5]. (Smith 2002) The three measures each pick out a different kind of strength that the belief can have: certitude is (roughly) synchronic confidence, reflected in one's propensity to bet on the truth of the belief; robustness is (again, roughly) diachronic stability, reflected in the belief's tendency to be weakened or strengthened by new information or experience; and importance is a measure of the relative priority of different beliefs, as when one *matters* more than another. Smith thinks that we experience moral judgments as having these features – and these features, he thinks, are features that are best explained if moral judgments are beliefs.

So, Smith, like Horgan and Timmons, agrees that part of the reason that we must reject non-cognitivism is that the phenomenology of moral judgment is akin to that of belief and not to that of desire. Unlike Horgan and Timmons, however, Smith does not claim that beliefs themselves are capable of being "hot" and thus providing motivational force. Instead, he argues that moral beliefs are normally accompanied by certain desires, desires which we are rationally required to have. Other cognitivists offer yet other explanations of how moral judgments can be beliefs and yet (appear to) posses Φ; there is a greater variety of explanations than I can summarize here. However, the claims about the compatibility of cognitivism with Φ are less important than the claims about the nature of belief. Most cognitivists assume that beliefs (and only beliefs) have certain clear, distinctive features, which they then go on to argue are possessed by moral judgments.

On the other side, Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard, who are reluctant to call moral judgments "genuine" beliefs, emphasize the truth of Φ, as well as the distinctive phenomenological features that go along with Φ. Further, Gibbard offers an evolutionary story, endorsed by Blackburn, to explain how a distinctive psychic mechanism, related to coordinating plans and group activity, and not to describing the world, might have given rise to moral judgments and moral language. (Gibbard 1990, Part I) Moral judgments have a different evolutionary history and employ a different psychological mechanism than beliefs, but they did borrow from belief a grammar and logic. These non-cognitivists claim that even if moral judgments and descriptive ones are both called "beliefs," they nonetheless make use of distinct underlying psychic mechanisms. The psychic mechanisms underlying moral judgments are at root the same ones that produce desires, wishes, and other conative states.

So non-cognitivists deny that moral judgments are genuine beliefs in the sense that their possession of belief-like features such as ψ is chronologically posterior to their possession of the desire-like features, and in the sense that the desire-like features are more fundamental to their purpose. But these non-cognitivists, interestingly, do not make any claims about what the concept of belief (or desire) requires. They do not attempt to show that it would be conceptual error to call a moral judgment a belief, though many cognitivists attempt to prove the opposite: that it would be a conceptual error not to call a judgment a belief. In a curious way, then, the cognitivists claim more than the non-cognitivists do. There are as well some hybrid views, which claim that moral judgments express both beliefs and conative states (see Ridge 2007), and some alternative views, such as the view that moral judgments express a kind of hybrid state, sometimes called a "besire." (Altham 1986). I return to these options in the conclusion. But most of the participants in the debate take cogntivism and non-cognitivism to be exhaustive,

and exclusive, options. The question for this paper is whether it is possible to make progress in the cognitivist/non-cognitivist debate by pressing questions about the nature of belief (or desire, or any other such notion), as Smith, Horgan and Timmons, Blackburn, and others have tried to do.

## 3. Moderate skepticism about folk psychology

How are we, then, to evaluate the claim that moral judgments are (or are not) *genuine* beliefs? Rather than addressing the arguments pro and con directly, let us take a moment to step back and look at what is supposed to be at stake. When we argue about whether X is a "genuine belief," what are we really arguing about? Belief is generally held to be a concept of folk psychology, not of neuroscience or biology.[6] Here I argue that folk concepts, like belief, cannot withstand the kind of scrutiny that they have received from philosophers, and they certainly cannot be expected to offer clear answers in these difficult cases. The difficulty is that analysis of a concept can only resolve *hard* cases if the concept is sufficiently rigorous and well-defined. There is no reason to think that belief, or any other folk psychological notion, is capable of this.

The view of folk psychology (FP) that I endorse here is *moderately* skeptical. The position is skeptical in that it holds that the concepts of FP (such as belief and desire) are not sufficiently rigorous to provide clear answers to hard questions, and that there is little hope that we can refine these concepts to become more rigorous without begging important metaethical questions. The skepticism is *moderate* in that it does not entail the claim that FP is a radically false theory, as Paul Churchland argued (Churchland 1981), or even that FP is a *theory* at all.[7] Instead, I argue that our folk concept of belief (and, by extension, similar FP concepts) is both

context-dependent and incomplete, in that it fails to yield a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for sorting beliefs from non-beliefs.

Whether or not a particular mental state case counts as a belief cannot be settled by the common practices regarding our use of the term "belief." We should think of FP concepts like belief as context-dependent. States that imperfectly resemble paradigmatic beliefs might be called beliefs or not depending on context: the attention paid to features that the state has in common with belief rather than to the features that differ is not consistent. Also, FP concepts, like belief, are not completely classically defined. Although it might be agreed by virtually everyone that belief has the property ψ, for a wide range of other properties, the folk theory is silent about whether possession of that property is *required* for belief. So, for example, if one were to ask whether all beliefs had some phenomenological feature, one should not assume that the folk concept will yield an answer.

Before setting out the arguments in favor of this moderate skepticism, let's first consider one of the traditional defenses of folk psychology against skepticism. It is often noted that we are highly successful at predicting and explaining the behavior of others, and that FP is essential to this success. (Horgan and Woodward 1985) This success suggests that FP is at least largely correct, and thus gives some reason to think that our folk psychological concepts are powerful tools for resolving philosophical questions. So FP's success lends an air of plausibility to arguments that use an analysis of belief to establish a philosophical position. Some skeptics (such as Churchland) have doubted our predictive and explanatory success, and have pointed to a range of cases where we are not successful – and defenders of FP (like Horgan and Woodward) have offered a number of replies. Let us grant the defenders their point that people are often (though certainly not always) successful at predicting and explaining the behavior of

others. There remains the question of whether this success is the result of the application of folk psychological concepts.

Kristin Andrews, for example, argues that in a wide range of cases, simple induction is more than sufficient for predicting the behavior of others – I predict that you will take another drink not because I attribute to you the desire to do so, but because past experience tells me that this is what generally happens when people have a drink in hand. (Andrews 2000) The inductive rule I use to make this prediction does not involve my making any psychological attributions. Explaining our success at prediction and explanation in terms of induction is simpler than supposing either that we engage in mental simulation or that we apply a theory of psychology when making this prediction. Daniel Hutto further argues that much of our understanding of others' behavior proceeds from our learning narratives that describe what happens in a wide range of ordinary situations, and these narratives need not and generally do not make reference to psychological states. (Hutto 2004) These narratives are not simple rules of induction, but rather more involved culturally learned stories about certain kinds of events, such as dropping someone off at the airport. One learns the beginning, middle, and end of such stories, and expects them to have certain structures. We do *sometimes* make use of folk psychology in making predictions, but much of the success of our predictions does not redound to the credit of these psychological attributions.

One might, however, consider Ockham's razor. It is rather un-parsimonious to theorize three approaches to predicting and explaining behavior when one approach (FP) could do it all.[8] Why should we choose the more complex explanation that we sometimes use induction, sometimes narrative, and sometimes FP? One reason not to favor the apparently parsimonious explanation is that the ability to make accurate predictions seems to be distinct from the ability

to use folk psychological concepts. Many other animals, for example, seem to be able to accurately predict a wide range of behavior. (Andrews 2007) But this success does not give us any reason to think that they make use of the concepts of folk psychology, and indeed there are good reasons for thinking that most if not all other animals do not possess the concepts of folk psychology. And there is ample independent reason to think that we are capable of using inductive reasoning in other areas, so to suggest that we use induction in predicting behavior is not to posit a *new* mental mechanism and so not to be subject to Ockham's razor.

There is the further problem of deciding in actual cases when a person is using FP and when she is using some other method to predict or explain behavior. This is indeed a challenge, but psychologists have been very clever at designing experiments that can make such discriminations. More important, that it is difficult for observers to tell which mechanism is being used in a particular case in no way undermines the claim that there are a number of distinct mechanisms that might be at work.

This is not to deny that FP plays a role in making predictions and explanations. But it undermines the claim that our explanatory and predictive success redounds to FP's credit in the vast majority of cases. It might well be the case that FP sometimes helps us and sometimes does not. Consider an example where the use of FP concepts tends to decrease our success: Wilson and LaFleur (1995) showed that predictions about one's own future behavior were *less* accurate when subjects were asked to think about the reasons for their likely future actions, then when subjects were not instructed to do so.[9] This suggests that the use of FP concepts (in this case, reasons) in making predictions can sometimes undermine success. So, while FP concepts are unlikely to be *completely* wrongheaded, as the eliminativist maintains, it is possible that they do not always get it right, either.

The foregoing suggests that the traditional defense of FP, that it is instrumental in producing successful explanations and predictions, must be qualified. It is more plausible to think that FP's role in predicting and explaining is limited in scope – that in many cases, FP is not responsible for our success (or failure) in making predictions and explanations of behavior. Of course, this in itself does not support moderate skepticism about FP.

The central argument for moderate skepticism is that ordinary folk intuitions about FP concepts like belief are too context-dependent and incomplete to yield precise criteria to use in determining what does and does not belong to that concept. If the folk concept of belief is going to tell us whether or not a moral judgment is a belief, we need to discover what criteria folk use, explicitly or implicitly, in deciding what is and is not a belief. There are several difficulties in trying to discover these criteria.

First, people have little insight into the criteria that they actually use – and their own opinions on the subject can be incorrect. Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson (1977), in an oft-cited article, review a large body of psychological studies that demonstrate agents' inability to determine why they had acted as they did. The researchers set up situations where a known stimulus that affects people's choices was administered. In some studies, the subjects were aware of the stimulus, and in others, they were not. In both cases, subjects usually denied that their choices and actions had been influenced by the stimulus. Instead, subjects invented another reason for their choice. For example, subjects in the studies were asked to choose from four identical pairs of stockings. Psychologists have established that people tend to choose the last of a string of options when all the options are more or less indistinguishable, and this was indeed the case here. However, subjects in the study consistently offered some other reason – an imagined qualitative characteristic of the stocking – for preferring the fourth pair. Similarly,

Paul Eckman has shown that that people are largely unaware of the cues they use to determine whether or not someone else believes what she is saying. (Eckman 1985) Our tendency to attribute beliefs in some circumstances is determined by factors that we ourselves do not understand. Instead, we tend to confabulate: we invent spurious explanations of why we did or did not attribute a belief. This suggests again that our use of the concept of belief is influenced by a wide range of factors that vary from one context to another.

Second, it appears different groups of people might use different criteria for applying FP concepts, or at least weigh competing criteria differently. Recent cross-cultural work in psychology suggests that there is a great deal more cognitive variation than philosophers have generally assumed. For example, Richard Nisbett and colleagues conducted a series of studies on classification which suggest that East Asians more readily make classifications according to relationships and similarity, and less readily according to rules, than Westerners do. This variation can be found even between Americans of European descent and Americans of Asian descent. (Nisbett 2003, Chp. 6) There is also variation within ethnic groups according to social and economic status. Jonathan Weinberg, Shaun Nichols, and Stephen Stich conducted a series of studies which reinforce Nisbett's on inter-cultural variation but which also show a wide variation in the application of concepts like knowledge among different socio-economic groups. (Weinberg, et al. 2001) What criteria people use, how the criteria are weighed, and so on, depend in part on where the person comes from. This suggests that philosophers' intuitions about the criteria for the application of folk concepts like belief might not agree with others. If two philosophers disagree about how important a particular criterion is, they cannot assume that all or even most ordinary people will uniformly or even mostly apply the criterion in the same way.

Third, even the same person will use different criteria for applying an FP concept depending on the context. Some widely discussed studies conducted by Joshua Knobe and others regarding intentional action, reasons, and valuing show that ordinary judgments about these FP concepts are, at least, very confusing, and suggest that our application of these concepts is guided at least in part by moral judgments. (Knobe 2003, 2004, and 2007) For example, Knobe and Erika Roedder conducted a study in which subjects were asked whether a person in a story, George, "actually values" something, when George acts, despite misgivings, and with some guilt to further a goal contrary to that value. (Knobe 2007) When the example is the value of racial equality, most subjects agree that he does in fact value it; when the example is the value of racial superiority, most subjects contend that he does *not* in fact value it. Knobe concludes that moral judgments affect one's concept of valuing.

The studies just mentioned do not directly examine the concept of belief[10], but other FP concepts such as knowledge, valuing, and intentionality. So we need to be careful. Perhaps the folk concept of belief, unlike many other folk concepts, is not at all variable. This seems unlikely – one would need to explain why belief is different than other folk concepts – but one cannot rule it out. However, one good reason for thinking that the criteria we use in applying the concept of belief are also variable is the existence of the cognitivist/non-cognitivist debate itself. All parties to the debate concede that moral judgments have features (or at least appear to have features) that are usually associated with both belief and other features that are not. Ordinary, non-philosophical talk about moral judgments is inconsistent. It is not surprising to hear a moral judgment called either a belief or a feeling, sometimes both in the same sentence. Moral judgments are just the sort of hard cases that make one wonder whether one's ordinary folk concepts are adequate for a proper and full characterization.

The question is whether, given all this variability and uncertainty about folk usage, it is reasonable to assume that the concepts of FP are clear enough to resolve philosophical disputes like the one between cognitivists and non-cognitivists. One might argue that many people are confused in their application of these concepts, and that we can independently specify the *right* way to use these concepts, and dismiss the results of the studies discussed above as aberrant. However, one can only press such a point so far. Since the concepts like belief are folk concepts, it is not possible for the folk to be *radically* mistaken about them. If such inconsistencies turn out to be pervasive, there is no basis for claiming that the folk concept is any more complete or consistent than the folk in fact take it to be.

What should we conclude from the above arguments? These arguments do not give us good reason to throw out FP concepts like belief completely, nor do they suggest that it is never possible to tell whether something is or is not a belief. They do, however, suggest that most folk concepts are highly contextual, and that they are not classical concepts defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. (They might perhaps be prototype concepts.) This does not mean that FP concepts are less than real, nor that they cannot be useful or important. But FP concepts are not terribly good at helping us to decide hard cases. While we do have some reason to think that in a variety of cases, it is possible to use these concepts in ways that make accurate predictions and explanations, we should be careful not to conclude from this that these concepts can help us resolve difficult disputes like the cognitivism/non-cognitivism debate. Our use of these concepts is imprecise and variable, not yielding even consistent answers across what seem to be like cases.

It is worth noting that Horgan and Timmons' arguments that moral judgments are beliefs explicitly appeal to similarity judgments – it is because moral judgments more closely

resemble (in their view) beliefs than pro-attitudes in terms of their phenomenology that we should call them beliefs. But Horgan and Timmons acknowledge that there are also some ways in which moral judgments do not resemble other beliefs. What principles can guide us in making similarity judgments in hard cases? Folk psychology is unlikely to settle the issue by itself.

Philosophers, in describing our folk psychology, sometimes go far beyond anything that can be discovered by careful inspection and analysis of our use of these concepts. They *create* categories such as "norm-acceptance" and "non-descriptive belief," rather than *discovering* new species of already familiar folk concepts. As Peter Godfrey-Smith notes, in a related context: "Philosophers often present their work as investigations of the 'structure of our concept' … [However] they are not revealing pre-existing structure, structure that we all grasp but have not yet made explicit." (Godfrey-Smith 2006, 14)[11]

While philosophers are free to "refine" folk concepts, thereby making the application of criteria more consistent[12], doing so won't help to resolve the dispute between cognitivists and non-cognitivists. One person might set out precise criteria for Belief*, and conclude that, according to these criteria, moral judgments are Beliefs*, while another might refine the concept of belief using somewhat different criteria (or weighing them differently), yielding Belief#, and following these criteria, show that moral judgments are not Beliefs#. But they would still differ over whether Belief* or Belief# is the better refinement of the folk concept of *belief*, and the folk concept of belief cannot help to settle that question either.

That the concept of belief is incomplete and context-dependent does not mean that the concept of belief cannot be useful in a wide variety of cases. Most of the time, the concept of belief is clear enough to help us decide whether or not a particular psychological state is a

belief. However, it cannot help us to decide the *hard* cases, and moral judgments are hard. Prototype theories (see Wittgenstein 1958, §66-69) leave such hard cases unresolved. For example, a prototype concept of art may fail to tell us whether Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) is art, and this might be an acceptable result, because cases like *Fountain* are relatively rare and marginal to the practice of art. But moral (and more generally, evaluative) thought is not a marginal or special case – it accounts for a great deal of our thinking and figures prominently in action. What's more, we are here trying to use the concept of belief resolve a question about the nature of moral judgment.

## 4. Three objections

One might respond to the foregoing by attempting to characterize folk psychological concepts rather differently, so that these concepts can be refined and made more rigorous. Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit, for example, give belief and related FP concepts a (Lewis-style) functional-role characterization that resists type-reduction to any kind of brain state. (Jackson and Pettit 1990) In other words, the concepts of belief and desire are not justified according to how well they correspond to the underlying psychological or neurological phenomena; we are justified in saying that there are beliefs if the claims about the typical functions of beliefs turn out to be true – that is, if beliefs have the causal powers that they are usually thought to have. Jackson's and Pettit's account promises to be more rigorous in that it offers a test for identifying beliefs by enumerating their functions.

This characterization, however, while it might constitute a strong response to the radical skepticism of Churchland, does little to rebut the more moderate skeptical challenges offered here. Jackson and Pettit claim that it is enough to say that beliefs and desires exist that the

platitudes – the folk descriptions of what they do -- turn out to be true most of the time. But of course while there might be folk agreement about some platitudes, there will be disagreement about others. Jackson and Pettit explicitly concede that this account of belief and desire leaves open the possibility that the concepts of belief and desire are incomplete and context-dependent. They concede that, like older but still useful scientific theories, folk psychology might be less accurate and less complete than some other, better theory.

In advancing this view, Jackson and Pettit are primarily interested in rebutting eliminativism. However, their argument suggests that while we might not want to stop using the concepts of belief and desire, even when we recognize that there are better theories (in principle, at least) to be had, we would be ill-advised to use folk psychology to settle the most difficult and problematic cases. To consult our folk notions of belief in order to settle whether moral judgments are beliefs is a little like consulting our Newtownian concepts of motion to resolve a dispute concerning the movement of sub-atomic particles.

Another objection returns to the phenomenological characteristics of belief discussed by Horgan and Timmons, and (separately) Smith. For example, Horgan and Timmons talk of the feeling of "coming down" on a belief at the end of a deliberation; Smith talks of the variety of the measures of strength of beliefs in deliberation. Perhaps the distinctive phenomenological character of belief gives us sufficient resources to say what features beliefs and only beliefs possess, and hence allows us (with careful attention) to resolve hard cases. Possession of the requisite phenomena shows a state to be a belief; lack thereof proves otherwise. If such a strategy works, the concept of belief could be made rigiorous, and we will have a test for resolving hard cases.

Unfortunately, there are serious reasons to doubt that this line of argument can be successful. First, the phenomenological approach will only succeed if, on careful introspection, we agree that indeed, all and only the things that folk call "beliefs" have those characteristics. I am skeptical that such agreement would be forthcoming; my own first-person experience of believing, for example, does not always agree with the characterizations offered by these authors. However, let us suppose that we could all agree that all of central cases of belief have certain phenomenological characteristics: a, b, c, and d. What reason do we have to think that, on encountering some mental state which has a, c, and d but not b, folk psychology will univocally tell us whether this new state is a belief? That is, can an analysis of our folk use of these terms reveal which of these characteristics are necessary and which are sufficient for a thing's being a belief?

A final difficulty remains for this line of argument. Most metaethical accounts of moral judment are meant to apply also to other normative judgments, such as judgments of humor, beauty, and prudence. That is, if moral judgments are beliefs, then so are other non-moral normative judgments.[13] However, the phenomenological approach cannot do this, because non-moral normative judgments do not possess the same phenomenology as moral judgments. For example, a judgment that a joke is funny does not typically occur at the end of a deliberation about the joke's funniness; nor is making the judgment felt as "coming down" in favor of laughing. Judgments about beauty, or in general, aesthetic quality, are even harder to describe. Does one arrive at these judgments as the result of deliberation? Do judgments about aesthetic quality possess certitude, robustness, and importance? It's not at all easy to say.

One could perhaps insist that while moral judgments are beliefs, other types of judgments are not. But then, we might ask, in what sense are aesthetic, humor, and moral

judgments all *normative*? If the normativity of moral judgments is explained in terms of their status as special types of belief with associated desires, how should we explain the normativity of aesthetic judgments, which are not beliefs? A phenomenological approach requires a distinct account for each phenomenologically distinct type of judgment, which prompts this question: in virtue of what is each of these judgments normative? It might be possible to answer this question, but the phenomenological approach complicates our understading of what has traditionally been seen as a unified genus.

The third objection returns to the widely cited distinction between two different "directions of fit."[14] Beliefs, it is claimed, have a "world-to-mind" direction, and desires have a "mind-to-world" direction. While it is difficult to say with precision what this distinction is getting at (Zangwill 1998), the rough idea is rather simple: in response to new evidence and experience of the world, our beliefs change, but our desires do not; on the other hand, our desires but not our beliefs guide our actions, changing the world to suit us. Taking up this distinction, one might respond to the skeptical arguments offered earlier by replying that beliefs can be distinguished from non-beliefs simply by asking whether or not a particular mental state has the belief's world-to-mind direction of fit. So there should be no ambiguities about whether or not a moral judgment is a belief.

The main difficulty with this objection, aside from skeptical concerns about the soundness of the distinction itself (Tennenbaum 2006), is that it begs the question. A philosopher can certainly stipulate that she will use the term "belief" to refer to all and only those mental states that have a world-to-mind direction of fit, and that no state is a belief if it possesses a mind-to-world direction of fit. But whether or not this is *true* of belief is determined by whether or not it fits our folk concept of belief. As noted earlier, philosophers seem to agree

that moral judgments have ψ, which is consistent with a world-to-mind direction of fit, but also Φ, which suggests a mind-to-world direction of fit. While many philosophers agree that no state that has Φ can be a belief, this is not, or at least not obviously, part of the folk concept of belief. In order to use the direction of fit metaphor to decide whether moral judgments are beliefs, one must first show that it is part of our folk concept of belief that all and only beliefs have an inward and never an outward direction of fit. The preceding skeptical arguments suggest that this claim cannot be supported by analysis of belief, since belief is context-dependent and not classically defined.

## 5. Conclusions

The argumentative strategies in the cognitivism/non-cognitivism debate that rely on an exact analysis of belief have poor prospects. Thus, the focus on arguments involving the nature of belief has tended to impede rather than promote progress in the cognitivism/non-cognitivism debate. As we saw in Section 2 above, some cognitivists have tried to discredit non-cognitivism by deploying rather precise criteria for what constitutes a belief. Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons have made a number of arguments intended to show that Blackburn's view of moral judgments is wrong, and theirs is right. But these arguments, depending as they do on an analysis of what belief is supposed to be, are not likely to succeed. Michael Smith's arguments against non-cognitivism face the same difficulties. The preoccupation with belief has led some philosophers to think that they can refute other theories or establish their own by making claims about what does or does not fall within the concept of belief. But this is not a promising strategy for establishing or discrediting metaethical positions.

Can the distinction, then, between cognitivism and non-cognitivism be maintained or must it be abandoned? There seem to be a few possibilities for moving forward. The debate between cognitivists and non-cognitivists has taken a psychological turn because new non-cognitivists such as, Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard embraced the idea that moral claims could be truth-apt, and instead drew our attention to *psychological* characteristics that distinguish between moral and descriptive judgments. But we could return to truth-aptness as the basis for a somewhat more refined distinction between cognitivists and their critics. For example, Michael Ridge (2006) suggests a "reconceptualization" of the debate "according to which the real sticking point between the partisans of these views is no longer whether normative utterances express beliefs at all, but rather whether the beliefs expressed are such that the utterance is true just in case the belief is true" (74). Such a reconceptualization might, further, capitalize on doubts about the minimalist, deflationary strategy embraced by Blackburn and Gibbard. So cognitivism/non-cognitivism could go full-circle: it is about truth after all.

Second, one could emphasize the variability and context-dependence of moral judgments, as Michael Gill (2008, 2009) does. The territory of the debate then shifts. We no longer argue whether or not moral judgments *simpliciter* (or, worse, normative judgments *simpliciter*) are or are not beliefs, but we restrict our discussions to particular segments of moral discourse. We can then have particular local debates about one part of moral discourse, and what kind of mental state is expressed in that particular subclass of statements. Such a strategy can only succeed, of course, if, within those particular contexts, notions of belief are relatively complete and well-defined. But some of these contexts just might turn out to be more amenable to analysis. Of course, if we follow this strategy, we would no longer be cognitivists or

cognitivists *tout court*; we would always have to be cognitivists about particular areas of moral discourse.

A third possibility is to introduce a new category, or categories, of psychological state that we can use alongside, or even instead of, belief and desire: for example, Altham (1977) suggests "besire" and Gendler (2008) suggests "alief," states which fall somewhere in between desire and belief. This would be to expand our folk-psychological discourse by introducing concepts that better capture the mixed character of normative judgments. Of course, it is unlikely that philosophers could have much impact on the everyday *use* of folk psychological terms by ordinary people. However, by refining and expanding folk psychological discourse for use in philosophical discussion, we can change the projects and possibilities for conceptual analysis: philosophers can now explore, for example, whether or not moral judgments are aliefs.

Fourth, and this possibility is compatible with the previous two, we might conclude that the moderate skepticism defended above lends support to irrealism. Don Loeb (2008) argues that the inconsistency we show in using moral language in ways that are both belief-like and non-belief-like lends support to "moral incoherentism." Moral incoherentism is the view that the linguistic dispositions behind moral language are hopelessly incoherent, so moral talk is like talk of a "round square." If this view were right, then there would not be anything for moral language to be about, and irrealism would be vindicated. One response to Loeb is to try, as Michael Gill (2008) does, to show that the linguistic inconsistencies can be minimized by specifying the context of their use, and that one can give a disjunctive "reconciling pluralist account" (2008, 390) of moral language.

Of these possibilities, only the first promises to leave the cognitivist/non-cognitivist distinction in place, albeit by reintroducing the concept of truth, which most non-cognitivists

have taken pains to recapture in expressivist terms. The remaining possibilities offer different approaches to analyzing moral language (or failing to do so) by moving away from the belief *vs*. pro-attitude question, or re-framing it rather dramatically. It is, I suggest, well worth exploring these novel approaches (and others) to analyzing moral language that the preoccupation with belief has sometimes obscured.

Further, metaethics needs to be better informed by data. Systematic empirical study of the moral aspects of folk psychology is in its infancy (for an overview of empirical work on ethics, see Doris and Stich 2005). There are, as yet, no published studies on the context-variability of "belief." As Loeb (2008) argues, we need a better understanding of just how variable – or not – moral language is. There is here the possibility of *naturalizing* metaethical study, and hence opening up the kinds of possibilities for metaethical argument that have been explored in a few other areas of philosophy, such as applied ethics and epistemology.

"Naturalizing" sometimes is used to mean *replacing* philosophy with science, and that is perhaps what Quine (1969) had in mind. But it need not, and I do not think it should. Many naturalists in epistemology (e.g., Kornblith 1994) see the natural sciences and philosophers as working together to solve philosophical problems. For example, the question of what cognitive faculties are at work in making and grasping moral judgments may be quite important. If we were able to say something about whether and how these faculties respond to evidence, we might cast some light on the prospects for moral realism (or at least naturalistic versions thereof) (Goodwin and Darley 2008). If we think that the real problem is whether or not moral judgments are rightly called "beliefs," we might focus our attention on analyzing folk concepts, not to empirical investigation; once we give up on this idea, we can turn our attention to more fruitful areas of research.

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[1] The literature on minimalism and its connection to the cognitivist/non-cognitivist debate is large and complex. Some think that minimalism refutes non-cognitivism; others take the opposite view. There is not even much agreement on what exactly minimalism amounts to. What matters for the purposes of this paper is that the differences between cognitivists and non-cognitivists are not just differences over truth-aptness. If cognitivists and non-cognitivists were to agree to put aside issues of truth (as minimalism seems to suggest they can do), they would not stop arguing.

[2] Blackburn and Gibbard prefer the term "expressivism" over "non-cognitivism" for at least two reasons. First, and most important, on their view, moral judgments have many "cognitive" characteristics. Second, there are ways of being a non-cognitivist that do not involve being an expressivist. For these reasons, both Blackburn and Gibbard prefer not to call themselves "non-cognitivists". However, in this paper, I shall use the term "non-cognitivism" rather than "expressivism" to refer to views such as Blackburn's and Gibbard's. I wish to emphasize the contrast between the cognitivists and their opponents. Blackburn, Gibbard, and others in their camp are critics of traditional cognitivist analyses of moral terms. Hence, at least in the sense that they do not subscribe to the cognitivism of (for example) someone like Michael Smith, they are "non"-cognitivists. Also, some cognitivists call themselves expressivists, for example,

Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons, and David Copp. Thus, the use of "expressivist" to contrast with "cognitivist" can be confusing.

[3] This is an oversimplification. While A.J. Ayer's view is quite close to this, C.L. Stevenson's view is far more sophisticated. Stevenson does not invoke the speaker's actual state of mind in his account of the "meaning" of moral statements. It is not clear whether the Frege-Geach problem, in its traditional form, presents a problem for Stevenson's non-cognitivism. However, it is certainly the case that non-cognitivists agree that failure to account for the feature of moral statements illuminated by the Frege-Geach problem would be a problem for a non-cognitivist theory. (Ayer, 1936, Chapter 6; Stevenson, 1937).

[4] They offer a more detailed account in an earlier article. (Horgan and Timmons 2005)

[5] Importance is possessed only by evaluative judgments. But Smith thinks that this feature is possessed by them insofar as evaluative judgments are "belief-like".

[6] Some disagree. William Lycan holds that "belief" refers to a natural kind, perhaps a neurological or biological kind. Lycan endorses a causal-historical theory of reference for theoretical terms. It is consistent with his view that most folk claims about belief are false. While this account offers a strong line of defense against eliminativism, it is not clear that it offers any help to this metaethical debate. According to this view, it is the role of science, not philosophy, to uncover the true nature of belief, just as scientists revealed that water is in fact $H_2O$. (Lycan 1988) Thanks to Shaun Nichols for drawing my attention to this account.

[7] Much attention in recent years has focused on the question of whether our use of folk psychology is the application of a theory to cases or our engagement in mental simulation. (Davies and Stone 1995)

[8] I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this point as well as the one in the following paragraph.

[9] Thanks to Kristin Andrews for bringing this to my attention. See also Andrews (2009) for a discussion.

[10] To my knowledge, no such studies have been done. The studies of knowledge (Weinberg, et al. 2001), one might argue, are highly pertinent, since any philosophical account of knowledge would at least include belief, and Knobe's (2007) discussion of valuing is arguably quite relevant as well, since, at least according to cognitivists, valuing is believing.

[11] Godfrey-Smith makes use of Ron Giere's concept of a model to describe what philosophers are doing here – he thinks philosophers are creating or elaborating models, rather than discovering them. But one need not accept this account of models in order to see his point here.

[12] Michael Pendelbury, in his comments, suggested an approach like this.

[13] These arguments are rarely made explicitly; often, a causal "*mutatis mutandis*" remark appended at the end of a discussion is thought to be sufficient. For a particularly egregious example, consider Ayer: "As we have already said, our conclusions about ethics apply to aesthetics also. Aesthetic terms are used in exactly the same way as ethical terms." (Ayer 1936, 135) For further discussion, see my (2008).

[14] Norman Dahl suggested this line of argument.