

Ethics, Theoretical Rationality and Eliminativism About Belief

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1. Introduction

In his forthcoming book *Good and Gold*, Howard Sobel expresses sympathies for John Mackie and his “error theory” about the status of value judgments. On that view, such judgments have truth-values and express beliefs. However, given a correct account of the contents of these beliefs, we have reason to suspect that they are all false.¹ According to Mackie, to hold that an action is right is to ascribe a property that is ‘objectively prescriptive’—i.e., such that grasping that an action has the property necessarily involves being motivated to perform the action—and such properties do simply not exist.

On Mackie’s (and Sobel’s) view, thus, whenever we tell each other what is the right thing to do, or the best aim to pursue, or the most reasonable way of arranging society, we express falsehoods. This may seem like an odd view given the important role moral discourse has in the life of many. However, according to Mackie and Sobel, the oddity can easily be explained away. The fact that moral discourse just deals with falsehoods has not stopped it from serving important social functions, such as helping us to coordinate our actions in order to jointly achieve better outcomes. This is why it has evolved. Or as Sobel puts it: “Nothing could be more natural than that we should have evolved to tell and live the lies of objective moral values and constraints”.

Personally, I think that the socio-biological explanation of moral discourse that Mackie and Sobel sketch sits better with a non-cognitivist view than with an error theory. But I am not going to argue that here. Instead, I am going to discuss one possible reason to prefer Mackie’s error theory, or rather its cognitivist part (i.e., the claim that value judgments express be-

¹ See Mackie’s *Ethics. Inventing Right and Wrong*, New York: Penguin, 1977, ch. 1. For an interesting elaboration of this type of approach, see Richard Joyce’s *The Myth of Morality*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. The view in question is at least supposed to hold for all ‘positive’ judgments; i.e., judgments that actually ascribe some moral property.

liefs), to ethical non-cognitivism (hereafter EN). The alleged reason has to do with similarities between ethics and other evaluative discourses, such as aesthetics and rationality. The idea is that, given the similarities, all discourses should be given a unified treatment. Moreover, as non-cognitivism about the other discourses is implausible, it can be dismissed in the case of ethics as well.

Philosophers who have argued along these lines include Frank Jackson, Derek Parfit and John Skorupski.² For example, Parfit applauds Allan Gibbard for thinking that his ethical expressivism should be extended also to claims about what is rational and quotes Gibbard's claim that "to call a thing rational is not to state a matter of fact, either truly or falsely". But he also suggests that this in a sense makes Gibbard's position self-defeating. For "[i]f there could not be truths about what it is rational to believe, as Gibbard's view implies, it could not be rational to believe anything, including Gibbard's view."³ Parfit does, wisely, not think that the implication in question *refutes* Gibbard's position. After all, the central claim of EN is not that it is rational to *believe* in EN, or something of that sort, but that EN is *true*, which is a claim the advocate of EN need not construe as an expression of an emotion. Parfit merely stresses that it means that the cost of accepting EN is "very high".⁴

Frank Jackson offers a somewhat more elaborate reasoning. In a paper entitled "Non-Cognitivism, Normativity, Belief", he summarizes it as follows.

I raise what seems to me a serious, though essentially simple, problem for non-cognitivism about rationality. But my reason for highlighting the connection between non-cognitivism in ethics and non-cognitivism about rationality is not simply to identify my target as one worth shooting at. I want there to be guilt by association. I want to strengthen the case for cognitivism in ethics (101).

² See Jackson, T., "Non-Cognitivism, Normativity, Belief", in J. Dancy (ed.), *Normativity*, pp. 100-115 (page references are to this paper, unless otherwise indicated), Appendix 1 in Parfit's forthcoming book *Climbing the Mountain*, and Skorupski's "Irrealist Cognitivism", also in *Normativity*, (pp. 116-140, see esp. 116). See also Cuneo, T., *The Normative Web*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. In his book, Cuneo argues that someone (such as an advocate of EN) who rejects moral realism is also committed to rejecting "epistemic realism" (i.e., roughly, the claim that judgments about theoretical rationality can be true). On the basis of that claim, he argues that we should accept moral realism (and accordingly reject EN), as we have strong reasons to accept epistemic realism.

³ Notice that Parfit here assumes that it follows from the claim that it is not true that an action is rational that it isn't rational. This assumption may be questioned.

⁴ The alleged reason is that if an advocate of EN extends his non-cognitivism to theoretical rationality, this undermines the intelligibility of his claim that EN is better and superior to its competitors. For if NTR is correct, such claims cannot be true or false but are instead expressions of emotions or other conative attitude. At least, it raises puzzles about how such a claim can be defended. What are the arguments adduced for the claim that EN is superior to its competitors to accomplish, if those claims cannot be true? Cuneo reasons similarly. For a summary of his argument, see *The Normative Web*...

Jackson writes about non-cognitivism about rationality. In particular, he has *theoretical* rationality in mind; i.e., discourse about when a belief is justified or a hypotheses warranted. Jackson was to show that non-cognitivism about theoretical rationality is false (hereafter NTR), and suggests that this also undermines EN. The caution Jackson expresses by using the phrase “guilt by association” is due to the fact that he does not assume that EN implies NTR—the alleged falsity of NTR is not supposed to *entail* the falsity of EN. Rather, the advocates of EN are held to be committed to NTR in a less stringent sense, and the argument against EN is more indirect.

In order to establish that the advocates of EN *are* committed to NTR in this weaker sense, Jackson appeals to the claim that the arguments commonly used to *defend* EN—“the famous arguments” as he calls them—apply, *mutatis mutandis* also to theoretical rationality. By “the famous arguments”, he means the argument from disagreement, the open question argument, and the argument that appeals to the strong connection between moral judgments and motivation. That is, a popular argument for EN appeals to the fact that judging that an action is right or obligatory is normally accompanied by at least *some* motivation to perform that action. However, judging that a *belief* is rational or reasonable is *also*, normally, accompanied by some motivation, namely the motivations to adopt that belief. So, if the argument works in the first case, it presumably works in the latter as well. Similarly, there seems to be just as much, and as radical, disagreement about when beliefs are justified as there is about when actions are right, and just as no amount of description seems to “close” any moral questions, no description closes questions about what it is reasonable to believe.

Now, Jackson thinks that NTR can be refuted on independent grounds, by an argument that is not applicable to EN. It might be thought that this *undermines* the idea that provides the basis for his argument against EN—i.e., the claim that EN and NTR stand and fall together. But that is not how Jackson sees it, and although he does not spell out any *reason* for thinking so,⁵ he might have the following reasoning in mind: What the (alleged) refutation of NTR shows is that the arguments for non-cognitivism are, though famous, not so strong after all. For, if they fail to establish the truth of NTR, why believe that they do a better job in the case of EN? (Theoretical rationality has the features that make the arguments work, so a discourse could have

⁵ That is, a reason for the claim that the alleged fact that “the famous argument” apply equally well to both discourses means that they stand and fall together, even given that there is an independent argument against NTR. That is, a reason for rejecting EN on the ground that “the famous arguments” apply equally well to both discourses and the fact that NTR can be refuted by an independent argument. That is, the fact that there is an argument that applies to NTR but not to EN could be taken to be a feature that explains why the alleged fact that “the famous arguments” apply to both discourses does not show that an advocate of EN is also committed to NTR or why they provide support for EN even if they provide no support for NTR.

those features without being true.) In other words, the upshot is that the basis for EN is undermined, leaving it with little or less positive support. That is, the idea is that the argument against NTR deprives EN of its justification.⁶

In my view, Jackson is wrong in claiming that the famous arguments for EN applies just as well to NTR. There are differences between the discourses that explain why the versions applied to ethics are more convincing than those that apply to rationality. There is therefore, *pace* what Jackson and others have presumed, a room for a mixed verdict about evaluative discourses. However, to show this is not the aim of the present paper. Instead, the aim is to refute Jackson's argument against NTR. Since this argument is flawed, it does not cast any doubts over EN, even if we assume that all evaluative discourses should be given a unified treatment.

2. Expressivism, Cognitivism and Realism

Before I start I need to say something about the content of non-cognitivism and its competitors. There are many subtle issues regarding how to define these positions, but I will ignore most of the complications, as they have little significance in the present context.

I shall assume that non-cognitivism entails that the judgments or commitments to which it applies lack truth-values and do not consist in true or false beliefs. EN implies that this holds for moral judgments, whereas NTR implies that it holds for judgments about theoretical rationality. It is sometimes assumed that this negative thesis exhausts the content of non-cognitivism, and that the more positive claims about the function of evaluative judgments that non-cognitivists tend to make are external to it (e.g., the claim that evaluative judgments, rather than beliefs, consists in conative attitudes of some form, such as desires or sentiments). This is why non-cognitivism is sometimes distinguished from *expressivism*, where the latter differs from non-cognitivism in that it, besides the negative claim, involves the positive ones as well. Still, I shall use EN to refer to the more inclusive position, so that it entails that moral commitment consist of conative attitudes (rather than beliefs).

By "cognitivism", I shall simply refer to the negation of the negative component of non-cognitivism. It states that evaluative judgments do have truth-values and that they are beliefs. That is, judgments to the effect that something is justified or reasonable, etc, ascribe a real property to that thing.

⁶ Again, Cuneo reasons similarly. He defends what he calls "the parity premise" (the claim that if there are no moral facts, there are no epistemic facts) on the ground that all the considerations that give reason to be skeptical about the existence of moral facts are present also in the case of epistemic facts. So, denial of moral facts on those grounds commits one, he thinks, to denying epistemic facts as well.

“Realism” is a trickier concept. It entails cognitivism but also the claim that some of the beliefs that are supposed to constitute the judgments in question are in fact true (to distinguish it from John Mackie’s so-called error theory). In addition, I am disposed to define realism so that it excludes relativism; i.e., so that it entails that the property we ascribe by judging something to be, say, morally right, etc, does not differ depending on the culture, etc, to which she belongs. Maybe further claims should also be added, to account for the fact that realists believe not only that moral judgments can be true but *objectively* so. However, I am going to ignore that possibility. Notice that, by adopting realism, one still leaves many questions unanswered, such as those concerning the nature of the properties moral judgments are supposed to ascribe (whether they are natural or non-natural, etc). Different realists disagree about those issues, but these disputes have no relevance to the arguments I want to pursue.

There is a complication regarding the formulation of EN and NTR that is addressed by Jackson. The relevance of this complication can be seen only if one is familiar with Jackson’s argument against NTR, so I shall begin by stating the argument.

Jackson’s argument against NTR is an attempted *reductio ad absurdum*. The absurdity that NTR is supposed to entail is the claim that there are no believers and no beliefs. The implausibility of this claim provides, according to Jackson, a conclusive reason for rejecting NTR. He writes: “I will assume that eliminativism about believers, though a highly interesting position, is a manifestly false one” (104, see also 103).

A central premise in the argument by which Jackson tries to establish that EN actually entails eliminativism is the assumption that belief “is subject to normative constraints” (102). It is important to be clear about what Jackson means here. Many hold that our beliefs are subject to normative constraints in the straightforward sense that they are apt objects for normative assessments. Jackson mentions a number of norms that may be relevant to such evaluations, such as: the view that someone “who believes that P, and that if P then Q, *ought* to believe that Q”; the view that one ought not to have inconsistent sets of beliefs; and the view one should revise ones beliefs on the basis of the available evidence (101-102). For example, “someone who believes that a certain hypothesis explains the observed data ought to believe that hypothesis, or at least increase their degree of belief in it” (102).

However, it is not merely this—i.e., that beliefs should be held or revised under certain circumstances—that Jackson has in mind when saying that belief is “subject to normative constraints”. Rather, he wants to say something about what it *is* to believe. To believe that P and that if P then Q is *to be such* that one should believe Q. That is, according to Jackson, to be such that one should believe that Q is a necessary condition for actually *believing* that P and that if P then Q.

If belief is subject to normative constraints, being a believer requires that one have the relevant normative properties. For example, if someone believes that P and believes that if P then Q, then they have the property of being such that they ought to believe that Q (102).

In other words, Jackson thinks that believing entails having certain normative properties. The rest of the argument can now easily be spelled out. NTR entails that judgments about what one ought to believe, which beliefs ought to be held, and so on, are not truth apt. Accordingly, there are no properties that correspond to the normative predicates that are used within that discourse. So, given NTR, there is no such thing as having or lacking such a property. Thus, as having such properties is necessary for having a belief, NTR entails that there are no believers, and no beliefs.

Now, the complication regarding the formulation of expressivism and its competitors is this. On the basis of “minimalist” or “deflationary” accounts of truth, it has been held that ethical non-cognitivists are, after all, entitled to think that moral judgments, or at least the *sentences* we use for expressing those judgments,⁷ are truth apt. For, on those views, ascribing truth to a sentence is just to affirm it, which is something a non-cognitivist obviously can do. By a similar reasoning, it could also be argued that non-cognitivists are entitled to say that there are moral properties, moral knowledge, and so on.⁸

Jackson mentions this option as a possible way of defending NTR against his argument. For example, an advocate of NTR could clearly say that an agent A who believes that P and that if P then Q should believe Q. So why cannot she also say that A “is such that” she should believe that Q? Jackson tries to respond to this reasoning. But although I think that his responses are unsatisfying, I shall ignore this whole debate. I will not in what follows rely on minimalism.

3. Beliefs and Killings

Even if we ignore the possibilities that minimalism give rise to, there are serious problems with the argument. Let us grant that beliefs are subject to normative constraints in the sense that some beliefs ought to be held whereas others ought not to be held and so forth. Sometimes Jackson seems to think that this is enough to justify the claim that a person, in order to be a believer,

⁷ I distinguish between the sentences we use for expressing our moral opinions (sentences typically involving words such as “right”, “good”, “just”, etc) from the opinions themselves. It is to the latter category I reserve the term “moral judgments”. The disagreement between non-cognitivists and descriptivists is a disagreement about the nature of these commitments.

⁸ This is congenial with the line famously taken by Simon Blackburn and which is labeled “Quasi-Realism”.

must have certain normative properties.⁹ However, at other passages, it emerges that an additional assumption is in play. Thus, Jackson stresses that there is a difference in this regard between beliefs and *killings*. Killings can, like beliefs, be normatively evaluated. Some killings are wrong, others might be right. However, Jackson does *not* think that this assumption commits an ethical non-cognitivist to deny the existence of *killings* (see 111).

What is the difference? The difference is that a non-cognitivist can consistently and correctly hold that “whether or not X killed Y is a cognitive matter that can be captured in terms of purely descriptive language”. For, “describing some incident in terms of how many people were killed, and why, cannot, in and of itself, require one also to use terms like ‘wrong’ in connection with it” (111). The concept of belief, by contrast “has normativity built into it”. Jackson writes that

the language of belief and the language of normativity go together; for example, if you use the words ‘believes that P, and believes that if P then Q’ of someone, you are *required* to use the words ‘ought to believe that Q’ of them (110, my italics).

This means, in effect, that we can distinguish between two versions of the thesis that belief is subject to normative constraints, a weak and a strong one (but notice that Jackson reserves the phrase for the strong version). On the *weak* version, some beliefs ought to be held and others ought not to be held. On the *strong* version, by contrast, the concept of belief (unlike the concept of a killing) has “normativity built into it”, in the indicated sense. According to Jackson, while both beliefs and killings are subject to normative constraints in the weak sense, only beliefs are subject to normative constraints in the strong sense. This is what is supposed to explain the contrast and why EN does not exclude the existence of killings in spite of the fact that NTR excludes the existence of beliefs.

But the problem is that there is little reason to think that that the contrast actually obtains. Nothing that Jackson writes provides any support for it. He does ponder the possibility of rejecting the claim that belief is subject to normative constraints (he calls this response “Eliminativism about the normativity of belief”, see 113-114). However, when discussing this response, Jackson equates it with the denial of the *weak* version of the claim that belief is subjective to normative constraints. That is, he takes the respondent to deny that there are things we should believe and things we should not believe. And this position is easy to attack. For example, Jackson argues that, as NTR and EN stand and fall together, this would commit the advocate of NTR to denying also that there are any morally right or wrong actions. But

⁹ See, e.g., 103, where Jackson writes: “Our argument [...] is based on the less contentious claim that there are conditions that believers ought to satisfy”.

the problem is of course that the weak version of the thesis does not entail the strong, as the example of killings shows. And it is the latter claim that Jackson needs to establish in order for his argument to go through.

4. Is there a contrast?

What are the prospects of providing the defense of the stronger thesis that is lacking in Jackson's paper? The thesis that normativity is built into the concept of belief is presumably supposed to entail that there is a *conceptual* connection of some sort between the claim that A believes P and if P then Q, on the one hand, and the claim that he should believe Q, on the other hand. That is, on this idea, it is not only true, but *conceptually* so, that A should believe that Q given that she believes that P and that if P then Q. No such connection holds between the fact that an action is a killing and the fact that it is wrong. As I just wrote, Jackson writes that "if you use the words 'believes that P, and believes that if P then Q' of someone, you are *required* to use the words 'ought to believe that Q' of them" (my italics). The locution "required" is presumably supposed to indicate that there is a conceptual connection of this kind.

How is one to establish that there is a difference in this respect between "belief-talk" and "killing-talk"? Perhaps one might try the open question argument. Consider the following question: "X is an act of killing, but is X wrong?". It might be held that, whereas this question is "open" (in the sense that answering the question does not merely require an understanding of the meanings of the words that are used), the question "A believes that P and that if P then Q, but should she believe Q?" is not.

However, this is not persuasive. How to answer the latter question is far from clear, which suggests that it is just as "open" as the former. That is, it is not evident that A, in the pertinent circumstances, *should* believe that Q. Perhaps she should instead drop her belief that P or the belief that if P then Q.¹⁰ For example, suppose that Q is false, or that A has independent reasons for doubting Q. Then revising her initial beliefs might seem more reasonable than adopting Q. So, both a negative and an affirmative answer to the question seem possible to justify, depending on the circumstances, in which case the question seems just as "open" as the question about the moral status of the killing.¹¹

¹⁰ This suggests an implausible voluntarism regarding belief. I will return to that complication, and its implications for the topics addressed in this paper, later.

¹¹ There is an obvious response to this objection. The response is that, although Jackson did articulate the relevant norm as entailing that one should believe Q if one believes P and if P then Q, he really had another, more plausible norm in mind, namely this: One should accept the following claim: If P and if P then Q then Q. It is doubtful, however, if it is possible for a thinker *not* to believe this claim, in which case the term "should" should not be applied.

Similar things can be said about another epistemic norm that Jackson appeals to, namely the one according to which one should not have inconsistent beliefs. Consider the following question: "A's system of beliefs is inconsistent, but should she revise it (in a way that restores consistency)?" Is this an open question? Again, the answer seems to be "yes", as both an affirmative and a negative answer seem possible to justify. Suppose that A's system is inconsistent due to the fact that she believes that at least one of her beliefs is false. This does not exclude that she has evidence in favor each of her beliefs, nor, it seems, that she is (reasonably) rational. Moreover, if she has evidence for each of her beliefs, the proper reaction might be to retain status quo and to await further evidence instead of revising her belief system.

A possible response to these counterexamples is that the "should" in the epistemic norms Jackson considers should be understood less strictly. In some passages in the paper, he suggests that the norms merely state that there is something (epistemically) *wrong* with someone who, for example, does not accept "fairly obvious" implications of her beliefs. This means that we can rephrase the questions supposed to be semantically closed as follows: "Is there at least something wrong about a person who believes that P and that if P then Q but does not believe Q?" Maybe this is a closed question, even if the question of whether she should believe Q in such circumstances is not.

However, again, it is possible to argue that it is not evident how the question is to be answered. One way of bringing this out is to ponder how a person could *fail* to believe that Q when she believes that P and that if P then Q. Normally, if we assume that someone does not believe Q we would hesitate to attribute beliefs to that person of which Q is an obvious implication.¹² Indeed, it may be argued that, given that Q is an *obvious* consequence of two of her beliefs, it is hardly *possible* to fail to believe it (the failure merely indicates that she does not really believe that P and that if P then Q). Given that view, the claim that she *should* believe Q, or that there is something *wrong* with her if she does not believe Q, seems somewhat innocuous. As the Kantian dictum that "ought" implies "can" suggests, "should" presumably entails "can not".

Perhaps it is after all possible to fail to believe that Q even if one believes that P and that if P then Q. The explanation might be that she has never pondered the possibility of *combining* those thoughts. That this may be so is probably easier to see when the implication is not quite as obvious. Maybe it is possible to derive some complex mathematical theorem from a person's mathematical beliefs, even if she herself has never performed the derivation. However, in such a case, it does not seem obvious that there is something

¹² At least, we would hesitate to attribute those beliefs given the assumption that the agent believes not-Q. A well-known view on meaning and belief attribution that justifies this hesitation, is, of course, Donald Davidson's "principle of charity".

“wrong” with her. There is no reason to clog one’s mind with all the implications one’s beliefs jointly may have, or to spend the energy required to perform complex derivations, if the theorem we may thus derive is irrelevant to the rest of our cognitive concerns. We need to know more about the agent, and her aims and abilities, in order to determine what it is rational for her to believe in those circumstances. Notice that my point is not that it is *evident* that it is not irrational not to believe these implications. My point here and elsewhere is just that the question of whether we should believe the implications of what else we believe is meaningful (and thus not semantically closed).

The upshot of this is that the evidence for the claim that the concept of a belief, unlike the concept of a killing, has “normativity built into it” is weak. And if that claim is given up, an advocate of NTR can consistently hold that, just as the question of whether someone has killed someone is a purely cognitive matter, so is the question of whether someone believes something. In other words, she can deny the stronger version of the claim that belief is “subject to normative constraint”. Since that claim is an essential premise in Jackson’s attempt to derive the conclusion that there are no beliefs and no believers from NTR, his *reductio* fails, as does the argument against EN that is based on it.

5. Concluding remarks

Where does that conclusion leave Sobel? Well, Sobel’s position can be seen as a halfway house between Jackson’s realism and EN. Although he differs from Jackson regarding the contents of moral judgments (Jackson is a naturalism), he agrees with him, and thus disagrees with non-cognitivists, in thinking that they express or constitute beliefs. However, he agrees with the non-cognitivists, and thus disagrees with Jackson, in thinking that none of them is true. This makes Sobel vulnerable to a similar challenge as the one Jackson has developed against EN. For if Jackson and the others are right in stressing that all evaluative discourses should be analyzed in a similar way, this commits Sobel to an error theory also about theoretical rationality. To some, this is a hard bullet to bite. I, of course, reject the simplistic attitude of the “unification theorists”, but it would be interesting to learn what Sobel has to say about it.

References

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