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The Moral Belief Problem

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Abstract

The moral belief problem is that of reconciling expressivism in ethics with both minimalism in the philosophy of language and the syntactic discipline of moral sentences. It is argued that the problem can be solved by distinguishing minimal and robust senses of belief, where a minimal belief is any state of mind expressed by sincere assertoric use of a syntactically disciplined sentence and a robust belief is a minimal belief with some additional property R. Two attempts to specify R are discussed, both based on the thought that beliefs are states that aim at truth. According to the first, robust beliefs are criticisable to the extent that their content fails to match the state of the world. This sense fails to distinguish robust beliefs from minimal beliefs. According to the second, robust beliefs function to have their content match the state of the world. This sense succeeds in distinguishing robust beliefs from minimal beliefs. The conclusion is that the debate concerning the cognitive status of moral convictions needs to address the issue of the function of moral convictions. Evolutionary theorising may be relevant, but will not be decisive, to answering this question.

1. An inconsistent triad

The following three propositions are apparently mutually inconsistent:

(1) Moral sentences are syntactically disciplined. This claim has two components:

(1a) Moral sentences are syntactically sophisticated, that is, they are capable of significant embedding in negations, conditionals, propositional attitude operators and other subsentential constructions.

(1b) Moral sentences are disciplined, that is, they are subject to clear standards of appropriate and inappropriate usage.

(2) There is a conceptually necessary connection between a sentence being syntactically disciplined and sincere assertoric use of that sentence serving to express a belief (whose content is captured by such usage). This claim has two components:

(2a) There is a conceptually necessary connection between a sentence being syntactically disciplined and that sentence being truth-apt.

(2b) There is a conceptually necessary connection between a sentence being truth-apt and sincere assertoric use of that sentence serving to express a belief (whose content is captured by such usage).

(3) Moral sentences in their sincere assertoric uses do not serve to express beliefs (whose content is captured by such usage). Rather, they serve to express some affective attitude of the agent, such as an emotion, preference or practical stance.

The first claim – moral syntacticism – is supported by simple reflection on our actual use of moral sentences, which readily feature in negations, conditionals and other such constructions (syntactic sophistication) and are subject to clear standards of appropriate usage (discipline). In this, moral sentences contrast with sentences such as 'Ouch!', which are not syntactically sophisticated and sentences of a private language, which (if Wittgenstein was right) are not disciplined.

The second claim – call it minimalism – holds that being syntactically disciplined suffices for a sentence to be truth-apt, that is, express assertoric content [(2a)].[1] A truth-apt sentence will then be true just in case assertion of that sentence satisfies the standards of appropriate usage for the discourse in which it features. Minimalism holds further that being truth-apt suffices for sincere assertoric use of that sentence to express a belief [(2b)].

The two claims of minimalism have distinct sources of support.

Wright supports (2a) on the basis of a two-fold theoretical advantage (1992: 74-75). The first is that so construing truth-aptness deals with the headache of mixed inferences, that is, inferences that involve sentences only some of which would qualify as truth-apt under more stringent criteria of truth-aptness. The second is that that (2a) conserves our prereflective practice of allowing talk of truth and inference to a wide range of discourses that might not satisfy more stringent criteria of truth-aptness, such as discourse concerning the comic and the delightful.

The second claim of minimalism is arguably analytic. Wright claims:

[1] This view is sometimes called 'disciplined syntacticism', for example in Lenman 2003.

> Assertion has the following analytic tie to belief: if someone makes an assertion, and is supposed sincere, it follows that she has a belief whose content can be captured by means of the sentences used. (1992: 14)

The third claim is moral expressivism, most recently defended by Blackburn (1984, 1998b) and Gibbard (1990).

Though each of (1), (2) and (3) can be made to look plausible, it appears that they cannot all be true, since accepting any two of the claims provides an argument against the third.

First, moral syntacticism and minimalism appear to jointly entail the falsity of expressivism. If moral sentences are syntactically disciplined, and if being syntactically disciplined suffices for being truth-apt, which in turn suffices for sincere assertoric use of such sentences serving to express beliefs, then sincere assertoric uses of moral sentences express beliefs. That is, (1) and (2) entail that (3) is false (Lenman 2003: 36).

This argument bears some resemblance to the 'Frege-Geach' problem facing expressivism (Geach 1965). That is the problem of explaining how, if moral sentences express attitudes, they can function in non-assertoric contexts such as conditionals, where no attitude is apparently expressed. The Frege-Geach point is generally regarded as laying down a challenge to the expressivist – that of explaining how moral sentences can occur in non-assertive contexts. But minimalism turns this challenge into a decisive refutation. For by taking the appearance of moral sentences in non-assertive contexts as a decisive mark of truth-aptness, and by linking truth-

aptness to belief, the minimalist claims that the problematic phenomenon pointed out by Geach actually entails the falsity of expressivism.

Second, moral syntacticism and expressivism appear to entail the falsity of minimalism. If moral sentences are syntactically disciplined and yet in their sincere assertoric uses do not serve to express beliefs then there can be no necessary connection between sentences being syntactically disciplined and sincere assertoric uses of those sentences expressing beliefs. That is, (1) and (3) entail that (2) is false.

Those who accept this argument may go on to reject (2a), (2b), or both. Rejecting (2a) on the basis of this argument amounts to the claim that it is possible for a sentence to be syntactically disciplined without being truth-apt, and that moral sentences are like this (Jackson, Oppy, Smith 1994). Rejecting (2b) on the same basis amounts to the claim that it is possible for a sentence to be truth-apt even though sincere assertoric use of that sentence fails to express a belief, and that moral sentences are like this (Blackburn 1998a). Rejecting both claims amounts to accepting both possibilities.

Third, expressivism and minimalism entail the falsity of moral syntacticism. If moral sentences in their sincere assertoric uses do not serve to express beliefs and if there is a conceptually necessary connection between sentences being syntactically disciplined and sincere assertoric use of those sentences serving to express beliefs it follows that, contrary to appearances, moral sentences are not syntactically disciplined. That is, (2) and (3) entail that (1) is false.

Those who accept this argument may go on to reject (1a), (1b), or both. Any such rejection may seem particularly unpromising when faced with the undeniable

evidence that moral sentences are syntactically disciplined. But such views can seem more promising if taken in a revisionary spirit, that is, as offering an account not of how moral practice actually is, but of how it should be given the theoretical understanding provided by the combination of expressivism and minimalism.

2. Overcoming inconsistency

(1), (2) and (3) appear inconsistent. Yet all three positions are backed by argument, whose failure needs to be diagnosed were we to reject the view they support. This could perhaps be done, but I wish to question the need to do so. I propose that a further option lies open – that of denying that the three claims are inconsistent.

To see this, one needs to recognise the possibility that there is more than one sense of 'belief' in play.

The first sense of 'belief' is that associated with minimalism. Minimalism claims a sentence being syntactic disciplined suffices for its truth-aptness [(2a)] and being expressed in a truth-apt sentence suffices for a mental state to be a belief [(2b)]. A minimal sense of belief holds that, in addition, being expressible by a truth-apt sentence is all there is to a mental states being a belief. Thus what we may call a minimal belief is simply any state of mind that is expressed by sincere assertoric use of a sentence that is syntactically disciplined. The sentence captures the content of the belief.

Suppose, however, that there is further, robust sense of belief such that a belief is robust just in case it is a minimal belief, but also has some further property R not possessed by minimal beliefs. Below (§3) I suggest that the property of aiming at

truth might fill this role. Assuming there is some such property the three propositions can be made consistent as follows:

Expressivism can be understood as claiming that moral sentences in their sincere assertoric uses do not express robust beliefs. Thus, in (3), 'belief' is read as 'robust belief'. Conversely, minimalism can be understood as claiming that there is a conceptually necessary connection between a sentence being syntactically disciplined and sincere assertoric uses of that sentence expressing minimal beliefs.[2] Thus, in (2), 'belief' is read as 'minimal belief'. Further, from the fact that moral sentences in their sincere assertoric uses fail to express robust beliefs and that there is a necessary connection between syntactic discipline and the expression of minimal beliefs, nothing follows for the syntactic discipline of moral sentences. That is, expressivism and minimalism, so construed, no longer combine to refute moral syntacticism. Thus the three propositions are consistent.

Three features of this solution to the moral belief problem are worth noting.

First, it is close to the view put forward in Lenman 2003, according to which there are minimal and robust notions, not of belief, but of truth-aptness. If one accepts the converse of (2b) – the claim that a sentence is truth-apt only when sincere assertoric use of that sentence serves to express a belief – the two senses of belief I distinguish will feed into a distinction similar to Lenman's. But will my psychological distinction between types of mental state mesh with Lenman's semantic contrast between different ways that we go about understanding sentences? There is some reason to think so. Roughly, Lenman's contrast is between sentences that can be understood only in terms of their truth-conditions and those that can be understood

[2] This renders minimalism trivial – as we might expect from a theory based on 'platitudes'. See Wright 1992.

through understanding an equivalent but non-truth-apt sentence. If robust beliefs are states that aim at truth (as I will argue) this will explain why the sentences used to express them can be understood only in terms of their truth-conditions. Thus my account promises to mesh with and explain Lenman's semantic contrast.[3]

Second, accepting two senses of belief needn't commit one to the view that our actual uses of the term 'belief' are systematically ambiguous. Since robust beliefs are simply minimal beliefs that possess some additional property, all robust beliefs will be minimal beliefs. It is possible to claim, therefore, that all pretheoretical uses of the term belief refer simply to minimal beliefs. Similar remarks apply were one to accept, with Lenman, two derived notions of truth-aptness.

Finally, some things can be said to create a presumption in favour of this approach. First, it preserves the possibility of good arguments in favour of each of the three claims. By denying inconsistency one avoids summarily rejecting all possible arguments for one of the positions. Second, the approach recognises the possibility of a cleavage between our pretheoretical and theoretical concept of belief. By so doing, it recognises the possibility that a complete account of (robust) belief might require non-platitudinous philosophical and empirical insight gleaned from examining such issues as the structure of intentional action explanation and the taxonomy of psychological states (Blackburn 1998a: fn.6)

[3] As Lenman himself hopes such accounts might (2003: 54).

3. A robust sense of belief

All this depends, of course, on there being some property R possessed by robust but not minimal beliefs. What sort of thing are we looking for in R? I suggest three constraints.

First, R must be such that there are some minimal beliefs that lack it, and hence that there are some minimal beliefs that are not robust beliefs. If R were to be possessed by all minimal beliefs as such, then the point of postulating such a property would be lost.

Second, it will be welcome if R is such that, when attributed of a certain class of states, it explains why the linguistic expressions of those states are disciplined. In other words, it would be welcome if the account of robust beliefs explains why robust beliefs are minimal beliefs (Lenman 2003: 52-54). There may of course be other possible explanations for the discipline of a class of sentences. But part of the point of claiming that a class of sentences express robust beliefs should be to explain what has so far been taken for granted, namely the source of that discipline.

Third, the account of robust belief that R provides should at least be compatible with, and perhaps go some way to explaining, our prereflective thoughts concerning the nature of beliefs. Such thoughts include: that beliefs are states designed to fit the facts; that beliefs are states that represent possible ways the world could be; beliefs are states that guide us around the world.

With these constraints in mind, I wish to discuss a recent suggestion: that robust beliefs aim at truth (Lenman 2003; Lillehammer 2002).

Two questions arise: First, what is it in particular for truth to be the aim of belief? Second, what is it for beliefs to aim at anything at all?

For a particular belief whose content is captured by the syntactically disciplined sentence 'p', to aim at truth is for the believer to aim to have that belief only if that content is true (Velleman 2000). According to minimalism, the content of a belief is true just in case the sentence that characterises that content meets the standards of discipline for the discourse in which it is a part. Hence for beliefs to aim at truth is for a believer to aim to believe that p only if p; to aim to believe that q only if q; and so on. These cases can be generalised by saying that for beliefs to aim at truth is for the believer to aim to have the content of her beliefs match the state of the world.

What about aiming? To aim at anything is to be subject to criticism should one fail to achieve that aim – as is shown by the fact that criticism can often be deflected by showing it to rely on a misconception of one's aim ('But I was always aiming for the back of the green'). So for beliefs to aim at truth, in the above sense, is for beliefs to be subject to criticism just in case their content fails to match the state of the world. Thus:

(4) A mental state aims at truth iff the state is criticisable, qua state of that kind, when its content fails to match the state of the world.[4]

If this is what it is for beliefs to aim at truth, can their so aiming define a class of distinctively robust beliefs?

[4] I take this to be the view put forward by Anscombe (1957: 56).

No – because all minimal beliefs aim at truth in this sense (so the first constraint on R is not satisfied). To elaborate: A minimal belief is any state of mind expressed by sincere assertoric use of a syntactically disciplined sentence. The content of minimal beliefs can fail to match the state of the world in the following sense: the belief has the content that p and p doesn't meet the standards of discipline for the discourse of which p is a part; or the belief has the content that q and q doesn't meet the standards of discipline for the discourse of which q is a part; or…and so on. When minimal beliefs fail to match the state of the world in this way they will be criticisable for failing to do so: the belief that p will be criticisable to the extent that p doesn't meet the standards of discipline for the discourse of which p is a part; the belief that q will be criticisable to the extent that q doesn't meet the standards of discipline for the discourse of which q is a part; and so on. The possibility of such criticism is guaranteed by the discourse-dependent standards of discipline that one is subject to merely in virtue of having a belief with a certain content. Thus all minimal beliefs are criticisable to the extent that their content fails to match the state of the world. Hence all minimal beliefs aim at truth in the sense given in (4). Thus this cannot be the sense of aiming at truth that defines a robust sense of belief, as Lenman supposes.[5]

The defender of a distinction between minimal and robust beliefs based on the property of aiming at truth must therefore offer another account of that property.

One suggestion is as follows: mental states aim at truth when their function is to have their content match the state of the world (Lillehammer 2002; Gibbard 1990: 108-9). More precisely, a mental state aims at truth when it is the product of a

[5] This argument owes much to that of Divers and Miller (1995: 39)

mechanism whose function is to produce states of mind whose content matches the state of the world.

What notion of function is involved here? Kitcher (1993) has suggested that the function of an entity is that which it was designed to do, where what an entity is designed to do is that effect for which it was selected (either by natural selection or by conscious intention). Hence the function of the heart is to pump blood, since this is the effect for which it was selected (by natural selection). Similarly, the function of the sparkplug is to ignite the fuel, since this is the effect for which it was selected (by conscious intention). According to Kitcher, 'selection for' is always historical: an entity has an effect for which it was selected when instances of that type of entity either originated or persist because of that effect. Thus ascertaining function requires ascertaining selectional history.

This approach to selection seems too narrow, for it rules out assigning function to any entity that doesn't have the right kind of selectional history. For example, on Kitcher's view, when I use a mallet to try to break open a Kinder Egg the function of the mallet in the action cannot be to break open the Kinder Egg, because this is not what mallets have been historically selected for. To avoid this problem, we can distinguish a further non-historical sense in which entities can have effects for which they are selected: an entity is selected for because of a certain effect when that entity is used in the way it is because of that effect. Thus I use the mallet to try to break open the Kinder Egg because (I believe) it will have the effect of, precisely, breaking open the Kinder Egg. Thus, to modify Kitcher's view, the function of an entity is that effect it has been selected for, where 'selection for' is determined either historically through natural or artificial selection, or non-historically through present usage. Note that non-historical selection still allows for the possibility of malfunction:

the entity will malfunction just in case the effects of that entity do not include the effect which explains why the entity is used as it is. In my example, the mallet will malfunction just in case it doesn't smash open the Kinder Egg.

Like most representations, such as maps and thermometer levels, beliefs are used to guide us round the world. The best explanation of why we use representations in this way is that the system responsible for them is taken to produce representations whose content matches the state of the world. Thus the function of such a system is to produce representations whose content matches the state of the world. That is, the function of beliefs (like other representations) is to have their contents match the state of the world. This is what it means, I suggest, to say that beliefs aim at truth.[6]

Unlike the previous reading of 'aiming at truth' this functional reading meets the three constraints on R.

First, there is no guarantee that all minimal beliefs aim at truth in this sense. There are two ways in which minimal beliefs can fail to do so. First, minimal beliefs may be used to guide us round the world, but for some other reason than that their contents are taken to correspond to the world. Perhaps they are so used because being guided by them is generally successful, even though they fail to match the state of the

[6] It doesn't follow that all beliefs are formed with the purpose, or conscious intention, of having their content match the state of the world. For example, innate contentful states might be used to guide an individual around the world, and be so used because their content is taken to match the state of the world. The function of such states would be to have their content match the state of the world and they would thus aim at truth. But since they are innate, such states could not be purposively formed. Thus my account of what it is for beliefs to aim at truth is compatible with Owens' (2003) denial of the claim that beliefs are purposive.

world. Second, it may be that minimal beliefs are not used to guide us round the world at all. They might instead be used to aid co-ordination of attitudes, for example.

Second, that beliefs aim at truth in this way will explain why the sentences expressing them have the discipline they do. For it will be inappropriate to use a sentence that expresses a belief that is result of a malfunction of the system responsible for it. Conversely it will be appropriate to use a sentence that expresses a belief that is the result of the proper functioning of the system responsible for it. Further, it is quite possible that the discipline that applies to certain types of syntactically sophisticated sentences is not due the fact that those sentences express the contents of mental states whose function is to match the state of the world. Minimal beliefs expressed by such sentences will not be robust beliefs.

Finally, this account is in keeping with the pretheoretical thought that beliefs aim at truth, and attempts to given independent substance to that thought. It does so by drawing on the thought that beliefs are states that guide us around the world.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that a promising way to solve the moral belief problem is to distinguish two senses of belief: one minimal sense associated with syntactic discipline and one robust sense involving aiming at truth, where this is understood in terms of function.

This way of elucidating the concept of robust belief will have consequences for meta-ethical debate. In particular, the nature of moral states of mind will depend on their use and the explanation of that use. Evolutionary theorising regarding moral practice (such as that in Gibbard 1990) will be relevant to these questions. But it will

not determine the answers – since evolutionary origins do not always determine present usage (Sturgeon 1992). Thus, one consequence of my response to the moral belief problem is that evolutionary issues are relevant but not decisive for the issue of the cognitive status of moral convictions.

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