

THE FREGE-GEACH PROBLEM AND KALDERON'S MORAL FICTIONALISM

Matti Eklund

[published in *Philosophical Quarterly* 59 (2009)]

I. INTRODUCTION

In his (2005), Mark Eli Kalderon argues for a fictionalist variant of non-cognitivism over more traditional forms of non-cognitivism. His argument is based on a diagnosis of what the Frege-Geach problem really shows. On Kalderon's view, the Frege-Geach problem is that it shows how the traditional non-cognitivist too uncritically reads meaning off of use. If only the non-cognitivist solely made claims about use she would be on safe ground as far as the Frege-Geach problem is concerned.

I will here argue that Kalderon's diagnosis is mistaken. The Frege-Geach problem concerns the non-cognitivist's account of the use of moral sentences as much as it concerns the non-cognitivist's account of the meanings of moral sentences.

II. THE FREGE-GEACH PROBLEM

The proper statement of the Frege-Geach problem for non-cognitivism can be a rather delicate matter. Consider the following argument, standardly used to illustrate the problem:

P1. If tormenting the cat is bad, then getting your little brother to do it is bad.

P2. Tormenting the cat is bad.

C. Getting your little brother to torment the cat is bad.

(For future reference, call this argument *the modus ponens argument*.) The problem for the non-cognitivist is that the non-cognitivist says that "tormenting the cat is bad" does not express some truth-apt content but expresses an attitude, a negative attitude toward tormenting the cat. But that cannot be the contribution of "tormenting the cat is bad" as it occurs in P1. But if "tormenting the cat is bad" makes a different contribution to P1 than when it is used on its own, the modus ponens argument rests on an equivocation. So the non-cognitivist must say that the modus ponens argument equivocates. Since the argument doesn't equivocate, non-cognitivism is false. Or that is the argument.

It may be useful to note why ordinary *cognitivists* do not face an analogous problem. Suppose someone argued that cognitivists cannot account for the validity of the argument, pointing to how in

P2, “tormenting the cat is bad” is used to assert that tormenting the cat is bad, but in P1 it is not used to assert that; so, the argument continues, the cognitivist must say that the argument equivocates. The proper reply to this argument is that the cognitivist can draw a distinction between force and content: the content of “tormenting the cat is bad” – the proposition it expresses – is the same in P1 and P2 even if it is only in P2 that “tormenting the cat is bad” is used to assert that the proposition is true.

The problem for the non-cognitivist can now be expressed as follows: The non-cognitivist cannot draw the needed distinction between force and content. For she packs what is being done with “tormenting the cat is bad” in an utterance of P1 – expressing an attitude – into the meaning it has. That is why, apparently, she cannot say this sentence has the same meaning as it occurs in P2.

Now, this explanation of the Frege-Geach problem might suggest a general diagnosis of where the non-cognitivist goes wrong.¹ She goes wrong in reading meaning off of use in a too simple manner. It is as if the cognitivist were to say that the assertoric force of P1 were part of its meaning, so “tormenting the cat is bad” would express something different in P1 than it does in P2. One can then further think that even if the Frege-Geach problem shows that the non-cognitivist gets the *semantics* of moral language wrong, the mistake lies in her inference from use to meaning: she can be perfectly right as far as the *use* of moral sentences is concerned.

Something like this is Kalderon’s view on the problem in his (2005). He quotes Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) saying,

...when one utters a moral judgment, such as ‘This is right’ or ‘This is good’, it does not mean the same as ‘I approve of this; do so as well’ or ‘Hurrah for this!’ or any of the other attempts at equivalence suggested by the emotive theorists; but even if the *meaning* of such sentences were quite other than emotive theorists supposed, it might be plausibly claimed, if the evidence was adequate, that in *using* such sentences to say whatever the mean, the agent was in fact doing nothing other than expressing his feelings or attitudes and attempting to influence the feelings and attitudes of others.²

(MacIntyre, as opposed to Kalderon, gives no indication that the suggestion is in any way motivated by the Frege-Geach problem), and comments approvingly,

¹ In the text I talk about *the* Frege-Geach problem. I think in fact we have here may be a cluster of interrelated problems. But what I am describing is chief among them.

² MacIntyre (1981), 13-14; my emphasis. Quoted in Kalderon (2005), p. 115.

Moral discourse may be fully representational—moral sentences may express propositions that attribute moral properties to things—but their acceptance might not be belief in a moral proposition but, rather, the adoption of the relevant emotional attitude; and their utterance might not assert a moral proposition, but convey only the relevant emotional attitude.³

The suggestion provides the basis for Kalderon’s *non-cognitivist fictionalism*, according to which moral sentences have *straightforward semantics* but what we *do* with them is best described in non-cognitivist terms. Kalderon distinguishes between ‘non-cognitivism’, which concerns what acceptance of a moral sentence consists in and ‘non-factualism’ and ‘expressivism’ which both, as Kalderon uses the labels, concern the meanings of moral sentences.⁴ Kalderon is a non-cognitivist but not a non-factualist or an expressivist.

Kalderon’s diagnosis is that standard – non-factualist or expressivist – forms of non-cognitivism rely on what he calls the “pragmatic fallacy”.

The primitive expressivist....has committed *the pragmatic fallacy*: the primitive expressivist mistakes the contents of moral sentences with what their utterances normally convey.⁵

I will now argue against this diagnosis.

III. THE FREGE-GEACH PROBLEM AND NON-COGNITIVIST MORAL FICTIONALISM

Since Kalderon says that moral sentences have a perfectly standard semantics, there is no mystery, given Kalderon’s view, concerning how the propositions literally or semantically expressed by the premises of the modus ponens argument entail the proposition literally or semantically expressed by the sentence used to state the conclusion. Kalderon can explain *semantic entailment*, as we may put it. But given a view on which what is semantically expressed by some sentences generally differs from what speakers using these sentences use them to express, this is not all that needs explaining. For a speaker actually presenting the modus ponens argument— actually uttering these sentences in the course of performing some reasoning – is giving a seemingly valid argument. That Kalderon can explain semantic entailment does not mean that Kalderon can explain this other fact, precisely for the reason that on his view, a speaker’s ordinary use of the sentences used in stating this argument does not serve to assert the propositions semantically expressed by these sentences. With respect to explaining how the argument actually given can be valid, Kalderon seems here no better off than

³ Kalderon (2005), p. 115-6.

⁴ Kalderon (2005), pp. 52-3.

⁵ Kalderon (2005), p. 65.

other non-cognitivists. The worry I here give voice to was mentioned in [Author's Article], and a version of it is also presented in Lenman (2008). But I here want to elaborate on the worry, and explain why Kalderon's responses (2008a, 2008b) do not really address it.

To fill in some of the details: One issue raised by the Frege-Geach problem is that the non-cognitivist offers no explanation of how moral expressions behave in certain embedded sentences. Non-cognitivists, aware of the problem, have sought to give accounts of embeddings. One condition on the successfulness of such an account is that the non-cognitivist be able to give an account of good moral arguments. She should be able to provide a sense – or perhaps Ersatz sense⁶ – in which the premises entail the conclusion. Despite Kalderon's account of semantic entailment, he has a problem concerning what is *done* when P1 and P2 are *used* to make an argument which perfectly parallels the problem the non-cognitivist has with the semantics of P1 and P2. Kalderon furthermore has an embedding problem which parallels that the non-cognitivist faces. If he says utterances of moral sentences serve to convey emotional attitudes, it is incumbent on him also to give an account of the attitudes conveyed by utterances of complex moral sentences.

An analogy might help illustrate my concern. In his (1996) discussion of whether the non-cognitivist might turn to minimalism about truth to help with the Frege-Geach problem, James Dreier introduces the by now well-known 'Hiyo' example.⁷ The way Dreier sets things up, 'Bob is hiyo' is a sentence to use when a speaker wants to attract Bob's attention – it performs the speech act of 'accosting'; but it isn't said which property 'hiyo' denotes and in a substantive sense of property, 'hiyo' does not stand for a property at all. Given a suitable minimalist notion of truth, "Bob is hiyo" is truth-apt, and saying "Bob is hiyo' is true" amounts to the same as saying "Bob is hiyo". But – and this is Dreier's point – no sense has been made of sentences like "If a dingo is near, Bob is hiyo". This parallels the situation the non-cognitivist is in. The non-cognitivist's explanation of the meanings of moral expressions as they occur in unembedded sentences doesn't extend to their occurrences in embedded sentences: and introducing a minimalist notion of truth pretty obviously doesn't help provide such an explanation, any more than the minimalist notion helps with making sense of the behavior of 'is hiyo' in complex constructions.

Back now to Kalderon. A modified version of the 'hiyo' example will help illustrate my worry regarding Kalderon's diagnosis of the Frege-Geach problem. Suppose we introduce 'is hiyo' by explaining its use in simple sentences along exactly along the lines of Dreier. And suppose further

⁶ It can be argued that for the premises of an argument to entail the conclusion, the premises and conclusion must be truth-apt. If so then versions of non-cognitivism which deny that moral sentences are truth-apt are obviously unable to account for the validity of the argument. That should not be held to immediately refute such versions of non-cognitivism: for this type of non-cognitivist can still provide an *Ersatz* sense of 'entails' in which the argument's premises entail the conclusion.

⁷ Dreier (1996), p. 42f.

that we say that ‘hiyo’ does stand for a property P (in a sense as robust as you like). However, being non-cognitivist fictionalists about ‘hiyo’, we say that although ‘hiyo’ stands for P, utterances of sentences containing ‘hiyo’ serve to perform acts other than assertions: in particular, such utterances are never assertions of the propositions semantically expressed by the sentence uttered. Now consider again “If a dingo is near, then Bob is hiyo”. We know what this sentence semantically expresses: that if a dingo is near, then Bob is P. But we are no nearer an explanation of what a speaker using this sentence is doing than we were before. The relevance to Kalderon’s fictionalist non-cognitivism should be clear. What Kalderon does with moral terms is what we have here done with ‘hiyo’. The semantics is perfectly standard. We don’t, in the scenario envisaged, use the sentences in which the term occurs to assert the propositions they literally express. The actual use of ‘hiyo’ in unembedded sentences is explained. But we’re at a loss concerning the use of ‘hiyo’ embedded sentences.⁸

In his forthcoming (a) and forthcoming (b), Kalderon explicitly replies to the problem I have pressed here. He emphasizes first that there “could be no problem about entailment” given his view.⁹ What he means is that there could be no problem concerning what I have here called semantic entailment. Kalderon does allow, however, that there is a “query” regarding “reasonable inference” on his fictionalist view.¹⁰ He turns to the question of what the attitude involved in accepting the conditional premise might be, and characterizes it as “a higher-order functional state that structures the speaker’s affective sensibility—specifically, as the tendency to have the affect involved in accepting the consequent when having the affect involved in accepting the antecedent”; and the attitude is moreover said to involve “the *endorsement* of this affective sensibility”.¹¹

This may be a promising suggestion for how to explain reasonable inference. But it just does not serve to respond to the worry raised. For Kalderon simply fails to address the objection: *if what Kalderon sketches is an acceptable non-cognitivist fictionalist account of what accepting the conditional premise consists in, why cannot a standard non-cognitivist take Kalderon’s account of this and say that this is the attitude which the*

⁸ In his SEP entry on “Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism” (2004), Mark van Roojen goes through Dreier’s argument against minimalism, and indicates that fictionalist non-cognitivism compares favorably with minimalist non-cognitivism, avoiding problems like this.

⁹ Kalderon (2008a), p. 138.

¹⁰ Kalderon (2008a), pp. 138-9.

¹¹ Kalderon (2008a), p. 142. I am focusing on the part of Kalderon’s discussion of the modus ponens argument that seems potentially relevant to present concerns. Other parts of his discussion are more dubiously relevant. For example, when discussing acceptance of the premises, Kalderon emphasizes that moral reasons are impersonal in ways other reasons aren’t, so if there is a moral reason not to, say, torment the cat, that reason applies not only to the speaker but everyone else – including the speaker’s little brother – as well (p. 141). Even if this is right, it is plainly irrelevant. For the issue can be raised using other examples, to which these considerations do not apply. (E.g. “If murder is wrong, then sodomy is wrong. Murder is wrong. So, sodomy is wrong.”)

conditional premise semantically expresses? If Kalderon has a good answer to this question he fails to indicate what it is.

Recall too that the idea that the non-cognitivist can appeal to higher-order attitudes is a well-known one. It has for example been defended by Blackburn (e.g. 1984). So Kalderon's explanation of reasonable inference is not exactly new.

It might be suggested that while Kalderon's move – refusing to go from the non-cognitivist's claims about use to the corresponding non-cognitivist claims about meaning – doesn't *immediately* solve the problem, there are strategies open to someone who makes his move of distinguishing between issues concerning use and issues concerning meaning that are not open to an ordinary non-cognitivist. For example, it can be claimed that since the ordinary non-cognitivist sets out to give a special *semantics* for moral expressions she must give a compositional account, but since Kalderon is only concerned to give an account of *use* – what is put forward in ordinary uses of moral sentences – he is not so constrained. But I don't see this as a promising route. For Kalderon must account for the reasonableness of all moral arguments corresponding to logically valid forms of inference, and to do that he must anyway provide a thoroughly systematic – properly compositional – account.

IV. MORAL FICTIONALISM

When arguing that Kalderon's non-cognitivist fictionalism faces the Frege-Geach problem as much as standard cognitivism does, I am of course not suggesting that moral fictionalism generally faces this problem. What makes Kalderon vulnerable is the non-cognitivist element. A different sort of fictionalist can simply say that in an ordinary utterance of a moral indicative sentence 'S', a speaker asserts that *according to moral fiction such-and-such*, it is the case that S. This moral fictionalist does not face a Frege-Geach problem. For it is clear how what is asserted in utterances of the two premises in the modus ponens argument entails what is asserted in an utterance of the conclusion.

There may, in fact, be some reason to doubt whether the Frege-Geach problem is a worry for the specific positive fictionalist view which Kalderon goes on to defend. When laying out his positive view, Kalderon says things like,

Moral acceptance not only involves thoughts or perceptions with real content, a proposition that represents the morally salient facts about the relevant circumstance, but also crucially involves a phenomenologically vivid sense of the moral reasons apparently available in the circumstance as the real content represents it to be. Thus, moral acceptance, according to the form of

fictionalism argued for here, is a mixed case, involving as it does an amalgam of cognitive and noncognitive attitudes.¹²

One thing that stands out here is that Kalderon stresses that moral acceptance involves standing in some relation to a *proposition*. It may be that he thinks moral acceptance involves accepting a proposition and taking up an attitude. (Although Kalderon isn't perfectly clear on just how propositions are involved in moral acceptance.¹³) This suggests a possible escape route for Kalderon in face of the Frege-Geach problem: someone putting forward the modus ponens argument puts forward a valid argument, for the propositions involved in acceptance of P1 and P2 entail the proposition involved in acceptance of the conclusion.

But first, if Kalderon's positive view avoids the problem this way, then it is this point about proposition acceptance which helps. What does the work is the emphasis on there being a proposition expressed; a proposition which can stand in appropriate relations and be appropriately embedded. Kalderon's diagnosis of the Frege-Geach problem is by no means vindicated.

Second, if the stated escape route is open to Kalderon, it is open also to, for example, an 'ecumenical expressivist' such as Michael Ridge, who holds that the literal use of moral sentences serve to express both a proposition and an attitude.¹⁴

Third, merely stressing that the ordinary use of a moral sentence (whether literal or not) expresses both a proposition and an attitude does not immediately help with the Frege-Geach problem. For even if the propositions a speaker using P1 and P2 are used to express entail the proposition which C is used to express, and hence acceptance of the propositions that P1 and P2 are used to express rationally compels acceptance of the proposition that C is used to express, the question remains: why need some taking up the attitudes conveyed by the ordinary use of P1 and P2 take up the attitude conveyed by ordinary use of C? (I am not saying that the 'ecumenical expressivist' *cannot* be better off than a non-cognitivist of the kind more commonly discussed: only that appeal to proposition-attitude pairing does not *by itself* help. If the propositions and attitudes are suitably related, the problem may be avoided.)¹⁵

¹² Kalderon (2005), p. 129.

¹³ I am actually doubtful regarding the reading of Kalderon adumbrated at this point in the main text. I discuss it only for good measure. In his (forthcoming), Matthew Chrisman (2008) asks the pertinent question of whether Kalderon's view is that "Ethical claims express the sorts of noncognitive attitudes that the noncognitivist claims to be constitutive of the acceptance of a moral sentence" or that "Ethical claims express attitudes of pretending that something is morally good/bad/right/wrong" (p. 5). In Kalderon's (2008b), he indicates that he meant the former.

¹⁴ See Ridge (2006).

¹⁵ The point made in this paragraph is originally from Mark Schroeder's manuscript "Finagling Frege", available at <http://www-rcf.usc.edu/~maschroe/research/Schroeder%20Finagling%20Frege.pdf>.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have stressed as against Kalderon – and Kalderon’s use of MacIntyre’s remark – that it is not true that the non-cognitivist can avoid the Frege-Geach problem by only making a claim about the use of moral sentences, and not their meanings. If the Frege-Geach problem is indeed fatal for ordinary forms of non-cognitivism, then it is, for all Kalderon manages to show, similarly fatal for a corresponding theory about the use of moral sentences.

In saying this, I am, importantly, not contradicting what John Searle (1969) said about the lesson of the Frege-Geach problem; and it may be of independent interest to compare Searle’s diagnosis with Kalderon’s. Such a comparison may also make it clearer wherein the mistake in Kalderon’s diagnosis lies. Searle says,

The speech act analysts correctly saw that calling something “good” is characteristically commending (or praising, or expressing approval of, etc.) it; but this observation, which might form the starting point of an analysis of the word “good”, was treated as if it were itself an analysis. And it is very easy to demonstrate that it is not an adequate analysis by showing all sorts of sentences containing the word “good” utterances of which are not analyzable in terms of commendation (or praise, etc.).¹⁶

Searle *doesn’t* grant that the non-cognitivist is correct about the use of moral sentences. On the contrary he insists that the non-cognitivist is looking at a too restricted range of moral sentences and how they are used. Contrast this with Kalderon’s diagnosis, repeated here for convenience:

The primitive expressivist....has committed *the pragmatic fallacy*: the primitive expressivist mistakes the contents of moral sentences with what their utterances normally convey.¹⁷

For Kalderon, the fallacy doesn’t lie in the focus on the use of a too restricted range of sentences: it is the inference from use to semantics that is singled out as problematic. What I have urged is that Kalderon’s diagnosis is mistaken. For all that, Searle’s diagnosis still stands.

REFERENCES

- Blackburn, Simon: 1984, *Spreading the Word*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Chrisman, Matthew: 2008, “A Dilemma For Moral Fictionalism”, *Philosophical Books* 49: 4-13.
- Dreier, James: 1996, “Expressivist Embeddings and Minimalist Truth”, *Philosophical Studies* 83: 29-51.

¹⁶ Searle (1969), p. 139.

¹⁷ Kalderon (2005), p. 65.

- Kalderon, Mark Eli: 2005, *Moral Fictionalism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Kalderon, Mark Eli: 2008a, "Moral Fictionalism, the Frege-Geach Problem, and Reasonable Inference", *Analysis* 68: 133-43.
- Kalderon, Mark Eli: 2008b, "The Trouble With Terminology", *Philosophical Books* 49: 33-41.
- Lenman, James: 2008, "Against Moral Fictionalism", *Philosophical Books* 49: 23-32.
- Macintyre, Alasdair: 1981, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame.
- Ridge, Michael: 2006, "Ecumenical Expressivism: Finessing Frege", *Ethics* 116: 302-36.
- Schroeder, Mark: manuscript, "Finagling Frege", available on the web at <http://www-rcf.usc.edu/~maschroe/research/Schroeder%20Finagling%20Frege.pdf>.
- Searle, John: 1969, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, London.
- van Roojen, Mark: 2004, "Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism", in Ed Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.