

## **MIXED-UP META-ETHICS<sup>1</sup>**

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My topic is the old debate between moral realists and moral expressivists. Although I will eventually adopt a Pyrrhonian position, as usual, my main goal is neither to argue for this position nor to resolve this debate but only to explore some new options that mix together realism and expressivism in various ways. Nothing that I say will be conclusive, but I hope that some of it will be suggestive.

### **1. The Standard Debate(s)**

Moral realists and expressivists claim a bundle of theses on many levels. In particular, the complete package for moral realism contains at least these five theses:

- R1 – Metaphysical Thesis: There are some objective moral facts.
- R2 – Semantic Thesis: Moral statements are true if and only if they correspond to objective moral facts.
- R3 – Alethic Thesis: Some (positive) moral statements are true.
- R4 – Epistemic Thesis: We can and often do know some objective moral facts.
- R5 – Pragmatic Thesis: Moral statements (try to) describe objective moral facts.

The complete version of moral expressivism then denies each of these theses and adds one more:

- E1 – Metaphysical Thesis: There are no objective moral facts.
- E2 – Semantic Thesis: Moral statements are not apt for truth (by virtue of correspondence to objective moral facts).

- E3 – Alethic Thesis: No (positive) moral statements are true (by virtue of correspondence to objective moral facts).
- E4 – Epistemic Thesis: We cannot know any objective moral facts.
- E5 – Negative Pragmatic Thesis: Moral statements do not (try to) describe moral facts.
- E6 – Positive Pragmatic Thesis: Moral statements express prescriptions, emotions, attitudes, acceptance of norms, or other non-cognitive states.

One could add other theses, such as that realists assert and expressivists deny that moral statements express beliefs, but these additions are not needed here. The etymology of the labels “cognitivism” and “non-cognitivism” suggest that the epistemic theses are central. However, I will focus on the semantic theses and, to some extent, the pragmatic theses. By “moral realism” and “moral expressivism”, I will henceforth mean their semantic theses.

We need to clarify exactly what those semantic theses claim. First, they present truth conditions as a way of explaining meaning or semantics. Second, realists claim truth by correspondence to objective moral facts. I do not count subjectivism or cultural relativism as a kind of realism.

Next we need to clarify the scope of the semantic theses. Expressivists usually take their claims to apply to all evaluative or normative claims, including non-moral ones, such as claims about what has aesthetic value (beautiful), economic value (a bargain), or epistemic value (justified). However, some moral realists do not want their claims to apply to all non-moral values, such as what tastes good. Some have argued that “good”, “bad”, “right”, “wrong”, and “ought” have different logics and semantics in different areas of value (cf. Cosmides & Tooby 2008 on precautionary vs. social contract oughts). To avoid such issues, I will limit my discussion to moral language.

It is crucial here to ask: Are realism and expressivism supposed to apply to *all* moral language? Some expressivists (including Blackburn 1984, 193–5, and Gibbard 2003) set up artificial languages and try to show how much we can accomplish with words that conform to their language. However, a moral realist can then respond that, even if such an artificial language could work, it is not how our natural language actually does work. So I think that the debate has to be about natural language.

Still, the debate cannot be about *every* common use of moral language, because both sides admit that common speakers often misuse moral language. In particular, common folk do sometimes use moral language purely expressively, as when Beavis and Butthead say, “Abortion sucks” (cf. Gill 2008a). I also see little more than expression in the common but confusing phrase “That’s too bad.” What does that mean apart from expression? On the other hand, common folk also sometimes use moral language purely descriptively, as when they say “Abortion is wrong for Catholics” meaning

only that Catholics think abortion is wrong. (This usage is similar to “it is illegal” from an external point of view in Hart 1961 and to inverted commas uses in Hare 1952, discussed by Gill 2008b, 11.) If someone cites such examples to refute realism or expressivism, then realists and expressivists can respond, “I was not talking about *those* uses.” This response is not cheating. After all, realists and expressivists get to specify what they are claiming, and they often agree about which uses are deviant and which are standard. (See Sayre-McCord 2008.) So it is only those standard uses that realism and expressivism are about.

Finally, I need to clarify the purpose of realism and expressivism. Some meta-ethicists try to reform or regularize moral language or even to prescribe a new way to talk (Brandt 1979). This enterprise can be useful. However, the central goal for most realists and expressivists is only to describe actual human thought and talk.

There are two ways to describe moral language. An internal project seeks to capture the psychological processes or representations that actually occur when people use moral language. However, contemporary realists and expressivists are not trying to do that. When Jackson and Pettit use networks of truisms or when Gibbard cites hyperstates, they surely know that these theoretical constructions do not reflect actual psychological entities or events. Instead, they want their theories to be externally adequate in capturing the outputs of our linguistic systems without necessarily reflecting the internal workings of that system. In this respect, their project is more like Chomskian grammar, which uses constructs without claiming psychological reality.

Overall, then, I take moral realism and expressivism to be trying to externally describe the semantics of all standard moral language. At least, that is the debate that I want to discuss.

## 2. Shared Assumptions

Both sides in this debate agree on certain assumptions, as Michael Gill has recently pointed out. Specifically, they assume that all standard moral language shares a single definite kind of semantics. This assumption comes out in their methods: They give a few examples and then generalize. Without the assumption of universal semantics, they would need a more thorough survey of moral language. This assumption is also clear when they announce what they are up to. Here is what some prominent expressivists say:

- Ayer 1935, 108: “in every case in which one would commonly be said to be making an ethical judgment, the function of the relevant ethical word is purely ‘emotive’.” (Notice “every”.)
- Hare 1952 title: *The Language of Morals* (but see 124–6) (Notice “the” = one and only.)

- Blackburn 1984, 169: “The point of expressive theories is to avoid the metaphysical and epistemological commitments and problems which realist theories of ethics . . . are supposed to bring with them.” (Notice that the problems for realism are not avoided if any moral language at all refers to moral facts.)
- Gibbard 2003, 138: “With normative language, we do mix plan with fact—on this point I insist. An everyday normative term, though, may not express a plan-laden concept at all straightforwardly.” (cf. 157–8; Notice that normative language is always supposed to express a plan even if it does not always do so straightforwardly.)
- Timmons 1999, 107: “Moral statements, in their primary role, are . . . not assertions of a descriptive kind. Rather, they are evaluative assertions.” (Notice: He never discusses secondary roles of moral statements.)

So all of these expressivists imply that all standard moral language has the same kind of semantics.

Next, some prominent realists:

- Brink 1989, 29: “[non-cognitivists] seem unable to capture the actual content of our moral judgments . . .” (as if all moral judgments share a common kind of content)
- Jackson 1998, 113: “By the time I have finished, you will have before you a schematic account of the meaning of ethical ascriptions and sentences in purely descriptive terms.” (Since no limit is mentioned, this claim apparently applies to all ethical ascriptions and sentences.)
- Smith 1994, 6: “we seem to think moral questions have correct answers; that the correct answers are made correct by objective moral facts . . .” (Again, presumably all moral questions.)

Since I am interested in semantics, another “realist” is:

- Mackie 1977, 33: “The ordinary user of moral language means to say something about whatever it is he characterizes morally, for example a possible action, as it is in itself, or would be if it were realized, and not about, or even simply expressive of his or anyone else’s relation to it.” (Notice “whatever”.)

Thus, both sides of the traditional debate seem to share these two assumptions (cf. Gill 2008b, 2):

*The Determinacy Assumption:* Some standard uses of moral language have features that make one semantic thesis correct or better for those uses. (Note: correct = true, better = more justified)

*The Uniformity Assumption:* All standard moral language has the same kind of semantics.

Of course, different terms differ somewhat in their semantics, but the uniformity claim holds that moral language is either all expressivist or all realist. On this assumption, if a semantic thesis holds for any standard moral language, then it holds for all.

### 3. Moving Beyond the Standard Debate by Denying the Shared Assumptions

These assumptions behind the standard debate are questionable. Different views result from denying different assumptions

*Indeterminists* deny the Determinacy Assumption, so they claim that no use of language has any feature that makes either expressivism or realism better or correct for that use.

*Variantists* deny the Uniformity Assumption and claim that (a) some uses of moral language definitely fit expressivism, (b) other uses of moral language definitely fit realism, and (c) neither kind of use is primary or aberrant (that is, non-standard). (Cf. Gill 2008a, 387, 394)

Notice that variantism allows that many but not all uses are indeterminate, but it is incompatible with indeterminism about all standard moral language.

Neither variantism nor indeterminism is common. The only one I know who has suggested indeterminism is Unger (1984). The only one I know who has suggested variantism is Gill (2008a, 2008b, 2008c).

Analogous positions could be formulated about other metaphysical issues, such as relativism *vs.* absolutism and externalism *vs.* internalism (about the relation of moral judgment to motivation). However, we will be concerned here with indeterminism and variantism about moral semantics.

These positions are not only coherent but also attractive in certain ways. As Gill argues, “the Variability Thesis can offer a plausible explanation both of the attractiveness of opposing twentieth century meta-ethical positions and of the philosophical stalemate that seems to exist between them.” (Gill 2008b, 9) Indeterminists could explain the stalemate but not the attractiveness. Only variantists can explain both.

Still, there are various varieties of variantism, depending on which factors change the semantics. Some versions are not that interesting. For example, if some moral statements express an emotion of disapproval, whereas other moral statements express prescriptions, that would count as variantism, but all moral statements would still express something non-cognitive, so expressivism would win.

Other versions of variantism would be indefensible. One version might claim that moral semantics (or truth-aptness) varies with person or tense. However, if I do something immoral at noon on Tuesday, these are equivalent semantically (that is, one is true if and only if the others are):

	First person (said by me)	Second person (said by you about me)	Third person (said by him about me to her)
<b>Present Tense</b> (said on Tuesday at noon)	"I should not do this."	"You should not do that."	"He should not do that."
<b>Past Tense</b> (said on Wednesday)	"I should not have done that."	"You should not have done that."	"He should not have done that."

The mutual entailments among these claims could not be explained if the semantics of moral terms varied with person or tense. So semantic person and tense variantisms are indefensible.

It is not enough, then, merely to say that variantism is coherent and interesting. We need to search for a specific version of variantism that can explain observed features of moral language. Towards this end, I will discuss four more promising versions of variantism. On these views, the kind of semantics for moral language vary with terms, speakers, topic, and context.

#### 4. Variations in Terms

Semantic term variantism holds that some moral words should be understood in the way expressivists claim but other moral terms should be understood in the way realists claim. This kind of view is suggested by Edwards (1955 on "good" vs. "ought") and Gert (2005 on "wrong" vs. "ought"), but the most interesting argument for it is given by Wiggins (1987). Wiggins begins by distinguishing valuations from practical judgments:

I propose that we distinguish between valuations (typically recorded by such forms as 'x is good', 'bad', 'beautiful', 'ugly', 'ignoble', 'brave', 'just', 'mischievous', 'malicious', 'worthy', 'honest', 'corrupt', 'disgusting', 'amusing', 'diverting', 'boring', etc.—no restrictions at all on the category of x) and directive or deliberative (or practical) judgements (e.g. 'I must y', 'I ought to y', 'it would be best, all things considered, for me to y', etc.). (1987, 95)

Wiggins claims that these two types of judgments have different semantics: "It is either false or senseless to deny that what valuational predicates stand for are properties in a world." (1987, 131) In contrast, "Of course, if practical judgments were candidates to be accounted simply true, then what made them true, unlike valuations, could not be the world itself, whatever that is." (Wiggins 1987, 129) The crucial question is why practical judgments cannot be true in the same way as valuations. Here is Wiggins's argument:

The claims of all true beliefs (about how the world is) are reconcilable. Everything true must be consistent with everything else that is true. . . . But not all claims of all rational concerns or even of all moral concerns (that the world be thus or so) need be actually reconcilable. When we judge that this is what we must do now, or that that is what we'd better do, or that our life must now take one direction rather than another direction, we are not fitting truths (or even probabilities) into a pattern where a discrepancy proves that we have mistaken a falsehood for a truth. Often we have to make a practical choice that another rational agent might understand through and through, not fault or even disagree with, but (as Winch has stressed) make differently himself; whereas, if there is disagreement over what is factually true and two rational men have come to different conclusions, then we think it has to be theoretically possible to uncover some discrepancy in their respective views of the evidence. (1987, 125–6)

This passage is mysterious, but the argument seems to run something like this:

- (1) True beliefs must be consistent.
- (2) “I must X” is inconsistent with “I must not X.”
- (3) Sometimes one person judges “I must X” and another person judges “I must not X” (in relevantly similar circumstances), and neither judgment is faulty or false.
- ∴ (4) judgments like “I must X” cannot express true beliefs.

Of course, if one were an expressivist about valuations, this conclusion would not lead to variantism, but I already quoted Wiggins’s claim that “valuational predicates stand for . . . properties in a world.” (1987, 131) Hence, variantism follows from the conclusion that practical judgments cannot express true beliefs.

The problem is that the argument for this conclusion commits a fallacy of equivocation (cf. Sinnott-Armstrong 1988, ch. 7). If “I must X” means “I have an overriding moral requirement to X”, then premise (2) is true but premise (3) is false. Given universalizability, if two people are in relevantly similar circumstances, and if one judges “I must X” and the other judges “I must not X”, then these judgments cannot both be true. In contrast, if “I must X” means “I have a non-overridden moral requirement to X”, then premise (3) is true, but premise (2) is false. There is no interpretation of “I must X” on which all of Wiggins’s premises are true. So his argument fails to establish his conclusion.

Moreover, there is independent reason to reject this kind of semantic term variantism. This view would undermine intuitive entailments between terms. In particular, “I must A” entails “It is good for me to A” or “If I were a good or ideal person, I would A.” (In the other direction, “It is good for me to A” and “All alternatives to A are bad” and “It is good to punish me if

I fail to A" (maybe plus more premises) jointly entail "I must A." Similarly with thick concepts: "Telling the truth would be the honest thing to do" entails "All else equal, I ought to tell the truth.") Wiggins might question these entailments, but there must be some entailments between such terms, or else moral language would be an unconnected jumble, so the problem is bound to recur if one term is realist and the other term is expressivist. Semantic term variantism is, thus, not the way to go.

## 5. Variations in Speaker

The second kind of variantism that I will discuss holds that moral statements should be understood in the way expressivists claim when these moral statements are made by certain speakers, but the same (or other) moral statements should be understood in the way realists claim when these moral statements are made by other speakers. The most natural reason for holding this position is that some speakers endorse expressivism, whereas other speakers endorse realism. When speakers tell us that they are claiming an objective moral fact, it seems natural to interpret these speakers' statements in the way that realists would. In contrast, when other speakers tell us that they are not claiming any objective moral fact, then it seems natural to interpret these other speakers' statements in the way that expressivists would.

This argument applies only if some common speakers do see themselves as expressivists and other common speakers do see themselves as realists. Though that seems clear, it will be illuminating to explore some scientific evidence regarding the extent, nature, and source of variation.

In a series of five experiments, Nichols (2004a) found that 55 of 148 subjects said, "there is no [objective] fact of the matter" about whether "It is okay to hit [or shove] people just because you feel like it [or to torture puppies]." Realists might suggest that the subjects are making judgments of taste instead of moral judgments when they deny any objective fact of the matter. However, Nichols also found that these subjects still distinguished moral violations from conventional violations with respect to seriousness, justification, and authority contingency. This result suggests, then, that at least some people are making moral judgments even when they deny that there is any objective fact of the matter on the moral issue.

The source of such views is revealed in a recent study by Goodwin and Darley (2007). In their first experiment, subjects read 26 statements including 8 ethical statements that certain acts are good, bad, wrong, or permissible. Then they indicated how much they agreed with each statement on a scale of 1–6 and also whether those statements were true, false, or "an opinion or attitude". In a second experiment, subjects were instead asked whether there can be a correct answer to whether each statement is true. Next, subjects



were asked to “check as many of the following statements as you consider support for your moral beliefs. That is, that provide the reasons that you hold the particular set of moral beliefs that you do.” Here are their options:

- 1 – they are ordained by a supreme being.
- 2 – every good person on earth, regardless of culture, holds these beliefs.
- 3 – a society could not survive without its citizens holding these beliefs.
- 4 – they are self-evident.

Finally, subjects were asked, “According to you, is it possible for there to be right and wrong acts without the existence of God? yes / no / not sure”

Goodwin and Darley (2007) found a correlation between subjects’ views about the status of moral judgments (whether they were true or false) and their views about the grounds of moral judgments (their reasons for holding their moral beliefs). Specifically, subjects who checked grounds 1–2 were more likely to call their judgments true or false than those who did not check those grounds. In contrast, subjects who checked grounds 3–4 were not significantly more likely to call their judgments true or false than those who did not check those grounds. These effects of grounds 1–2 were independent and additive, and “the most robust of these predictors of objectivism was religious grounding.” (Goodwin and Darley 2007, 27) Thus, there is significant variation in views about the very issue that divides realists and expressivists, and this variation is connected to different grounds for moral beliefs.

Does this variation support semantic speaker variantism? Gill argues that it does:

[These self-reports] give a variabilist approach at least some *prima facie* explanatory advantages over approaches based on the [Uniformity] Assumption. For those who accept the [Uniformity] assumption must shoulder the burden of explaining away those first-person reports.... [W]e should start from the presumption that people have fairly accurate beliefs about how they conceive things and use terms. (Gill 2008b, 6)

It should be clear that Gill is not claiming to prove anything. His goal is only to shift the burden of proof.

Defenders of semantic uniformity have several responses. First, they can deny that they need to carry the burden that Gill claims. One reason might be that, even if speakers’ self-reports are evidence of speaker-meaning, they are not strong evidence of public word-meaning. When Mrs. Malaprop says, “Please bring the autobahn over here so that I can rest my feet on it,” she will tell us that she is talking about a piece of furniture, and we know that she is talking about an ottoman, but the sentence that she uttered still means something about a German highway. (Davidson 1986) Speakers’

self-reports might reveal what those speakers mean, but speakers' self-reports do not show what their words mean unless those self-reports are shared by all standard speakers, and that is not the case in the examples that are supposed to support semantic speaker variantism.

Moreover, as linguists (such as Pinker) often report, many people hold many misconceptions about their concepts, especially with respect to issues as abstruse and abstract as when there is truth or a fact of the matter. The evidence provided by self-reports is only as strong as the reliability of those self-reports. The reliability of self-reports seems low with respect to realism and expressivism. Hence, even if self-reports do shift the burden, that burden is light.

Defenders of semantic uniformity can also try to carry this burden. Perhaps people misunderstand the questions of whether moral judgments are true or reflect a fact of the matter because they misinterpret those semantic and metaphysical questions as epistemic. They think that what is being asked is whether they can know what the fact is. Many people do seem to reserve the word "fact" for what can be known, as when they contrast facts with mere opinions and theories. This misinterpretation of the question could explain how subjects could deny any moral fact of the matter when they assert a moral statement even if the meaning of that statement implies a moral fact.

Finally, defenders of semantic uniformity can try to shift the burden back on to variantists. The most powerful move here is to invoke self-reports on a different level. Regardless of whether they assert or deny a moral fact of the matter, many people still assume that they are using the same concept as their interlocutors when they engage in moral discussion and argument. This assumption is revealed by asking them whether they agree or disagree on substantive moral issues with other people whom they know to hold different meta-ethical views. In an informal survey, most speakers thought that they could agree and disagree morally with people who held different meta-ethical views.

It is not clear how agreement or disagreement works if meanings really do vary in the way that semantic speaker variantists claim. Imagine that Ann yells, "Boo, Harvard"; Bill says, "Harvard has a good team"; and Carol says, "Harvard has a bad team." Ann does not disagree with Bill or agree with Carol. Compare Adam, who is an expressivist and says "Affirmative action is immoral"; Betty, who is a realist and says, "Affirmative action is not immoral"; and Claude, who is a realist and says, "Affirmative action is immoral." Adam seems to disagree with Betty and agree with Claude. However, if their metaethical views affect the meanings of their claims, as semantic speaker variantism claims, then Adam's claim means something like "Boo, affirmative action"; Betty's claim means something like "Affirmative action does not have an objective property of being immoral"; and Claude's claim means something like, "Affirmative action has an objective property of

being immoral.” On this interpretation, Adam does not disagree with Betty or agree with Claude.

Gill recognizes this problem and responds: “there may very well be some first-order moral issues about which these two people can disagree without manifesting their different meta-ethical commitments...[such as] whether our society is obligated to provide health care to all its members.” (Gill 2008b, 6) Even on this issue, however, semantic speaker variantists cannot account for this disagreement. First, imagine that a moral realist denies any moral obligation on society to provide universal health care, and an expressivist claims it. If semantic speaker variantism were correct, the realist would be denying that society has an objective moral obligation, but the expressivist would be saying, crudely, “Hurrah for universal health care.” These utterances do not conflict. Conversely, imagine that a moral realist claims a moral obligation on society to provide universal health care, and expressivist denies it. Now, if semantic speaker variantism were correct, the realist would be claiming the objective moral obligation, but the expressivist would be expressing some attitude of indifference. Again, these utterances do not conflict.

Such speakers take themselves to be disagreeing and their opponents to be wrong about the very topic that they are speaking about. They also think the disagreement does not disappear when the ambiguity is revealed (as when interlocutors realize that one is talking about a river bank and the other is talking about a commercial bank). Remember also Goodwin and Darley found that people’s views on whether there is a fact of the matter often depend on the kind of ground they give for their moral claims, but the fact that two people reach a claim on different grounds does not show that their claims differ in meaning.

Of course, this apparent disagreement still might not be real. Such speakers might be incorrect in thinking that they are using the same concepts as their apparent opponents. However, such self-reports at least shift the burden back onto those who claim or imply that they are not really disagreeing. That burden is not carried by any argument so far. So semantic speaker invariantists at least have a lot of work to do in order to defend their views.

## **6. Variations in Topic**

The next variety of variantism holds that moral statements should be understood in the way expressivists claim when these moral statements are about certain topics, but otherwise similar moral statements should be understood in the way realists claim when those moral statements are about other topics. This view avoids the problem of disagreement as long as each disagreement is about a specific topic. Thus, semantic topic variantism has some advantages over semantic speaker variantism.

Semantic topic variantism is suggested in this passage from Gill:

Some person may, for instance, use moral terms in a way that is best analyzed cognitively when she is discussing policy choices in a professional setting (let us say, when, in her capacity as a physician, she is serving on an ethics committee that is trying to decide whether to alter the hospital's do-not-resuscitate [DNR] policies) and yet also use moral terms in a way that is best analyzed noncognitively when she is discussing personal issues in a nonprofessional setting (let us say, when she is talking with a close friend about how a mutual acquaintance of theirs went about ending a romantic relationship). (Gill 2008a, 393; cf. 391)

This passage runs together two kinds of variation. The first contrast is between "policy choices" and "personal issues." That variation concerns topic or content. The second contrast is between "a professional setting" and "a nonprofessional setting." That variation concerns setting or context. Both variations might be true, but they raise somewhat different issues, so I will separate them. I will discuss topic variation in this section and context variation in the next section.

Although Gill says "may", the possibility that he describes actually occurs. In the study mentioned above, Goodwin and Darley (2007) found that subjects tended to say that moral statements about robbery, discrimination, and cheating were true or false (and that there could be a correct answer to whether each statement is true), but moral statements about abortion, euthanasia, and stem cells were opinions or attitudes (and that there cannot be a correct answer to whether each statement is true). Goodwin and Darley conclude, "Unlike philosophers of metaethics, lay individuals are objectivists about some ethical beliefs but not others." (2007, 20)

This result might be explained by the nature of the judgments. Questions of abortion, euthanasia, and stem cells concern which kinds of affected things have moral rights or are protected by the moral rules. In contrast, those issues of the range or scope of moral protections does not affect questions of robbery, discrimination, and cheating. There seems to be greater disagreement about questions of scope than about questions of which kinds of acts are forbidden by morality (Snare 1980). That greater disagreement (or an implicit awareness of it) might explain why subjects tended to hold that moral judgments about scope issues were "opinions or attitudes" rather than true or false.

Does this variation support semantic topic variantism? Some might infer that lay individuals mean different things by "wrong" in judgments about abortion, euthanasia, and stem cells (at least when they see them as "opinions or attitudes" rather than as true or false) than in judgments about robbery, discrimination, and cheating (at least when they do see them as true or false rather than as "opinions or attitudes").

It is not clear how or why this conclusion would follow. Imagine that car A is reliable, efficient, safe, comfortable, and inexpensive; car D is unreliable,

inefficient, unsafe, uncomfortable, and expensive. Car B is reliable, safe, and comfortable but inefficient and expensive, and car C is efficient and inexpensive but less reliable, safe, and comfortable. Suppose everyone agrees that A is better than B, C, and D and that A, B, and C are all better than D, but people disagree about whether or not B is better than C. Still, someone who says that B is better than C takes himself to be referring to the same relation as when he says that C is better than D. That is why he can say that A is better than B which is better than C which is better than D, and why he can infer from “B is better than C” and “C is better than D” to “B is better than D.” The fact that one ranking is controversial and the other is not does not show that the meanings of the terms change in the middle of this series.

The same goes for moral judgments. The fact that moral statements about abortion, euthanasia, and stem cells are controversial does not show that terms have different meanings when they are applied to these topics than when they are applied to less controversial topics like robbery, discrimination, and cheating. And if people’s reluctance to claim a fact of the matter in cases of abortion, euthanasia, and stem cells is due to such moral statements being controversial, then the fact that they deny any fact of the matter also does not show that terms have different meanings when they are applied to some (controversial) topics than when they are applied to other (less controversial) topics.

Even if observed variations do not imply semantic topic variantism, that conclusion still might be true. However, semantic topic variantism faces several problems.

A first problem can be brought out by applying standard tests of ambiguity (Zwicky and Sadock 1975). One test of ambiguity invokes *counting*. When there is a real ambiguity, as in the term “pen”, which can apply to writing pens and pig pens, then it seems linguistically improper to conjoin the two meanings in certain ways. It seems very odd, for example, to say \**“I own two pens”* when you own one writing pen and one pig pen. In contrast, there is no linguistic oddity in saying “Forgive me father, for I have sinned twice (or done two wrongs) since my last confession”, when you committed murder and had an abortion. A second test of ambiguity uses *zeugma*. If Joe is boring a hole and Kelly is boring her audience, it would be a joke to say, \**“Joe and Kelly are both boring.”* There is nothing funny, however, about saying, “Murder and abortion are both morally wrong.” It is not even linguistically odd to say that they are wrong in the same way. It is also not odd for opponents to claim the negative, “Neither abortion nor appendectomy is morally wrong.” A third test of ambiguity cites *anaphora*. It would be weird to say, \**“If that number is cardinal, that bird is, too.”* But there’s nothing weird about saying, “If that research on babies is wrong, that research on stem cells is, too.” All of this suggests that the term “wrong” does not have a different meaning when it is applied to abortion than when it is applied to

uncontroversial topics like murder and appendectomies, as well as robbery, discrimination, and cheating.

Another problem for semantic topic variantism arises from moral reasoning. People often infer from “Murder is wrong” and “Abortion is like murder” to “Abortion is wrong,” and most people think that this form of inference is fine, even if they deny the premises. However, this form of this inference would fail if “wrong” had a realist meaning in the premise but an expressivist meaning in the conclusion; or vice-versa. Moral reasoning is often based on analogies from one area of morality to another. Semantic topic variantists need to explain how such inferences work or at least why so many people think they work.

Finally, it is also hard to keep these areas of morality separate. Personal and professional issues (cited by Gill), for example, often conflict and need to be weighed against each other, such as when my spouse says that I ought to come home and my boss says that I ought not to leave the office. Is the question of whether I ought to go from my office to my home a professional question or a personal question? It seems to be both. Moreover, policy decisions (also cited by Gill) often affect or are based on personal ethical matters. Any kind of variantism will be problematic to the extent that the different areas that are supposed to change moral semantics conflict and overlap, because then the semantics will be indeterminate or possibly even incoherent.

## 7. Variations in Context

The final variation on variantism is semantic context variantism, which holds that: “There are some contexts in which moral terms are used in a manner that is best analyzed as involving one commitment and other contexts in which moral terms are used in a manner that is best analyzed as involving the commitment that has traditionally been taken to be the former’s meta-ethical competitor.” (Gill 2008b, 8)

As an illustration of context variation, Gill (2008b, 17) discusses the views of Hare (1952, 164) on uses of moral language in inverted commas. However, as I argued above, this use can be dismissed as non-standard, because both expressivists and realists agree that their theories are not supposed to apply to moral language in inverted commas.

Still, there are plenty of other examples. In the quotation above, Gill (2008a, 393) suggests that moral semantics might vary between (i) personal and professional settings. He also said,

there also may be some people who use moral terms relativistically in certain situations—say, when discussing the moral status of individuals in distant times or places, or when conversing with other people who themselves use moral

terms in a predominantly relativistic way—and who use moral terms objectively in other situations—say, when assessing the laws, policies, or customs of their own country, or when conversing with other people who themselves use moral terms in a predominantly objectivist way. (Gill 2008a, 391)

This passage suggests two more variations in context: (ii) when discussing distant people *vs.* when discussing nearby people and (iii) when speaking to a relativist *vs.* when speaking to an objectivist (or, in the case of our topic, (iii\*) when speaking to a moral expressivist *vs.* when speaking to a moral realist).

Version (iii\*) is still distinct from semantic speaker variantism because the metaethical views of the *audience* are supposed to change the semantics in (iii\*), whereas it is the metaethical views of the *speaker* that change the semantics according to semantic speaker variantism.

Unfortunately, the claim that moral semantics vary with these contexts runs into the same problems as the earlier versions of variantism. If the meanings of moral statements change when the context changes in these ways, then it will be difficult to explain agreement and disagreement between people in different contexts. Imagine that, while I am at my office, my wife calls me from home and says, “You ought to come home to help me and your children.” My boss then walks into my office and says to me, “You ought not to leave the office before this deal is sealed.” They seem to disagree about what I ought to do, but they would not disagree if the meaning of my wife’s claim in her non-professional context accords with expressivism but the meaning of my boss’s claim in his professional context accords with realism. The same point applies if my sister calls me from Namibia and says that I ought to donate large amounts of time or money to a charity that helps Namibians, but I deny her claim; or if I am speaking to two realists and two expressivists at the same time about whether cheating at the office is morally wrong in the same way as cheating in a marriage, and I agree with one of the realists and one of the expressivists, but I disagree with the others. It is hard to see how semantic context variantists can explain such agreements and disagreements, for the same reasons as with semantic speaker variantism.

Normal tests of ambiguity also speak against semantic context variantism. The sentence “I am driving” has different meanings when said in a car than when said on a golf course. As a result, it is odd to say, “They both told me that they were driving. She said it in the car, and he said in on the golf course.” (That’s zeugma. For counting, suppose I play 18 holes of golf and then my partner asks, “How many times did you drive today?” It would be a joke to answer, “19—18 times on the course, and 1 time to the course.”) In contrast, it is not linguistically odd to say, “They both said that lying is wrong. He said it at home, and she said it in the office” or to say “I’ll tell you (a realist) just what I told him (an expressivist)” or to say “It is wrong to neglect the poor both nearby and faraway.” (Such claims are not always

true, since bribing officials might be wrong nearby but not faraway where bribery is accepted. Still, such claims are not linguistically improper.) Thus, the meanings of moral statements does not seem to vary in the way claimed by semantic context variantism.

Finally, people often draw inferences across contexts, as when they say, "Since rape is wrong in our own country, it is also wrong way over there." Here's another: "Last night at home you said that it is always wrong to break promises. Now in the office you are telling me that we can break a promise to our customer. You can't have it both ways." This pair of claims seems inconsistent, yet they would be consistent if the meaning of "wrong" changed between home and the office.

For these reasons, semantic context variantism is problematic. The other versions of variantism fared no better. Of course, some fifth kind of variantism still might be defensible. However, until a better version is developed, I conclude that semantic variantism is dubious at best.

## 8. Incoherentism

A related but more radical possibility is suggested by Don Loeb: "It may be that ordinary people use the moral words *both* to make factual assertions *and* to do something incompatible with the making of such assertions." (Loeb 2008a, 363) Loeb calls this view "incoherentism" because it implies that moral language is incoherent.

This thesis might have any of at least four scopes:

*Extreme* incoherentism: *all* standard uses of all moral words are incoherent in this way.

*Strong* incoherentism: *most* standard uses of some moral words are incoherent in this way.

*Moderate* incoherentism: *many* standard uses of some moral words are incoherent in this way.

*Weak* incoherentism: *some* standard uses of some moral words are incoherent in this way.

Gill (2008a, 389, 398) cites some passages where Loeb seems committed to something close to extreme incoherentism, but Loeb (2008b, 413) denies that he holds extreme incoherentism. Gill (2008a, 393) insists that Loeb is committed to at least strong incoherentism: "Loeb's moral incoherentism is based on the idea that cognitivist and non-cognitivist features are both implicated by all, or at least by most, ordinary uses of moral terms." However, Loeb sometimes claims only moderate incoherentism (cf. Loeb 2008a, 365; 2008b, 415: "much of our moral talk is at cross-purposes").



Weak incoherentism is so weak that even Gill admits it (cf. 2008, 398: “some of us are in this state at least some of the time . . . [but it is] atypical”).

Whatever its scope, Loeb argues that this incoherentism should be taken seriously. His argument for incoherentism has three stages. First, Loeb argues that expressivism and realism each captures part of the truth: “Why hasn’t one view of moral language come to dominate? An obvious answer is that each of these theories captures something important about our moral thought and language.” (2008a, 361) This much can also be accepted by variantists.

Second, an incoherentist would need to argue that the realist and expressivist elements of meaning cannot be isolated or insulated from each other in the way that variantists suggest, because both elements are present in the same uses. Here Loeb (2008b, 414–7) argues against the ways that Gill tries to insulate pockets of moral language. Moreover, by building both elements into the same uses of moral language, incoherentism can explain (some of) the disagreements and inferences that bothered variantism above.

Third, Loeb needs to argue that the realist and expressivist elements are incompatible. This incompatibility might seem obvious if one thinks about the semantic theses in Section 1 above. Loeb defines the competing positions so as to make them incompatible:

Moral *cognitivism* holds that moral sentences make factual claims—or slightly more formally, that they express propositions, the bearers of truth-value. Moral *non-cognitivism*, at least in its traditional forms, holds that moral sentences do not make factual claims; instead they express something other than propositions—emotions, imperatives, attitudes, or the acceptance of norms, for example. (2008a, 356)

This definition of moral non-cognitivism conjoins two separate theses (separated by the semi-colon), which I called the semantic thesis and the positive pragmatic thesis. The semantic thesis of non-cognitivism (or expressivism) is clearly incompatible with the semantic thesis of cognitivism (or realism). However, the positive pragmatic thesis of non-cognitivism (or expressivism) is not incompatible with the semantic thesis of cognitivism (or realism). We can state facts and also express emotions or issue imperatives at the same time, such as when I say “There’s a spider on your leg” in order to state a fact and also to express fear and to warn and alert you to danger (Sinnott-Armstrong 1993).

The incompatibility between realism and expressivism, thus, arises only from the negative semantic thesis of expressivism. Hence, the three-stage argument for incoherentism works only if that particular element of non-cognitivism is supported by the first part of the argument—that is, only if the negative semantic thesis of expressivism “captures something important about our moral thought and language.” (Loeb 2008a, 361) Otherwise,

opponents of incoherentism could conjoin the semantic thesis of realism with the positive pragmatic thesis of expressivism, and that would answer Loeb's question, "Why hasn't one view of moral language come to dominate?" (2008a, 361) and also avoid the need to insulate pockets of moral language as variantism does.

To argue for incoherentism, then, Loeb needs to show that the negative semantic thesis is built into standard moral language. As far as I can see, Loeb gives no argument for that crucial claim. He also gives no clear examples of standard moral language that cannot be understood without the negative semantic thesis of expressivism. Some people do deny moral facts, but that does not show that any such denial is built into the meanings of the words they use. It seems much more likely that common word meanings include no commitment to any claim as abstract as a denial of moral facts.

Incoherence would also arise if the meanings of standard moral language were committed some claims to completeness, such as that prescription or expression is all there is to moral meanings. However, there is also no reason to believe that any such claim to completeness is built into standard semantics. It would be surprising if common word meanings required a commitment to any claim as extensive as completeness.

Hence, I see no reason to believe that standard moral language embodies any incoherence or to accept incoherentism in any form, including (1)–(4). This radical thesis still might be true, but it remains unsupported so far.

## 9. Hybridism

If we give up the claim that moral semantics is incoherent, we still might agree with Loeb that realism and expressivism each capture part of the moral semantics of the same uses of moral language. We just need to try to make those parts cohere. Then we might end up with:

*Hybridism:* Realist and expressivist semantics both fit all or most or many determinate standard uses of moral language, and this is not incoherent.

Like variantism and incoherentism, hybrid theories are supposed to make it easy to explain various features of moral language, because different parts of the meaning can be cited to explain different linguistic observations.

There are several ways to spell out hybrid theories, depending on the relation between the realist and expressivist parts within the overall meaning. A realist version is developed by Copp (2001). Expressivist approaches are developed by Ridge (2006a, 2006b), Boisvert (2008), and Timmons (1998). Historical precedents include Ross (1939, 255), Stevenson (1944, 206–210), and Ewing (1959, 116). Unfortunately, I do not have time or space to explore these fascinating proposals here. That will have to wait for another paper.

## 10. Indeterminism

I will close by laying out one more possibility that is often overlooked:

*Indeterminism* (or disjunctivism, if you prefer): moral language can be analyzed with *either* realist *or* expressivist semantics.

An extreme version claims that every use of moral language can be analyzed with either realist or expressivist semantics, so no case supports either theory over the other. A moderate version seems more plausible and holds that:

- (1) Some standard uses seem to favor realism over expressivism,
- (2) Other standard uses seem to favor expressivism over realism,
- (3) Neither of these kinds of use seems deviant enough to dismiss lightly,
- (4) Each theory can strain a bit and explain the uses that favor its opponent,
- (5) And we need to judge theories holistically.

If all of this is correct, then neither expressivism nor realism is better overall as a theory. In short, neither alternative is justified because both are compatible with all of the data. One could also go further and deny that there is any fact of the matter about the meta-ethical issues that divide realism and expressivism.

To defend this kind of view, indeterminists need to show how realists and expressivists can explain the cases that seem to favor their opponents. The key is to separate semantics from pragmatics (cf. Unger 1984).

Realists about semantics use pragmatics to account for any uses that might seem to favor expressivism. In those contexts, speakers simply conversationally or conventionally imply prescription or expression. For example, if someone says, “I know that sodomy is morally wrong, but I do it all the time, and I don’t feel bad about doing it or care whether others do it”, then we would suspect that they do not really believe it is wrong. This suspicion might seem to support expressivism. However, realists can say that, when this speaker calls sodomy wrong, he conversationally implies expression of disapproval as well as a prescription not to do it, and that explains why his utterance seems insincere or non-standard. This pragmatic explanation is compatible with the semantic content or meaning of the moral statement being purely realist.

On the other side, expressivists about semantics use pragmatics to account for uses that might seem to favor realism. For example, when Abraham attempts to kill his son in order to obey God, when Gaugin leaves his family in order to pursue art, or when a father cheats in order to help

his daughter out of a serious fix, some people say that what they did was morally wrong but was still admirable on religious, aesthetic, and parental or personal grounds, respectively. Some of these speakers do not seem to express disapproval or any prescription when they call the act morally wrong, so the natural interpretation is realist. However, expressivists can respond that such speakers are using the moral language in inverted commas (Hare 1952). This explanation is compatible with the semantic content or meaning of standard moral language being purely expressivist.

Indeterminists cannot prove the negative existential claim that no case or argument proves any of the opposing theories. Someone always might come up with a surprising and conclusive argument or case. However, indeterminists can make their position plausible by challenging each theory to produce an argument or case or set of cases to show that one theory is definitely better overall than its opponents. Put up or shut up!

## 11. Pyrrhonism

Suppose this indeterminist claim is correct: Both realists and expressivists can account for all uses of moral language and neither account is a clear winner overall. Then what should we do? The answer seems clear: We should suspend belief. Just as we should suspend belief between punctuated equilibrium and standard natural selection theory if both theories can explain all of the data, so, too, we should suspend belief between realism and expressivism if both can explain all of the data.

This suspension of belief, of course, fits right into the tradition of Pyrrhonism. Pyrrhonists generally suspend belief about all philosophical claims, and semantic theories like realism and expressivism are philosophical.

Of course, indeterminism is only about semantics. Indeed, it is compatible with the metaphysical thesis that real moral facts exist or that none exists and also with the epistemological thesis that real moral knowledge exists or that none exists. However, if we do not know what our words mean, as Pyrrhonism about moral semantics suggests, then will be is hard to do metaphysics or epistemology. Hence, indeterminism and Pyrrhonism about semantics might lead to a broader indeterminism and Pyrrhonism throughout metaethics.

This might seem disappointing, if you want a philosophical theory. However, disappointing or not, that still might be where the arguments lead or, as true Pyrrhonists always add, so it seems.

## Notes

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