Non-Cognitivism and the Problem of Moral-Based Epistemic Reasons: A Sympathetic Reply to Cian Dorr
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According to Cian Dorr (2002), non-cognitivism has the implausible implication that arguments like the following are cases of wishful thinking:

P1   If lying is wrong, then the souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife.
P2   Lying is wrong.

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C   The souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife.

(Call this the "Liar Argument.") If non-cognitivism implies that the Liar Argument and similar arguments are cases of wishful thinking, then, Dorr further claims, non-cognitivism remains implausible even if one solves the so-called Frege-Geach problem.[1] Dorr's claims have faced a number of objections, but I believe that Dorr is onto something.[2] So, after summarizing Dorr's argument and briefly describing three flaws in what Dorr claims, I shall present a distinct objection to non-cognitivism and use the preceding to show what Dorr's argument gets right and what it gets wrong.

Turning to Dorr's argument, Dorr's guiding question is this: "Given that P1 and P2 imply C, can acceptance of P1 and P2 ever give someone *reason* to come to accept C?" (2002: 97, emphasis in original). Intuitively, the answer is "yes"; accepting P1 and P2 can give someone reason to accept C. Dorr argues that non-cognitivism implies that the answer is "no," however, which is a reason to reject non-cognitivism. To show that non-cognitivism implies that accepting P1 and P2 never gives one reason to accept C, Dorr begins with a story about Edgar, who initially accepts P1 on the basis of others' presumed authority on such matters. Edgar has insufficient evidence for either

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[1] The Frege-Geach problem is to account for the meanings and logical properties of evaluative claims in a way that is consistent with non-cognitivist semantics. If non-cognitivists cannot solve the Frege-Geach problem, then it is not clear how they can account for the validity of arguments, like the Liar Argument, that involve embedded atomic moral claims; however, if non-cognitivists can solve the problem, then presumably they can account for the validity of such arguments. For an excellent discussion of the Frege-Geach problem, see Schroeder (2008).

[2] For objections to Dorr's claim that non-cognitivism renders the Liar Argument a case of wishful thinking, see Enoch (2003) and Lenman (2003). For responses to both Enoch and Lenman, see Schroeder (2011). See Budolfson (2011) and Mabrito (2013) for objections to Dorr's claim that solving the Frege-Geach problem will not suffice to solve the wishful thinking problem. Whether or not Budolfson's and Mabrito's objections to Dorr's claim are correct, this essay makes it clear that solving the Frege-Geach problem will not suffice to solve the distinct problem that I raise.

P2 or C, however, so he accepts neither P2 nor C. But, after reflecting for a time on the moral nature of lying, Edgar comes to accept P2. Finally, Edgar comes to accept C on the basis of inferring it from P1 and P2. We can now summarize Dorr's argument like this:

(1) Initially, it was irrational for Edgar to accept C before he accepted P2.

(2) If non-cognitivism is true, then Edgar's coming to accept P2 was only a change in non-cognitive attitude.

(3) If it was irrational for Edgar to accept C before he accepted P2, and Edgar's coming to accept P2 was only a change in non-cognitive attitude, then it was irrational for Edgar to accept C after he accepted P2.

(4) So, non-cognitivism implies that it was irrational for Edgar to accept C after he accepted P2 [from (1), (2) and (3)].

(5) But it was not irrational for Edgar to accept C after he accepted P2.

(6) Non-cognitivism is false [from (4) and (5)].

The argument is valid; so, let us consider each of its premises. As for (1), it is just part of the story: in the beginning, Edgar has insufficient evidence for either P2 or C. Turning to (2), Dorr states:

> According to the non-cognitivist, all that happened when [Edgar] came to accept P2 was a change in his non-cognitive attitudes. He acquired no new evidence or other beliefs relevant to the fate of liars in the afterlife. Nor did he intuit the truth of C *a priori*, or take himself to have done so (2002: 99).

So, since no additional evidence for C accompanied Edgar's coming to accept P2, and non-cognitivism implies that P2 expresses a non-cognitive attitude, non-cognitivism implies that Edgar's coming to accept P2 was just a change in non-cognitive attitude.[3] Thus, (2). As for (3), Dorr states:

> Only a change in one's cognitive states, or in one's evidence, can make the difference between a case in which it would be irrational to believe something and one in which it would be rational to do so. It is often rational to modify your views about one part of the world so that they cohere with your views about the rest of the world. It is irrational to modify your views about the world so that they cohere with your desires and feelings. That's wishful thinking! (2002: 99).

In other words, to change one's view of the world based on only a change in one's non-cognitive attitudes amounts to wishful thinking, which is fallacious. Consequently, if Edgar's coming to accept P2 is just a matter of Edgar's changing his non-cognitive attitudes, then since it was irrational for Edgar to accept C prior to accepting P2, Edgar's accepting C after accepting P2

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[3] To be a bit more precise, Edgar's going from not accepting P2 to accepting P2 might have been accompanied by some other changes in cognitive attitude – for example, Edgar came to believe that he now accepts that lying is wrong. But such changes are irrelevant to whether Edgar can rationally accept C given his going from not accepting P2 to accepting P2. So, we can set these changes aside.

is also irrational. Thus, (3). Together (1), (2) and (3) entail (4): if non-cognitivism is true, then it was irrational for Edgar to accept C after he accepted P2. As (5) claims, however, it is intuitively *not* irrational for Edgar to accept C after accepting P2. Therefore, per (6), non-cognitivism is false.

Having summarized Dorr's argument, I will briefly describe three flaws in what Dorr claims. Throughout, let us assume that the Frege-Geach problem has been solved and, therefore, that the Liar Argument is valid whether or not non-cognitivism is true.[4] The first flaw involves Dorr's guiding question, which is about whether accepting P1 and P2 is ever a reason to accept C. According to Dorr, non-cognitivism implies that the answer is "no" because non-cognitivism renders the Liar Argument a case of wishful thinking. But, even for paradigm cases of wishful thinking, accepting all of the offending argument's premises is often a reason to accept its conclusion, since paradigm cases of wishful thinking are often *valid*. Take, for example, the following argument:

(1) If I hope that my proposal will be accepted, then my proposal will be accepted.
(2) I hope that my proposal will be accepted.

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(3) My proposal will be accepted.

(Call this the "Hope Argument.") The Hope Argument is a paradigm case of wishful thinking since it offers my hoping that my proposal will be accepted as a reason to believe that my proposal will be accepted. But, even though the argument is a case of wishful thinking, it would still be irrational to accept (7) and (8) but not (9). For accepting (7) amounts to accepting that either (7)'s antecedent is false or (7)'s consequent is true, and accepting (8) amounts to accepting that (7)'s antecedent is not false. But, given any sentences P and Q, it would be irrational to accept $\sim P \lor Q$ and $\sim\sim P$ while not accepting Q. So, even though the Hope Argument is a case of wishful thinking, it would still be irrational to accept its premises while not accepting its conclusion. Similarly, then, contrary to what Dorr claims, even if non-cognitivism renders the Liar Argument a case of wishful thinking, it does not follow that non-cognitivism allows one to rationally accept P1 and P2 but not C.[5]

Turning to the second flaw, Dorr claims that if the Liar Argument is a case of wishful thinking, then Edgar's reasoning would be defective when Edgar infers C from P1 and P2. But if the Liar Argument is a case of wishful thinking, then Edgar's reasoning becomes defective at the beginning of the story – when Edgar accepts P1 without sufficient reason to either reject P1's antecedent or accept P1's consequent. For accepting a conditional without either rejecting its antecedent or accepting its consequent amounts to accept-

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[4] Cf. n. 2, above.

[5] Of course, there might be overriding reasons to reject C, in which case, assuming that the argument is valid, one should reject one of the premises. But it would still be irrational to accept P1 and P2 while not accepting C.

ing that, if one has sufficient reason to accept the antecedent, then one has sufficient reason to accept the consequent. So, when Edgar accepts P1 without sufficient reason to reject its antecedent or accept its consequent, Edgar ipso facto accepts that, if one has sufficient reason to accept P1's antecedent, then one has sufficient reason to accept P1's consequent. But if the Liar Argument is a case of wishful thinking, then the fact that one has sufficient reason to accept P1's antecedent is irrelevant to whether one should accept P1's consequent. The Hope Argument is similar: that one has sufficient reason to accept (7)'s antecedent is irrelevant to whether one should accept (7)'s consequent – and to think otherwise would be irrational. So, if the Liar Argument is a case of wishful thinking, then it was irrational for Edgar to accept P1 in the first place. This is important, for it shows that *if* non-cognitivism implies that the Liar Argument is a case of wishful thinking, then even if non-cognitivism does not render the Liar Argument invalid, non-cognitivism still renders Edgar's reasoning fallacious.

The third flaw in what Dorr claims is that, contrary to Dorr, non-cognitivism does *not* imply that the Liar Argument is a case of wishful thinking. Wishful thinking is a kind of red-herring fallacy, and an argument commits a red-herring fallacy just in case it gives as a reason to accept a claim something that is irrelevant to whether one should accept the claim. The Hope Argument is a case in point: it gives my hoping that my proposal will be accepted as a reason to believe that my proposal will be accepted even though my hoping is irrelevant to whether one should believe that my proposal will be accepted. If non-cognitivism is true, however, then the Liar Argument does not give *anything at all* as a reason to believe that the souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife. To see this, consider the following question:

> (Hq) Why should I believe that my proposal will be accepted?

Answering (Hq) requires giving a reason for belief. The answer that the Hope Argument gives is this:

> (Ha) I hope that my proposal will be accepted.

Of course this is not a *good* reason, but it is still a reason. Suppose, though, that one were to respond to (Hq) with, say, a question, or a command, or some expression of approval – indeed, anything other than a term that expresses a cognitive attitude. The response would be incoherent; it would be something like, "One should believe that my proposal will be accepted because, yes, my proposal!" That is incoherent. But if non-cognitivism is true, then the Liar Argument gives precisely that sort of answer to the question:

> (Lq) Why should one believe that the souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife?

The Liar Argument's answer to (Lq) is of course this:

> (La)   Lying is wrong.

But if non-cognitivism is true, then (La) expresses a non-cognitive attitude toward lying, and responding to (Lq) with the expression of a non-cognitive attitude would be incoherent. It would be like saying, "One should believe that the souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife because boo: lying." That is incoherent. So, if non-cognitivism is true, then, contrary to what Dorr claims, the Liar Argument does not commit the wishful-thinking fallacy – but that is because if non-cognitivism is true, then the Liar Argument does not offer a reason at all for belief.

We now have the ingredients for a new objection to non-cognitivism, and, furthermore, we can see what Dorr's argument gets right and what it gets wrong. Here is the objection:

> (1)   If non-cognitivism is true, then atomic moral claims do not give epistemic reasons.
> (2)   Atomic moral claims do give epistemic reasons.
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> (3)   Non-cognitivism is false.

(By "epistemic reasons" I mean reasons to believe a claim.) The argument is valid, and we have already seen why (10) is true: if non-cognitivism is true, then atomic moral claims express non-cognitive attitudes; but utterances in general that express non-cognitive attitudes cannot give reasons for belief. So, given non-cognitivism, atomic moral claims cannot give epistemic reasons. Hence, (10). That (11) is true is evinced by the fact that (La) is at least a coherent response to (Lq): if asked why one should believe that the souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife, it is at least coherent to respond with "lying is wrong." Thus, (11). Given (10) and (11), we can conclude, per (12), that non-cognitivism is false. As for what Dorr's argument gets right, it points out quite correctly that, even if non-cognitivists solve the Frege-Geach problem, non-cognitivism still has a problem with atomic moral premises. But, whereas Dorr claims that non-cognitivism wrongly implies that atomic moral premises can give only bad epistemic reasons, we now see that that is not quite right. Rather, non-cognitivism implies that atomic moral premises cannot give epistemic reasons at all, which is a reason to reject non-cognitivism.

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