

The Problem of Other Attitudes

Derek Shiller

NOTE: This is a penultimate copy of the text, some changes were added in the printed version, available here: <https://apq.press.uillinois.edu/54/2/shiller.html>

Noncognitivists take a very distinctive approach to understanding morality. Instead of seeking an explanation for what it is for an action to be morally wrong, they suggest that we can best understand morality by understanding what it is to *judge* that an action is wrong. According to noncognitivists, to judge that an action is wrong is to adopt a conative attitude towards it. To judge that an action is wrong is not to adopt an attitude toward a proposition regarding the extension of a moral property, except in a minimalistic sense of 'proposition' and 'property'. If they can provide a sufficient account of our attitudes about morality, noncognitivists hope that they can avoid any need for a deeper metaphysical account of moral properties.

Whether or not they succeed in this depends on whether or not they can provide an account of our attitudes that is adequate to the psychological complexity of moral thought. Nothing will be lost for the present purposes if, to simplify¹, we assume that noncognitivists are committed to interpreting moral judgments as attitudes of disapproval and approval of actions. However, a complete noncognitivist account needs to characterize not just straightforward attributive judgments, but all of the kinds of moral judgments that we make.

Peter Geach (1965) famously contended that noncognitivists of the time had not done enough to accommodate logical complexity. He suggested that while they may have provided a plausible characterization of judgments like the judgment that insurance fraud is wrong, they

¹ Noncognitivists have developed a number of different accounts of the nature of straightforward moral judgments. For a sample of the variety, see Ayer (1936), Gibbard (1992), and Horgan and Timmons (2006).

hadn't yet begun to tell us how to characterize the judgment that insurance fraud is wrong if stealing is wrong, or the judgment that everything John does is wrong unless fish are unable to feel pain. The lesson for noncognitivists was that they needed a systematic account of moral judgments that respected their potential complexity. Since Geach's paper, there have been a number of concerted efforts (including Blackburn 1984, Gibbard 2003, Schroeder 2008, Ridge 2014) to provide just what Geach claimed they were lacking.

The potential complexity of moral judgments is just one part of the noncognitivists' troubles; a separate but related problem has received much less attention. Noncognitivists have restricted their focus almost entirely to moral judgments. By doing so, they have ignored other kinds of attitudes. The noncognitivists' silence on these other attitudes is as problematic for their view as was their earlier silence about logically complex moral judgments.

Moral Uncertainty

This problem hasn't gone entirely unnoticed. A version of it was introduced by Michael Smith (2002) when he claimed that noncognitivists might have trouble accounting for the existence of gradations in our beliefs about morality. We are more certain about some of our moral judgments than we are about others. Given the spirit of noncognitivism, gradations of moral uncertainty cannot simply be characterized as degrees of belief regarding a special class of propositions. So, Smith wondered, what has the noncognitivist to say about the nature of such gradations?

Smith presented this as a problem for making sense of a property (gradability) that beliefs and moral judgements appear to share. We can equally well understand it as a problem of providing a noncognitivist interpretation of moral uncertainty. Beliefs exist on a spectrum: full

beliefs lie on one side, disbelief on the other side, and uncertainty is in the middle. Smith was concerned about how moral judgments could vary along a similar spectrum. The question of what sort of attitude sits in the middle of that spectrum is inseparable from the problem of what changes in attitudes as one moves along the spectrum. While noncognitivists might be able to tell a good story about the nature of the moral judgments that occupy the extremes of the spectrum, they had not done the same for the nature of moral uncertainty.

Smith observed that moral judgments appear to be gradable along three different dimensions: they can differ in terms of certitude, robustness, and importance. 'Certitude' refers to our level of confidence in the judgment, 'robustness' to how easily we will change our mind, and 'importance' refers to how morally significant we think the issue is. For example, we can be very confident about very unimportant issues, and very confident about very important ones.

The problem is that noncognitivists identify moral judgments with states that are gradable along only two dimensions: they can differ in (some sense of) strength, and in robustness. We might disapprove of some things more strongly than others, but there aren't two different ways of doing so. So noncognitivists are forced to find space for three dimensions of gradation within an attitude that really only admits of two. If they cannot make sense of the three dimensions of gradability of moral judgments, they cannot provide an adequate theory of moral uncertainty.

Some sophisticated responses have been offered to save the noncognitivist from Smith's challenge. These responses provide insight into just what kind of noncognitive attitude moral uncertainty might be. The scope of the problem, however, places greater demands on what might count as an adequate solution. I will return to these responses at the end of the paper, after I present the problem in full.

The Problem of Other Attitudes

Suppose that you are faced with a moral dilemma about whether or not to lie to your spouse to protect him or her from needless distress. You are unsure what the right thing to do is, even though you know all of the morally relevant features that bear on your decision: you know that lying will leave everyone happier in the long run, but it involves disrespecting the autonomy of a rational individual. You decide to lie. Afterward, you *hope that you did the right thing*.

Suppose that a loved one has been kidnapped by terrorists and held for ransom. You have the ability to pay, but you recognize that the ransom would serve to fund their activities and encourage them to commit greater evils. You *wish that your special obligations to your loved one made paying the ransom morally permissible*, but you think that it does not.

Suppose that you've thought long and hard about the trolley problem. As a card-carrying consequentialist, you judge confidently that the right thing to do is to pull the lever and push the fat man. While you have no doubts about it, you still sympathize with those who hold the view that it would be wrong to push the fat man, because despite your considered judgment, you also share the *intuition that it is wrong to push the fat man*.

Hoping that lying was the right thing, wishing that paying the ransom was morally permissible, and intuiting that pushing the fat man is wrong are moral attitudes. A moral attitude is an attitude that we would ordinarily describe as being somehow about morality. In the context of noncognitivism, it is controversial whether or not (and in just what sense) moral attitudes are actually attitudes about morality. Nevertheless, it is easy to distinguish moral attitudes from others based on their appearance.

There are lots of moral attitudes. We can be angry that we were wronged and we can regret that we've wronged others. We can imagine fictional worlds in which different moral

principles are true and we can suppose, in the course of a hypothetical argument, the vilest moral principles.² In fact, every ordinary propositional attitude appears to have a moral analogue.

The existence of other moral attitudes creates three problems for the noncognitivist, which I will collectively refer to as the ‘problem of other attitudes’. The first problem is to provide an explanatory characterization of each moral attitude. The second problem is to explain what makes these other attitudes count as *moral* attitudes – what justifies their inclusion in a single category? The final problem is to explain why it is that our attitudes are systematically paired, so that for each ordinary propositional attitude, we can also have an attitude that acts just like a propositional attitude with a special moral content. I’ll explain each problem in turn before considering the question of whether existing proposals designed for handling moral uncertainty can be extended to other attitudes.

Characterizing Other Attitudes

A cognitivist would say that the moral attitudes are just the familiar attitudes of hoping, wishing, intuiting, anger, regret, imagination and supposition that take as their object moral contents. Traditional noncognitivist theories, on the other hand, suggested that moral judgments lack particular moral contents; moral judgments ought to be characterized by their special functional role, not by special representational contents. Traditional noncognitivists cannot say that moral attitudes are just the familiar propositional attitudes taken to particular moral contents, so they must explain what these attitudes are, just as they need to explain what mental states are expressed by logically complicated moral sentences.

² It is a bit unusual to refer to imagination and supposition as attitudes, but they fit the definition given above. In the context of the present problem, it makes sense to group them in with traditional attitudes.

It might be thought that modern noncognitivist theories, bolstered by minimalist interpretations of content, fare better. We can provide a reasonably plausible minimalist semantics, according to which expressions like “all moral attitudes take a moral content as an object” are true. However, it doesn’t follow from this that minimalists can skirt the problem. Minimalist noncognitivists must distinguish their view from cognitivism. According to Jamie Dreier, minimalist noncognitivists “are distinguished by their claim that there is nothing to making a normative judgment over and above being in a state that plays a certain ‘non-cognitive’ psychological role, a role more like desire than it is like factual belief. In particular, to explain what it is to make a moral judgment, we need not mention any normative properties.” (39, 2004)

The same presumably goes for the other moral attitudes. While noncognitivists may admit that there are special moral contents, they must maintain that those contents are superfluous to characterizing the moral attitudes. In the absence of any better analysis of the fundamental commitments of noncognitivism, I’ll assume that Dreier is right, and so minimalist noncognitivists are committed to finding a way of characterizing the other moral attitudes without evoking any special moral contents.

The challenge of providing a characterization of these other attitudes is complicated by two considerations. First, noncognitivists will need a different characterization of moral attitudes from the characterization they provide for their ordinary propositional analogues. Hopes, wishes, intuitions, anger, regrets, imaginings, and supposition all take representational contents in their standard forms. The characterization of individual propositional attitudes will surely invoke their contents.³ In explaining what it is to hope that one’s keel has cleared the shoals, we can expect to

³ If they don’t, Dreier’s proposal doesn’t successfully distinguish noncognitivism from moral realism.

mention the keel and the shoals (or the properties of keelhood and shoalhood) and lay out the relation between the attitude and its object(s).

Dreier contended that even minimalist noncognitivists are committed to being capable of avoiding moral properties or propositions when characterizing moral judgments (and presumably other moral attitudes). It is unlikely that we can give a single characterization of moral and non-moral hopes that relies essentially on non-moral properties or propositions for non-moral hopes and does not rely on moral properties or propositions for moral hopes. We shouldn't expect to be able to treat moral hopes in precisely the same way we do other hopes.

Second, the functional role that noncognitivists use to characterize moral judgments can't simply be extended to the other attitudes. Noncognitivists agree that moral judgments have a special connection to motivation. Extant noncognitivist characterizations from Ayer (1936) to Gibbard (2003) rely on some such connection. When we judge that an action is wrong, we have some motivation not to do it. However, many other moral attitudes are either not motivational or not motivational in quite the same way that moral judgments are. Wishing that it were permissible to pay the ransom needn't have any impact on one's motivation to pay the ransom. Imagining or supposing that some action is morally wrong will not motivate one to avoid that action. The functional roles of the other moral attitudes are different from the functional role of moral judgments.

Noncognitivists need some story to tell about other moral attitudes, but neither the story they already have for moral judgments nor the story that they have for the other propositional attitudes can be directly extended. It appears likely that noncognitivists will need a novel characterization for each of the other moral attitudes.

Accounting for the Morality of Moral Attitudes

According to traditional noncognitivists, moral attitudes needn't share content by virtue of being moral attitudes, and according to minimalist noncognitivists, the moral attitudes can be characterized independently of whatever content they have. Furthermore, moral attitudes will not all share the same functional role. Moral hopes will have a very different role in our cognitive lives than moral intuitions and moral anger. If the category of moral attitudes is held together by neither a shared contents nor by a shared functional role, it looks like moral attitudes will be a rather heterogeneous lot.

There is clearly something in common between the judgment that it is wrong to commit fraud, the hope that it would be wrong to give one's child's college fund to charity, and the supposition that it is wrong to eat shellfish on Sunday. It is not an arbitrary fact about language that we use 'wrong' in referring to these different attitudes. If we provide a separate analysis of each kind of moral attitude and do not explain what it is that unites them as moral attitudes, we will have missed out on something important. Not only do noncognitivists need to characterize the other attitudes, but they need to provide some account of what they all share.

Accounting for Systematicity

For every kind of attitude that can take an ordinary propositional object, there exists a moral analogue. For hopes, there are moral hopes – hopes about what's right and wrong. For desires, there are moral desires – desires about what's right and wrong. We can be perplexed, surprised, revolted, angered, and disconcerted by morality. We can make moral suppositions in

the course of deliberation. We can imagine things to be morally different than we take them to actually be. These moral analogues are attitudes that most people would naturally be inclined to regard as ordinary propositional attitudes with an ordinary propositional content, characterized by their relation to that content in the same way that their analogues are. But according to the noncognitivists, the appearance is largely illusory. In explaining what it is to be a given non-moral attitude, we will need to make use of its non-moral content. In explaining what it is to be a given moral attitude, we will not need to utilize any special moral content.

There is no other collection of (uncontroversially) noncognitive attitudes⁴ that exhibits the same systematic pairing with the propositional attitudes. To take one example, there is no collection of fear-like attitudes that includes fear-hopes, fear-wishes, and fear-intuitions that masquerades as attitudes of hopes, wishes, and intuitions with a special sort of fear-related content. We may hope that the new addition to a horror movie franchise is as scary as the last, but this attitude is a mundane hope about the movie's impact upon our psychology. Attitudes about scariness are transparently psychological in a way that attitudes about morality are not. Judging that something is scary is not the same thing as being scared by it.

Some facet of the moral attitudes must explain why they can be systematically paired with propositional attitudes. Cognitivists have a clear explanation for this. All propositional attitudes -- hopes, regrets, imaginings, anger, despair, intuition, amusement, perplexity, and so on -- can be taken to any proposition. Moral attitudes are just propositional attitudes directed at moral propositions. The same account that explains what it takes to be a non-moral hope also explains what it takes to be a moral hope. Insofar as propositional attitudes can have any

⁴ Other noncognitive attitudes that might represent exceptions are other normative attitudes, epistemic modals, and probability assignments. The status of these other attitudes are as controversial as moral attitudes and for much the same reasons.

propositional object, it is unsurprising that we can have other moral attitudes. Noncognitivists owe a similarly robust explanation.

Extant Proposals

The scope of the problem of other attitudes means that partial answers are of questionable value. There are two responses to Smith which, whatever their prospects for handling Smith's challenge, are revealed to be inadequate with the full problem in view. These responses are worth rehearsing for three reasons. First, they draw on the existing theories with the most promise for providing a full solution to the problem of other attitudes. Second, they throw light on the difficulties one will encounter when trying to provide a full solution. Finally, they show the inadequacy of these theories as final noncognitivist theories.

Both responses attribute greater structure to moral judgments and use this structure to make sense of moral uncertainty. One does this by decomposing moral uncertainty into two separate attitudes. The second does this by adding structure inside the content of the attitude. The additional structure provides some help in solving the problem, but neither response is fully successful as it stands.

Michael Ridge (2007, 2014) proposed an account, ecumenical expressivism, according to which moral judgments are really pairs of other attitudes. To judge that an action is wrong is, very roughly, to simultaneously judge that the action has a certain property and to disapprove of actions that have that property. Typically, we are uncertain whether an action is wrong if we are uncertain whether it has a certain property. If I am uncertain whether or not fish are conscious, and I disapprove of killing all and only things that are conscious, then I count as being uncertain whether it is wrong to kill fish.

This account might initially be thought to be easily extended to other attitudes. We might, for instance, try to explain moral hopes as combinations of hopes about an action's properties and desires regarding actions with those properties: I hope that lying was the right thing to do by hoping that lying has some property, such that I desire that actions with that property be conducted.

However, in order to produce a plausible account of moral uncertainty, Ridge introduced a complication to his account that cannot be easily applied to the proposed extensions. Not every case of moral uncertainty involves non-moral uncertainty. I might believe that even though fish are not conscious, they still have first-order desires not to be harmed. I might be uncertain whether it is wrong to kill fish because I am uncertain whether it is morally permissible to kill anything with non-conscious desires not to be harmed. In such cases of fundamental moral uncertainty, I am uncertain about the moral question, but not because I am uncertain about any non-moral question.

With such particularly fundamental issues, Ridge fell back to an uncertainty-as-indifference analysis. To be fundamentally morally uncertain whether some action with certain properties is wrong is, roughly, to not feel strongly for or against actions with its properties. The more certain we are, the more strongly we feel. Sometimes we may know all of an actions' non-moral properties and still be unsure about whether it is moral. In such cases, Ridge suggested that degrees of moral uncertainty reflects degrees of indifference.

The same strategy can't be extended to the other moral attitudes. I may judge that it is wrong to benefit my friends and family at the expense of strangers and still wish that it wasn't wrong without wishing that it lacked any non-moral property that I believe it to have. I may know that moral responsibility requires freedom of choice, but imagine a fanciful story in which

moral responsibility is accrued for things entirely beyond one's control. This need not require supposing that actions in this story have any non-moral properties that explain the moral difference. In general, we can have attitudes that are fundamentally about morality in precisely the same way that Ridge thought we can be fundamentally uncertain about morality.

Insofar as gradations of indifference are helpful, they can only be utilized for understanding moral uncertainty -- there is nothing similar that one might use to handle other attitudes about fundamental morality. The solution that Ridge offered in response to Smith is therefore not up to the scope of the problem.

Andrew Sepielli (2012) proposed that any noncognitivist view with the resources to overcome the Frege-Geach problem also has the resources to make sense of moral uncertainty. Though he recognized that there might be other avenues open to the noncognitivist, he thought that the most promising route to answering the Frege-Geach problem involves positing complex contents as the object of moral attitudes, in the style of Mark Schroeder's (2008) Trojan noncognitivist proposal.

On Schroeder's proposal, noncognitivists should regard moral judgments as involving three components. The first component is the attitude, which is a conative state that Schroeder refers to as "being for" (a technical term that nevertheless borrows substance from an implied analogy to the notion of favoring). To *be for* an action is to have some sort of positive attitude towards it. The second two components of the attitude together comprise the content of the attitude. Unlike many traditional noncognitivist theories, Schroeder suggested that noncognitivists need complex contents: part of the content that contributes the moral flavor of the attitude. On Schroeder's proposal, moral judgements are attitudes of being for that are directed at actions of attributing blame. The judgment INSURANCE FRAUD IS WRONG is an

attitude of *being for* directed at a content of *blaming for insurance fraud*. What makes this moral judgment a judgment about the morality of insurance fraud is the fact that the content concerns *blaming for* insurance fraud. Schroeder thought that this additional structure is needed to solve the Frege-Geach problem, and Sepielli observed that it can also be used to give an account of uncertainty.

Schroeder's proposal gives us two distinct gradable aspects of moral attitudes. According to Sepielli, moral judgments can differ in how *for* blaming the judgment is, and they can differ in how severe the blaming is that the judgment calls for. This answers Smith's concern about the distinction between importance and certitude. To be relatively certain that insurance fraud is wrong is to be *very for* blaming for insurance fraud. To be relatively uncertain whether insurance fraud is wrong is to be *mildly for* blaming for insurance fraud. To be uncertain whether insurance fraud is wrong but confident that if it is, it is very wrong, is to be *mildly for* very strongly blaming for insurance fraud.

If Schroeder's proposal is adopted, then we might say that moral attitudes all share a part of their content. Since Schroeder suggested that moral judgments are states of *being for blaming for*, we might hold that all moral attitudes are attitudes about *blaming*. Schroeder also suggested that beliefs are also attitudes of being for, but they are not directed at kinds of blaming. (They are instead directed at actions of proceeding as if something or other were the case.) So moral judgments and ordinary beliefs differ in that they are the same attitude directed at different contents.

We might be able to systematically extend this to other attitudes. To form a hope may be to have some other attitude toward blaming, to form a moral fear is to have yet a further other attitude toward blaming, and so on. In each case, the same attitude may produce a moral attitude

when directed to a content concerning blame, and a propositional attitude when directed to another kind of content.

While the proposal sounds promising in outline, it is hard to fill in the details. For the proposal to be adequate, we need to specify the content that all moral attitudes share and the attitudes are directed at those contents.

Take the case of hope. The most straightforward way to make sense of moral hopes in Schroeder's framework is to think of them as hopes about blaming. Perhaps to hope that it is wrong to lie is to hope that one will be blamed for lying (or to hope that one's ideal self would blame one for lying), but it seems that any link between hopes about morality and hopes about blaming can be severed. Someone could hope that lying was the wrong thing to do without simultaneously hoping that people are actually or counterfactually blamed for lying.

This doesn't mean that a distinction between moral contents and noncognitive attitudes will not help the noncognitivists solve their problem, but it does mean that Schroeder's suggestion will not suffice all by itself. Whatever help it provides with the special case of moral uncertainty, it will need to be significantly modified or elaborated to handle the other moral attitudes. While Schroeder suggested that additional structure could solve the noncognitivist's problems, the appeal of his account is boosted by his specification of the components of this structure. Yet Schroeder only developed the details for moral judgments. Whether or not noncognitivists can plausibly fill in the details remains to be seen. The problem is not trivial. It places new and distinct demands on an adequate noncognitivist theory.

Conclusion

The three parts of the problem of other attitudes are tightly interconnected. A suitable solution should simultaneously characterize each moral attitude, explain their moral unity, and help us understand why they are systematically paired with non-moral analogues. Nothing that I have said guarantees that a solution cannot be found, but existing noncognitivist accounts simply have not taken the problem into consideration. It is doubtful that an adequate noncognitivist theory will be found until this changes.

Bibliography

Ayer, Alfred (1936). *Language, Truth and Logic*. London, V. Gollancz, Ltd.

Blackburn, Simon (1984). *Spreading the Word*. Clarendon Press.

Dreier, James (2004). Meta-ethics and the problem of creeping minimalism. *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (1):23-44.

Geach, Peter (1965). Assertion. *Philosophical Review* 74 (4):449-465.

Gibbard, Allan (1992). *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. Harvard University Press.

Gibbard, Allan (2003). *Thinking How to Live*. Harvard University Press.

Horgan, Terrence & Timmons, Mark (2006). Cognitivist expressivism. *Metaethics after Moore*, 255-298.

Ridge, Michael (2007). Ecumenical Expressivism: The Best of Both Worlds? *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 2:51-76.

Ridge, Michael (2014). *Impassioned Belief*. Oxford University Press.

Schroeder, Mark (2009). *Being for: Evaluating the semantic program of expressivism*. Clarendon press.

Sepielli, Andrew (2012). Normative uncertainty for non-cognitivists. *Philosophical Studies* 160 (2):191-207.

Smith, Michael (2002). Evaluation, uncertainty and motivation. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 5 (3):305-320.