

## SOME NOT-MUCH-DISCUSSED PROBLEMS FOR NON-COGNITIVISM IN ETHICS

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### *Abstract*

The main objection to non-cognitivism explored in the philosophical literature to date has been semantic in nature. How can normative claims lack truth conditions when they have so many features in common with claims that have truth conditions? The main aim of this paper is to shift attention away from this dominant line of objection onto a range of other problems that non-cognitivists face. Specifically, I argue that, contrary to the non-cognitivists, normative claims do express beliefs, even by their own lights; that the truth of Normative Judgement Internalism does not support non-cognitivism; that arguing for non-cognitivism on the basis of the Open Question Argument, as non-cognitivists do, leads them to embrace a contradiction; and, finally, that non-cognitivists do not provide us with plausible candidates for the desires and aversions that, as they see things, get expressed in normative claims.<sup>1</sup>

As the name implies, non-cognitivism is the view that the role of the sentences we use when we make normative claims in ethics (or indeed in any other practical realm) – sentences like ‘Keeping promises is right (or good or desirable or sensible)’ and ‘Torturing babies is wrong (or bad or undesirable or stupid)’ – is not to express some cognitive state, but rather to express some non-cognitive state. When someone sincerely asserts some such normative claim, they thereby express not a belief that they have, but rather a pro- or con-attitude – or, as I shall put it from here on, some desire or aversion.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented as part of a symposium on non-cognitivism at Princeton University in February 1999. My co-symposiast on that occasion was Simon Blackburn. It has also been presented at colloquia at the Australian National University, Bowling Green State University, University of California at Davis, Columbia University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Stanford University. I would like to thank all those who gave me so many useful comments on these occasions. I am especially grateful to Simon Blackburn, Michael Bratman, John Collins, David Copp, Fred Dretske, Jeffrey King, Philip Pettit and Gideon Rosen. The material that appears in the fourth section forms the basis of my contribution to *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*'s book symposium on Blackburn's *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

In recent times the dominant line of objection to non-cognitivism has been semantic (Geach 1965). If the proper role of normative claims is not to express some belief – that is, if they are not used to convey information about the world – then they cannot have truth conditions. The semantics of normative sentences must therefore be given in some other way than by a specification of their truth conditions, presumably by specifying the non-cognitive states that such claims typically express. Thus, the idea is, to explain what ‘Torturing babies is wrong’ means we must say that it is a form of words typically used to express aversion to torturing babies, much as we explain what ‘Boo for Collingwood!’ means by saying that it is a form of words typically used to express aversion to the Collingwood football team. The objection is then that normative claims have semantic features that are not well explained by any such expressive account. In particular, they have all of those semantic features possessed by sentences that are apt for truth and falsehood: they appear in the antecedents and consequents of conditionals, in various propositional attitude contexts, and so on and so forth. Yet how could this be so? The expressive sentences with which we are all familiar – ‘Boo for Collingwood!’, and the like – have no such features. Non-cognitivists have thus had to face the task of explaining, in expressive terms, how sentences with normative content could come to have such semantic features, notwithstanding their expressive character (Blackburn 1993; Gibbard 1990).

Though this has been no easy task, I am going to assume that non-cognitivists have succeeded, or at any rate that they can succeed, in giving such explanations. I make this assumption not because I think it is true, but rather because my aim here is to shift attention away from this dominant line of objection to non-cognitivism, and to focus attention instead on a number of other problems that non-cognitivists face, problems that aren’t much discussed in the philosophical literature. My reason for doing so is not that, as I see things, these problems constitute knockdown objections to non-cognitivism. Non-cognitivism is a slippery fish, and any attempt to refute it is as likely as not to result in reformulation, rather than outright rejection. My hope is rather that we will all better understand non-cognitivism if we see, first, why it is liable to these objections, and second, what the responses to them might be. I will, however, leave it to the non-cognitivists themselves to tell us what their responses are.

# 1. Normative claims express beliefs even by the non-cognitivists own lights

As I have said, non-cognitivism is the view that the proper role of the sentences we use when we make normative claims is to express desires or aversions, rather than beliefs. The first problem with this view is that, by their own lights, non-cognitivists are wrong to suppose that this is so. They should represent themselves as holding not that normative claims express desires and aversions rather than beliefs, but instead that they express both. Though this concession doesn't immediately lead to the abandonment of their view, as we will see, it does set us off in that direction.

As a first step towards seeing that non-cognitivists should admit that the role of normative sentences is, at least *inter alia*, to express beliefs it helps to remember that there are many familiar claims, claims framed in terms of the thick ethical terms, as Williams calls them (Williams 1985), that simultaneously express both beliefs, on the one hand, and desires and aversions on the other. In the Australian idiom, for example, the term 'skip', a term which derives from the sixties Australian TV show *Skippy the Kangaroo*, is typically used by Greek-Australians as a mildly abusive way of picking out Anglo-Australians. The term is used in sentences such as in 'Hey Bruce, you skip, what's the matter with you mate?!' Given the way in which Greek-Australians use the word 'skip', we can suppose that the rule governing its use has two parts: first, that it is to be used to convey the information that someone is Anglo-Australian, and second, that use of the word is to serve much the same function as a sneer or nasty tone of voice. If this is right, however – that is, if the rule has this bipartite form – then it would seem to follow immediately that a sincerity condition on the use of sentences like 'Bruce is a skip' is *both* that those using the sentence must believe that Bruce is Anglo-Australian *and* that they must have an aversion towards Anglo-Australians. Sincere utterances of 'Bruce is a skip' are thus plausibly supposed to express *both* belief *and* aversion.

Now it might be thought that Hare has given a decisive reason for supposing that the most general words of normative assessment are rather different from words like 'skip' in just this respect (Hare 1952). In *The Language of Morals*, for example, he tells us that though the most general words of normative assessment – words like 'right', 'wrong', 'good', 'bad', 'desirable', 'undesirable',

'sensible', 'stupid', and the like – have both evaluative meaning and descriptive meaning, the evaluative meaning of such words is *primary* and the descriptive meaning is *secondary*. The evaluative meaning is primary, he tells us, because when (say) I sincerely use the word 'good' of cars, chronometers, cricket bats, and the like, the evaluative meaning remains exactly the same, as I do the very same thing in each case: I *commend* the car, *commend* the chronometer, *commend* the cricket bat, and so on. But the descriptive meaning is quite different because, as Hare sees things, if someone asked me 'What do you mean, it is a good car?' I would be obliged to reply something like 'I mean it does eighty and never breaks down', whereas if someone asked me 'What do you mean, it is a good chronometer?' I would be obliged to reply something quite different, such as 'I mean it tells the time accurately regardless of temperature'. In Hare's view, then, the most general words of normative assessment, the thin terms, differ in a crucial respect from more specific words of normative assessment, the thick terms, like 'skip'. For whereas both the evaluative and the descriptive meaning of words like 'skip' remain the same from context of use to context of use, in the case of the most general words of normative assessment only the evaluative meaning remains the same, 'the descriptive meaning is different in all cases' (Hare 1952, p. 118).

But is Hare's reasoning on this score completely convincing? Everything turns on whether we should make of the differential answers Hare thinks we should give to the questions 'What do you mean, it is a good car?' and 'What do you mean, it is a good chronometer?' exactly what he makes of them, and the answer would seem to be that we should not. Indeed, if anything, it seems to me that Hare gives us a very good reason for supposing that the descriptive meaning of the most general words of normative assessment is on all fours with the evaluative meaning, equally primary. This is not, of course, to deny that I might manage to convey the fact that I have a quite different belief about the properties of a car, when I say that a car is good, to the belief that I manage to convey I have about a chronometer, when I say that a chronometer is good. It is simply to deny that this difference has the significance Hare claims for it.

Whether or not I manage to convey these different beliefs would, after all, seem to depend on the hearer's knowledge of something that is strictly additional to anything that I say when I say that a car is good, or that a chronometer is good. Specifically,

it would seem to depend on the hearer's knowledge of the fact that I commend cars for doing eighty and never breaking down, whereas I commend chronometers for telling the time accurately regardless of temperature: I would not manage to convey the fact that I have these different beliefs to a hearer who lacks this particular knowledge, for example. But nor, contrary to Hare, would a hearer who lacks this particular knowledge be in any doubt about what I mean when I say that a car is good, or that a chronometer is good. For they would know that I thereby do two things: first, that I commend both the car and the chronometer, and second, that I express my belief that each is of a kind such that it has the properties in virtue of which I commend objects of that kind. Indeed, it would seem to be the fact that I express this latter belief, regardless of context, when I say that something is good, that allows a hearer who happens to have the particular knowledge of what my standards for commendation of objects of the relevant kind are to work out what properties the objects that I commend have.

The upshot would thus seem to be that Hare is wrong to suppose that what he calls the descriptive meaning of the most general words of normative assessment is any part of their meaning at all, not a primary part and not a secondary part either. When I say that a car is good I might manage to convey, but I certainly do not literally say, that it does eighty and never breaks down. Rather, when I say that something is good Hare should suppose that what I do is commend that object, this being the evaluative meaning, and that I also express my belief that the object is of a kind such that it has the properties in virtue of which I commend objects of that kind, this being the descriptive meaning. By his own lights, then, Hare should suppose that the most general words of normative assessment have both evaluative meaning and descriptive meaning and that these are equally primary, equally primary because both remain constant from context of use to context of use.

More generally, then, far from Hare providing us with a decisive reason for supposing that the most general words of normative assessment are different from words like 'skip', he in fact provides us with a good reason for supposing that they are exactly the same. Non-cognitivists quite generally should insist that whenever we make normative claims, much as when a Greek-Australian calls an Anglo-Australian a 'skip', we thereby express *both* desires or aversions *and* beliefs. When we say 'Keeping

promises is right (or good or desirable or sensible)', for example, non-cognitivists should insist that we thereby express both our desire (or whatever psychological state they say we express) that promises be kept and our belief that the keeping of promises has those features, whatever they are, that we desire (or whatever) our acts to have (compare Jackson and Pettit 1998).

## **2. The truth of Normative Judgement Internalism does not support non-cognitivism**

So far I have argued that non-cognitivists should concede that when we make normative claims we thereby express context invariant beliefs. I said that though this concession doesn't lead immediately to the abandonment of non-cognitivism, it sets us off on that road. We are now in a position to see why this is so.

One of the main arguments for non-cognitivism begins from the datum, supposedly analytic, that those who judge it right (or good or desirable or sensible) to act in a certain way desire to act in that way, at least absent practical irrationality, and that those who judge it wrong (or bad or undesirable or stupid) to act in a certain way are averse to acting in that way, at least absent practical irrationality. Let's call this datum 'Normative Judgment Internalism' (Falk 1948). The argument then proceeds as follows (Hare 1952; Blackburn 1984; Gibbard 1990). Assume, for reductio, that normative judgments express beliefs alone. In that case it follows from the truth of Normative Judgment Internalism that some belief stands in the required causal and rational relation to desires and aversions. But beliefs could stand in that sort of relation only if they were capable of causing and rationalizing desires and aversions without the aid of any desire. Yet that is quite impossible, as beliefs only cause and rationalize desires in conjunction with further desires (as Jay Wallace puts it, the view is 'No desire out without a desire in' (Wallace 1990)). Normative judgments must therefore really be, *inter alia*, expressions of the desires and aversions that play that active role, along with beliefs, in the causation and rationalization of other desires. Non-cognitivism is therefore supposed to follow.

Many people reject this argument on the grounds that Normative Judgment Internalism is false (Frankena 1958; Foot 1972; Railton 1986; Brink 1986, 1989). However this is not my view, and nor is it the most powerful form that a reply to this argument for non-cognitivism might take. The most powerful reply

would grant the truth of Normative Judgment Internalism and question, instead, the premise that no belief could stand in the required causal and rational relation to any desire and aversion; question, in other words, the claim 'No desire out without a desire in'. In order to do that successfully the objector would, of course, have to come up with an example of a belief that stands in the required kind of causal and rational relation to desires and aversions: an example of a feature of acts which is such that, when we believe that our acts have that feature, we are in a state that could cause and rationalize the acquisition of a desire (or aversion) to perform(ing) an act with that feature. Ironically, it seems to me that the belief that we have just seen that the non-cognitivists must themselves suppose that we have, no matter what the context, when we make a normative claim – the belief that an object is of a kind such that it has the properties in virtue of which we commend objects of that kind – looks like it, suitably analyzed, is an example of just such a belief. In order to see that this is so, however, we must first ask what we must believe about the properties acts have in order to suppose that acts with those properties are fit for commendation.

To commend the performance of an action of a certain kind in certain circumstances to ourselves – in other words, to judge it right that we act in that way in those circumstances – is to advise ourselves to perform that act in those circumstances. But who is best placed to give ourselves such advice, and what is the content of the advice that we would give to ourselves? The answer is that it is we ourselves, purged of our various contingent cognitive limitations and rational failings who are best placed to give ourselves advice, and that the content of the advice that we would give is thus fixed by the content of those desires we would have about what we are to do in the circumstances of action about which advice is sought, if we had a set of desires that was maximally informed and coherent and unified (Williams 1980; Smith 1995). In figuring out what to advise ourselves to do, in certain circumstances, we must therefore ask what we would want ourselves to do in the circumstances contemplated if we had a (potentially) completely different set of desires from those we actually have, the desires we would have if our desire set was maximally informed and coherent and unified. If we call the possible world in which we have the desires we actually have the 'evaluated' world, and the possible world in which we have a set of desires that is maximally informed and coherent and unified

the 'evaluating' world, then the content of the advice we would give is fixed not by what we, in the evaluating world, want ourselves to do in the evaluating world, but rather by what we, in the evaluating world, want ourselves to do in the evaluated world. This, accordingly, is the property we must believe our acts to have in order to suppose that they are fit for commendation.

Once this is agreed, however, it seems to me that there is no difficulty at all in seeing how a belief with this sort of content could both cause and rationalize having certain desires without the aid of any further desire (Smith 1999; Smith forthcoming). For just imagine a case in which, on reflection, you come to believe that (say) you would desire that you keep a promise you made in the circumstances of action that you presently face if you had a maximally informed and coherent and unified set of desires, but in which you don't have any desire at all to keep that promise. Now consider the pair of psychological states that comprises your belief that you would desire that you keep your promise in the circumstances of action that you presently face if you had a maximally informed and coherent and unified set of desires, and which also comprises the desire that you keep that promise, and compare this pair of psychological states with the pair that comprises your belief that you would desire that you keep your promise in the circumstances of action that you presently face if you had a maximally informed and coherent and unified set of desires, but which also comprises instead your aversion to keeping that promise. Which of these pairs of psychological states seems to be more coherent?

The answer would seem to me to be plain enough. The first pair is much more coherent than the second. There is disequilibrium or dissonance or failure of fit involved in believing that you would desire yourself to act in a certain way in certain circumstances if you had a maximally informed and coherent and unified desire set, and yet being averse to the prospect of acting in that way. The aversion is, after all, something that you yourself disown. From your perspective it makes no sense, given the rest of your desires. By your own lights it is a state that you would not be in if you were in various ways better than you actually are: more informed, more coherent, more unified in your desiderative outlook. There would therefore seem to be more than a passing family resemblance between the relation that holds between the first pair of psychological states and the more familiar examples of coherence relations that hold between



psychological states. Coherence would thus seem to be on the side of the pair that comprises both the belief that you would desire yourself to keep your promise in the circumstances of action that you presently face and the desire that you keep that promise.

If this is right, however, then it would seem to follow immediately that if you are rational – in the mundane sense of displaying a tendency towards this sort of coherence – then you will end up having a desire that matches your belief about what you would want yourself to do if you had a maximally informed and coherent and unified desire set. In other words, in the particular case under discussion, you will end up losing your aversion to keeping your promise, and acquiring a desire to keep it instead. The belief that you would desire that you act in a certain way if you had a set of desires that was maximally informed and coherent and unified would thus seem able to cause you to acquire a corresponding desire when it operates in conjunction with a tendency towards coherence. Moreover, because acquiring the desire makes for a more coherent pairing of psychological states, it would seem to follow that the desire thus caused is rationalized as well. Finally, note that no causal role at all would seem to be played by any desire. All that is required is a tendency towards coherence, a tendency whose operation is ubiquitous across both the cognitive and the non-cognitive realms.

We must therefore conclude that one of the main arguments that non-cognitivists give for non-cognitivism is seriously flawed. Non-cognitivists assume, quite correctly, that given the truth of Normative Judgment Internalism it follows that, for cognitivism to be true, there would have to be some belief that stands in the required causal and rational relation to desires and aversions, but they further claim, incorrectly, that there are no such beliefs. Indeed, somewhat ironically, their claim that there are no such beliefs is refuted by the example of the belief that they themselves must suppose that we have whenever we make a normative claim. For the belief that we would desire ourselves to act in a certain way if we had a set of desires that was maximally informed and coherent and unified would seem to be a belief that we must have whenever we suppose that we would commend acting in that way to ourselves, and this belief, as we have seen, looks to be capable of causing and rationalizing a corresponding desire without the aid of any further desire.

### **3. Arguing for cognitivism on the basis of the Open Question Argument leads non-cognitivists to embrace a contradiction**

It might be thought that non-cognitivists have an obvious reply to the problem just stated. Even if they are wrong that no belief can cause and rationalize a desire without the aid of a further desire, they might insist that it would be wrong to suppose that the beliefs that are capable of doing this give the content of the normative claims that we make (compare Ridge 1999). The reason turns on the other main argument non-cognitivists typically give for their view.

The argument begins with the observation that if normative judgments expressed beliefs, then we would have to be able to specify the contents of those beliefs in either naturalistic terms or non-naturalistic terms. But, given that the world is itself entirely naturalistic, and given that some of our normative judgments are correct, it follows that the contents of these beliefs cannot be given in non-naturalistic terms. Normative judgments must therefore express beliefs with naturalistic contents, if they express beliefs at all. However, the argument continues, we can also demonstrate that normative judgments do not express beliefs with naturalistic contents either. For just try imagining that the belief that it is right (or good or desirable or sensible) to keep promises is a belief to the effect that keeping promises has some naturalistic feature. Which naturalistic feature might it be that you suppose it to have? For any naturalistic feature we care to mention, non-cognitivists insist that we can always coherently imagine that keeping promises has that naturalistic feature, and yet isn't right (or good or desirable or sensible), and that what this shows is that we can't really be supposing that keeping promises has some naturalistic feature in so far as we judge it to be right (or good or desirable or sensible).

Consider some obvious examples. We can coherently entertain the possibility that keeping promises has the property of maximizing utility, and yet isn't right (or good or desirable or sensible), something that would be impossible if the belief that keeping promises is right (or good or desirable or sensible) was just the belief that keeping promises has the property of maximizing utility. Another obvious example: we can coherently entertain the possibility that keeping promises has the property of being an act that I desire to perform, and yet isn't right (or good or desirable or sensible), something that would be impossible if

the belief that keeping promises is right (or good or desirable or sensible) was just the belief that keeping promises has the property of being desired. A less obvious example: we can coherently entertain the possibility that keeping promises is of a kind such that it has the properties in virtue of which I commend objects of that kind, and yet that it isn't right (or good or desirable or sensible), something that would be impossible if the belief that keeping promises is right (or good or desirable or sensible) was just the belief that keeping promises is of a kind such that it has the properties in virtue of which I commend objects of that kind. Another less obvious example: we can coherently entertain the possibility that keeping promises has the property of being something that we would desire that we do if we had a set of desires that was maximally informed and coherent and unified, and yet isn't right (or good or desirable or sensible), something that would be impossible if the belief that keeping promises is right (or good or desirable or sensible) was just the belief that keeping promises has the property of being something that we would desire that we do if we had a set of desires that was maximally informed and coherent and unified. And so we could go on.

This is, of course, simply the Open Question Argument. What non-cognitivists want us to admit, faced with these failures to uncover the naturalistic content of a normative claim, is that attempts to uncover such naturalistic content will fail no matter which naturalistic contents we consider. And once we admit this they want us to conclude, by *modus tollens*, that there mustn't really be any such thing as the belief that keeping promises is right. Rather – and at this point they simply wheel back on their own preferred account of what it is to make the judgement that keeping promises is right (or good or desirable or sensible) – when we say that keeping promises is right (or good or desirable or sensible) what we really do is express our desire (or whatever) that people keep their promises. Indeed, at this point they might even point out that they can happily concede that we express a belief with a naturalistic content as well, (say) the belief that keeping promises is of a kind such that it has the properties in virtue of which I commend objects of that kind, or the belief that keeping promises has the property of being something that we would desire that we do if we had a set of desires that was maximally informed and coherent and unified. Their point is simply that what makes it the case that we express a normative claim is the additional expression of desire (or whatever); expression of the

belief alone would not be enough. Non-cognitivism is therefore supposed to follow.

Much has been said that calls into question the crucial step in this argument, the step that depends on the validity of the Open Question Argument. Indeed, I have said some of this myself (Smith 1994, pp. 36–39). The main problem, for the record, is that the plausibility of the Open Question Argument depends on the false assumption that there are no unobvious analytic truths. The last of the examples given above seems to me to be a good example of a belief content that is analytically equivalent to a claim with normative content, notwithstanding the fact that it isn't obvious that this is so: hence the appearance of an open question. But this is not the point on which I wish to dwell here. For there is another problem with the non-cognitivist's deployment of the Open Question Argument as well. The problem is that, on plausible assumptions, by embracing the quite general conclusion of the Open Question Argument, non-cognitivists thereby commit themselves to a contradiction (Smith 1998).

The reason, in brief, is that the non-cognitivist's own positive account of what it is to make a normative claim itself constitutes a naturalistic analysis, a naturalistic analysis of the claim that someone sincerely makes a normative claim. But the claim that someone sincerely makes a normative claim is itself a normative claim. It therefore follows that non-cognitivists are committed both to the view that no naturalistic analysis of the content of a normative claim is possible (for that is the quite general conclusion of the Open Question Argument), and yet also to the view that such an analysis is possible (for they give a naturalistic analysis of the content of a normative claim to the effect that someone or other sincerely makes a normative claim). Let me develop these points in turn.

The first is that non-cognitivism is itself a version of naturalism. As proof of this note that non-cognitivists do not argue that normative claims express desires and aversions on a posteriori or inductive grounds. Their argument is rather *a priori*, grounded in their commitment to a naturalistic world-view. The truth of the claim that those who sincerely make normative claims express their desires and aversions as opposed to their beliefs is supposed to be established by reflection on a diet of examples of what is involved when people sincerely make normative claims in a naturalistic world. Once you think through all of the possible ways in which someone might succeed in doing something that

is appropriately described as 'sincerely making a normative claim', and all of the possible ways in which they might fail, non-cognitivists insist that the only conclusion to draw is that those who sincerely make normative claims thereby engage in the following perfectly naturalistic behaviour: they express their desires or aversions, not their beliefs. This is the only coherent possibility.

This, in turn, underscores the crucial point. For non-cognitivists object not to the project of giving naturalistic analyses *per se*. Rather they object to the project of giving naturalistic analyses of the contents of normative claims. Though the *content* of a normative claim cannot be analyzed naturalistically, they think that *what it is sincerely to make* a normative claim can be thus analyzed. In other words, though, as they see things, 'Keeping promises is right (or good or desirable or sensible)' has no naturalistic equivalent, the claim 'Michael sincerely says that keeping promises is right (or good or desirable or sensible)' does. Specifically, it is analytically equivalent to the naturalistic claim 'Michael expresses his desire (or whatever) that people keep their promises'.

The second point, however, is that 'Michael sincerely says that it is right (or good or desirable or sensible) to keep promises' is itself a normative claim, much like 'It is right (or good or desirable or sensible) to keep promises'. A good case for this can be made by appealing to the following rough and ready test of a claim's being normative (for an improvement see Jackson 1974). Roughly speaking, we can test whether a claim is normative by asking whether it analytically entails various 'ought' claims, claims which support the possibility of criticism when transgressed. In order to see why this is a good rough and ready test of what it is for a claim to be normative, consider two sorts of claim, both of which entail 'ought' claims, but only one of which should intuitively turn out to be a normative claim in the required sense: 'John has some extra food that he could give to Bill, thereby preventing Bill from starving to death' and 'It is right (or good or desirable or sensible) to keep promises'. Only the latter should turn out to be a normative claim, and the reason why is well explained by the suggested rough and ready test.

Consider the move from 'John has some extra food that he could give to Bill, thereby preventing Bill from starving to death' to 'John ought to give his extra food to Bill'. This move, though

perhaps perfectly legitimate, depends on a suppressed premise that isn't analytic: 'People ought to give away their extra food when doing so will prevent starvation'. Knowledge of the truth of this suppressed premise requires more than an understanding of what extra food and acts that prevent starvation and 'ought' claims are. By contrast, however, the move from 'It is right (or good or desirable or sensible) to keep promises' to 'People ought to keep their promises, other things being equal' relies on a suppressed premise that is plainly analytic: 'People ought to do what it is right (or good or desirable or sensible) to do'. Knowledge of the truth of this premise only requires knowledge of the meaning of what it is for acts to be right (or good or desirable or sensible) and what 'ought' claims are. Thus, according to the suggested test, the claim 'It is right (or good or desirable or sensible) to keep promises' is normative whereas 'John has some extra food that he could give to Bill, thereby preventing Bill from starving to death' is not. This is the right result.

Now let's apply the suggested rough and ready test to 'Michael sincerely says that it is right (or good or desirable or sensible) to keep promises'. It seems plain that this too entails various 'ought' claims, and that it too therefore supports the possibility of a certain kind of criticism. 'Michael sincerely says that it is right (or good or desirable or sensible) to keep promises' entails 'Michael rationally ought to desire to keep promises, other things being equal'. It entails the latter claim because Michael becomes liable to criticism for being practically irrational if he fails to desire to do what he sincerely says that it is right (or good or desirable or sensible) to do: he is weak of will, or suffers from some other moral psychological malfunction or malady. Moreover this entailment too looks to be analytic. Indeed, the suppressed premise is just Normative Judgment Internalism, itself something that figures as an analytic truth in the first of the main arguments for non-cognitivism considered above. Knowledge of the truth of the claim that people rationally should desire to do what they judge it right (or good or desirable or sensible) to do thus depends on nothing more than an understanding of the meanings of the words used to make the claim. 'Michael sincerely says that it is right (or good or desirable or sensible) to keep promises' would therefore seem to be a normative claim in the very same sense in which 'It is right (or good or desirable or sensible) to keep promises' is normative.

If we put these two points together with the non-cognitivists' commitment to the quite general conclusion of the Open Question Argument, however, then we can derive a contradiction. If, as non-cognitivists say, no normative claim has a naturalistic equivalent, then it cannot be, as they also say, that the claim that people sincerely make normative claims has a naturalistic equivalent. For the claim that people sincerely make normative claims is a normative claim, a normative claim that imports the standards of practical rationality. The additional argument non-cognitivists give for their view thus seems to commit them to embracing a contradiction.

#### **4. Non-cognitivists do not provide us with plausible candidates for the desires and aversions that, by their lights, get expressed in normative claims**

As we have seen, non-cognitivists are committed to giving a naturalistic analysis of the claim that someone sincerely makes a normative claim. Let's put to one side the fact that doing so commits them to closing an open question, thereby contradicting their quite general endorsement of the conclusion of the Open Question Argument. The final problem I wish to highlight focusses instead on the way in which non-cognitivists purport to close this open question.

Non-cognitivists insist that it is analytic that when people sincerely make normative claims they thereby express desires or aversions. But which desires and aversions? On the one hand, they must agree that not just any old desire or aversion is such that, when we express it, we make a normative claim. For example, they must agree that an unwilling addict could rightly claim that it is in no respect desirable for him to take the drugs he takes, notwithstanding the fact that he desires to take them. Whatever form of words he uses to express his addictive desires, then, that form of words must not be interpreted as the making of a normative claim. On the other hand, however, they must also insist that whenever someone makes a normative claim there are desires or aversions which they express. Thus, for example, the non-cognitivist must suppose that the unwilling addict who claims that it is undesirable to take drugs does indeed have aversions that he thereby expresses. But which aversions, and what special feature do they possess that makes them especially suitable for expression in a normative claim? How do they differ from mere desires and aversions that aren't suitable for such expression?

The difficulty involved in supposing that there are any such desires or aversions at all cannot be overestimated. It is, after all, agreed on all sides that the psychological state we express when we make a normative claim has many of the functional features of belief. The difficulty, to anticipate, is that it is hard to see how desires or aversions could have exactly these functional features, given that the main difference between beliefs, on the one hand, and desires and aversions, on the other, is that they differ in just these functional respects. In order to see this, consider the functions of belief and desire, and then compare these with the functional of the psychological state we are in when we are disposed to make a normative claim.

The function of a belief is to represent things as being a certain way. Beliefs manage to do this, in part, by coming prepackaged with links to other beliefs and perceptions that serve as sources of epistemic support. In the absence of these, beliefs simply disappear. To believe something at all is thus to believe a whole host of things which, together, are supposed to provide some sort of justification for what is believed. But desires, by contrast, are the exact opposite of beliefs in just this respect. The function of a desire is not to represent things as being a certain way, but rather (very roughly) to represent things as being the way they are to be. Desires thus do not come prepackaged with links to other desires which provide them with some analogue of epistemic support. Insofar as they come prepackaged at all they come prepackaged with the potential to link with beliefs about means with which, in combination, they can produce action, and in the absence of which they remain (more or less) dormant.

Now consider the psychological states we express when we make normative claims. On the face of it these psychological states would seem to be functionally like both desires and beliefs (Smith 1994 pp. 4–13). They are like desires in that those who are in the psychological state that they would express in the claim that (say) it is desirable to act in a certain way are thereby disposed to so act, at least absent practical irrationality. This is just Normative Judgement Internalism again. But these psychological states are also functionally like beliefs in that they come prepackaged with links to other psychological states that provide them with (some analogue of) epistemic support. Indeed, it is this function that provides cognitivists with their main reason for being cognitivists (Brink 1989, pp. 6–7).

Thus, for example, to accept the desirability of keeping promises is to be disposed to accept a whole host of claims which,



as it seems to us, together provide this claim with some sort of justification, and in the absence of which acceptance of the desirability of keeping promises would simply disappear. This is why the procedure of reflective equilibrium Rawls describes sounds so platitudinous, for the reflective equilibrium procedure simply takes to the limit the commonplace procedure whereby we test the various particular normative claims we accept against the host of other normative (and non-normative) claims we thereby accept and from which the various particular normative claims we accept gain their (analogue of) epistemic support (Rawls 1951).

It should now be plain why there is a special difficulty involved in finding desires or aversions that share the functional features of the psychological states that we express when we make normative claims. For the difference between beliefs and desires and aversions is, *inter alia*, that desires and aversions do not come pre-packaged with links to other desires and aversions which provide them with some analogue of epistemic support. This is why the unwilling addict can rightly claim that it is in no respect desirable for him to take drugs, notwithstanding the fact that he desires to take them. The unwilling addict's desire for drugs exists entirely independently of any links to desires or aversions that provide it with some analogue of epistemic support. It is simply a brute drive caused in him by his consumption of drugs. When a non-cognitivist tries to spell out the nature of the special desires and aversions that we express when we make normative claims, then, he must take care to stipulate the presence of such links.

Notwithstanding the fact that desires and aversions do not come prepackaged with links to other desires and aversions that provide them with some analogue of epistemic support, it is thus crucial to the truth of non-cognitivism that such links do exist. But nor, as we have seen, should we be skeptical about this. For many of the links among desires and aversions are ordinarily agreed to provide them with an analogue of epistemic support (Williams 1980; Smith 1994, pp. 155–161). For example, desires and aversions, like beliefs, are sensitive to information. The fact that a particular desire or aversion is uninformed and would disappear upon the impact of information – imagine someone who has a preference for drinking red wine over white, but who is ignorant of the taste of both, and yet would hate red wine if he tasted it and enjoy white – is ordinarily taken to be grounds for criticism. Desires and aversions, like beliefs, also fit together in more and less coherent ways. The fact that a particular desire or

aversion contributes incoherence to the overall set of desires and aversions of which it is a member is thus also ordinarily taken to be grounds for criticism. Finally, desires and aversions fit together with other desires and aversions in more or less unified ways, much as beliefs fit together with other beliefs in more or less unified ways. The fact that a desire or aversion contributes disunity to the overall set of desires and aversions of which it is a member is thus also ordinarily taken to be grounds for criticism.

What a non-cognitivist must stipulate, then, when he tries to spell out the special nature of the desires and aversions that we express when we make normative claims, is that these desires and aversions are parts of sets of such special desires and aversions that are, in turn, sufficiently informed and coherent and unified (where to say that a set of desires and aversions is 'sufficiently' informed and coherent and unified is simply to say that the links among the desires and aversions in that set are similar in number and quality to the minimum number and quality of epistemic links among beliefs that we are prepared to tolerate for the ascription of a belief). To repeat, he must stipulate such links on pain of failing to capture the functional role of the psychological states that we express when we make normative claims.

With this in mind let's now consider one well known non-cognitivist's recent attempt to spell out the nature of the special desires and aversions we express when we make normative claims. The following is from Simon Blackburn's *Ruling Passions* (1998).

We should think in terms of a staircase of practical and emotional ascent. At the bottom are simple preferences, likes, and dislikes. More insistent is a basic hostility to some kind of action or character or situation: a primitive aversion to it, or a disposition to be disgusted by it, or to hold it in contempt, or to be angered by it, or to avoid it. We can then ascend to reactions to such reactions. Suppose you become angry at someone's behavior. I may become angry at you for being angry, and I may express this by saying it is none of your business. Perhaps it was a private matter. At any rate, it is not a moral issue. Suppose, on the other hand, I share your anger or feel 'at one' with you for so reacting. It may stop there, but I may also feel strongly disposed to encourage others to share the same anger. By then I am clearly treating the matter as one of public concern, something like a moral issue. I have come to regard the sentiment as legitimate (Blackburn 1998, p. 9).

As I read this passage, the last sentence is supposed to be the conclusion of an argument whose premises are spelled out earlier on in the passage. Blackburn continues:

Going up another step, the sentiment may even become compulsory in my eyes, meaning that I become prepared to express hostility to those who do not themselves share it. Going up another level, I may also think that this hostility is compulsory, and be prepared to come into conflict with those who, while themselves concerned at what was done, tolerate those who do not care about it. I shall be regarding dissent as beyond the pale, unthinkable. This should all be seen as an ascending staircase, a spiral of emotional identifications and demands. The staircase gives us a scale between pure preference, on the one hand, and attitudes with all the flavor of ethical commitment, on the other (Blackburn 1998, p. 9).

And again, as he puts it later:

To sum up, then: to hold a value is to have a relatively fixed attitude to some aspect of things, an attitude with which one identifies in the sense of being set to resist change, or set to feel pain when concerns are not met. That fixed attitude typically issues in many dispositions, at various places on the staircase of emotional ascent I described (Blackburn 1998, p. 68).

Blackburn thus clearly thinks that he has made a case for the idea that someone who has the higher order attitudes and dispositions he describes is in a state of mind that is best described as a normative commitment: having the higher-order attitudes entails having the normative commitment. These are therefore the special attitudes he thinks get expressed when we make normative claims.

As is perhaps already clear, however, Blackburn's official story is unconvincing. For we can readily imagine someone who (say) has a desire that people keep their promises, and who shares many other people's anger at those who fail to keep their promises, and who feels disposed to encourage others to share that same anger too, and who feels disposed to be angry at those who don't share that anger, and yet who doesn't regard any of these sentiments as being in the least legitimate. We need simply to imagine someone who, in addition, regards all of his various attitudes towards promising in much the same way as the unwilling addict regards his addiction. He might think, for example, that these attitudes were all simply caused in him by social forces,

in much the same way as the ingestion of drugs caused the unwilling addict's desire to take drugs in him, and that no reasons can therefore be given in support of acting on the basis of these attitudes, much as the addict thinks that no reasons can be given for his acting on his desire to take drugs. In short, then, nothing about the mere location of attitudes on the staircase of emotional and practical ascent Blackburn describes suggests that they have any analogue of epistemic support at all, that is, that they are parts of sets of desires and aversions that are sufficiently informed and coherent and unified. Blackburn's account thus quite decisively fails to capture the functional role of the psychological states we express when we make normative claims.

It might be thought that Blackburn has an obvious reply to this objection. For he could simply stipulate that the syndrome of attitudes that he says get expressed in normative claims are parts of such sets. I will consider this reply below. But, even conceding for a moment that this reply succeeds (which I doubt), the very fact that he needs to make the reply must surely be an embarrassment to him. For it amounts to an admission that what makes a desire justified, and hence immune to criticism, is its being part to a set of desires that is informed and coherent and unified, and this is tantamount to admitting that at least one normative claim – the claim that a desire is justified, or immune from criticism – is the expression of a belief, rather than a desire. This is cognitivism, not non-cognitivism.

Let's now consider the view about the nature of the special desires and aversions we express when we make normative claims to which Blackburn would be committed if he were to make the obvious reply to the objection just stated. When we make such claims Blackburn would have to say that we thereby express certain desires or aversions that are located in his preferred place on the staircase of emotional and practical ascent, but he would then have to add that these desires and aversions exist alongside other similarly located desires and aversions which are such that, together, they make up a sufficiently informed and coherent and unified set. Would this solve the problem? It would not, as we could evidently believe that we have such desires and aversions, and hence believe that they are justified or immune to criticism *relative to* the sufficiently informed and coherent and unified set of which they are members, and yet also believe that we would not have such desires and aversions if we had a set of desires and aversions that was *maximally* informed and coherent and unified. (A

coherent sub-set of desires and aversions might fail to cohere with the larger set of which it is a sub-set.) In that case I take it that we would not believe that the original desires and aversions were justified or immune from criticism at all. We would rather believe the opposite.

The upshot would therefore seem to be that since, when we claim that it is desirable or undesirable to act in a certain way, we must suppose that we have a justification for making this claim, and since, by the non-cognitivist's own lights, we could not suppose that we have such a justification if we believed that the desires or aversions that we thereby express would be no part of a maximally informed and coherent and unified set of desires and aversions, so, when we make a such a claim, we must at least implicitly believe that the desires or aversions we thereby express would be part of a maximally informed and coherent and unified set of desires and aversions. Only so does it appear that we could take ourselves to have the sort of justification we require.

However, if this is right, then it follows that Blackburn must further revise his account of the nature of the special desires and aversions that we express when we make normative claims. He must suppose not just that we express certain desires or aversions that are located in his preferred place on the staircase of emotional and practical ascent he describes, and not just that these desires and aversions exist alongside other similarly located desires and aversions which, together, make up a sufficiently informed and coherent and unified set. He must suppose that, in addition, these desires and aversions are possessed in the presence of at least an implicit belief that such desires and aversions would be possessed if we had a set of desires and aversions that was maximally informed and coherent and unified.

If Blackburn were to revise his account of what makes desires and aversions special in this way, however, then he would all but have abandoned his non-cognitivism. For only a very tiny step is required to move from something that would then be agreed by both Blackburn and his cognitivist opponent alike – that when we claim that it is desirable or undesirable to act in a certain way *we must believe* that we would have corresponding desires or aversions if we had a set of desires and aversions that was maximally informed and coherent and unified – to a version of cognitivism pure and simple: that is, to the view that when we make that claim *we thereby express that belief, not the desire*. Nor is it difficult to see what would motivate someone to take that step.

After all, as we have seen, even by Blackburn's own lights, the actual presence of the desires and aversions need play no essential role in the explanation of the belief-like functions of the psychological state that we express when we make a normative claim. These functions could all be explained by the presence of the belief whose presence must now be posited. And nor, as I argued above, need the actual presence of desires and aversions play any role in the explanation of the desire-like functions of the psychological state that we express when we make a normative claim either. That is well explained by the belief whose presence must now be posited as well, together with the fact that agents have a general capacity to acquire the beliefs and desires that are mandated of them by considerations of coherence. Indeed, it is hard to see any work at all that is being done by Blackburn's suggestion that the desires we express must be located on his staircase of practical and emotional ascent.

But if the actual presence of desires and aversions need play no role in the explanation of either the belief-like or the desire-like functions of the psychological state we express when make a normative claim, and if no other work is being done by them either, then the postulation of their presence is completely idle. It would therefore be far better to take that tiny step and say that when we make a normative claim we thereby express just the belief that we would have certain desires or aversions if we had a set of desires and aversions that was maximally informed and coherent and unified. The distinctive non-cognitivist claim that we also express a desire of some yet-to-be-specified kind is beside the point.

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