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NON-COGNITIVISM AND FUNDAMENTAL MORAL CERTITUDE: REPLY TO ERIKSSON AND FRANCÉN OLINDER

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Accommodating degrees of moral certitude is a serious problem for non-cognitivism about ethics. In particular, non-cognitivism has trouble accommodating fundamental moral certitude. John Eriksson and Ragnar Francén Olinder have recently proposed a solution [2016]. In fact, Eriksson and Francén Olinder offer two different proposals: one ‘classification’ account and one ‘projectivist’ account. We argue that the classification account faces the same problem as previous accounts, while the projectivist account has unacceptable implications. Non-cognitivists will have to look elsewhere for a plausible solution to the problem of accommodating fundamental moral certitude.

Keywords: certitude; moral judgement; non-cognitivism

1. Introduction

Moral judgements, like all kinds of judgements, vary in degrees of certitude. We can be more or less certain, for example, that eating meat is morally wrong, that euthanasia is morally permissible, or that utilitarianism is true. Accommodating degrees of moral certitude is a serious problem for non-cognitivism about ethics, according to which moral judgements are primarily desire-like attitudes of approval and disapproval. In particular, non-cognitivists face severe trouble accommodating degrees of *fundamental* moral certitude. John Eriksson and Ragnar Francén Olinder have recently offered what they claim is a new solution on behalf of non-cognitivism.¹ In fact, they offer two accounts: a ‘classification’ account and a ‘projectivist’ account. In this note, we argue that their classification account of moral certitude is not immune to objections that we have pressed against previous attempts at a solution in our previous work (sections 2 and 3). Furthermore, their projectivist account invites new and equally damaging objections (section 4).

2. Previous Proposals

¹ Eriksson and Francén Olinder [2016]. All page references in the text are to this article, unless otherwise indicated.

In trying to accommodate degrees of moral certitude, non-cognitivists have two main options: they can either try to accommodate it in terms of strength of the relevant desire-like attitude or in terms of degree of a relevant kind of belief that may partly constitute moral judgement or necessarily accompany attitudes of moral approval and disapproval. Michael Ridge [2003, 2007] and Andrew Sepielli [2012] take the first approach, while Jimmy Lenman [2003] takes the second. In our previous work, we have criticised all of these proposals [Bykvist and Olson 2009, 2012]. Eriksson and Francén Olinder accept our arguments against Ridge's and Sepielli's respective elaborations of the first approach, but they take Lenman's approach to be 'on the right track' [721]. In order to illustrate a major weakness in Eriksson and Francén Olinder's classification account, it is useful to run through quickly Lenman's proposal and our earlier criticism of it.

According to Lenman, moral judgements are constituted by desire-like attitudes of approval or disapproval and beliefs. Suppose that a person, S, judges that it would be wrong for S to lie in a context, C. Simplifying somewhat, Lenman's view is that S's judgement is constituted by S's attitude of approval of the desire set of a hypothetical 'improved' version of S, and S's belief that improved S would desire that actual S does not lie in C [Lenman 2003]. For example, actual S might approve of an improved version of herself that displays a Kantian pattern of motivation. S's certitude that it would be wrong for her to lie in C would then be a matter of her degree of belief that improved S would desire that actual S refrain from lying in C.

The problem with this account is that it has no resources to accommodate degrees of *fundamental moral* certitude. As we put it in one of our previous articles [2009: 210]:

[F]or any descriptive specification of improved agents, there is room for uncertainty as to whether anything that this improved agent would approve of really is right. Lenman's

proposal can only account for uncertainty as to whether a descriptively specified ideal agent would (dis)approve of certain actions. But this is uncertainty about purely *empirical* matters of fact; it is not *moral* uncertainty.

Eriksson and Francén Olinder appear to hold that moral uncertainty is a disunified phenomenon and that different cases of moral certainty should be treated differently. They identify three ‘sources’ or ‘causes’ of moral uncertainty [725-30] and state their positive non-cognitivist proposals about what it is to be to some degree certain about some moral matter in the second half of their article [731-3]. We shall put to one side the first ‘source’, indeterminate moral standards, since it is obvious that one can be uncertain about determinate fundamental principles as well as certain about indeterminate fundamental principles. We shall next explain their classification account and why it is not immune to the problem of fundamental moral certitude that Lenman’s view faces.

3. The Classification Account and Why it Fails

According to Eriksson and Francén Olinder, moral judgements are analogous to certain descriptive judgements. Judging an object to be an F (where ‘F’ is a descriptive predicate such as, for example, ‘chair’, ‘adult’ or ‘horse’) involves both a belief that the object has certain natural features and a disposition to apply the concept F to objects with those features in both actual and hypothetical scenarios. This disposition constitutes the judge’s ‘classificatory standard’ for when an object falls under a certain concept. So, for example, someone who possesses the concept of *bachelor* would be disposed to apply it to all unmarried men. Analogously, judging that an action, x, is right involves both a belief that x has some natural features and a classificatory standard—a disposition to classify actions as having these natural features. In addition, in order for the judgement to be *moral*, there has to be an attitude of

approval of the action and this approval has to be ‘regulated’ in right way by the classificatory standard [724]. So, if you are a hedonistic utilitarian, your attitudes of moral approval are regulated by your disposition to classify actions as having the property of maximizing overall happiness.

Eriksson and Francén Olinder’s version of non-cognitivism, like Lenman’s, thus take attitudes of moral approval and disapproval to be necessarily accompanied by a belief, and they claim that, ‘to be morally certain *to some degree* is to hold *to that degree* the belief that necessarily accompanies each moral (dis)approval.’ [731, emphases preserved]

Which belief is this? It is perfectly clear which belief Lenman thinks necessarily accompanies each moral approval and disapproval—it is the belief that one’s ideal self would approve, or disapprove, of actions insofar they have certain natural properties. But it is not at all clear which belief Eriksson and Francén Olinder have in mind. Since they agree with us that Lenman’s account of fundamental moral uncertainty does not work, they cannot have in mind the belief he postulates.

Eriksson and Francén Olinder sketch the following model of how moral judgements are formed [731]:

To form moral judgments ... is in part to let one’s moral (dis)approvals be guided by some classificatory standard (one’s moral standard) and one’s application of that standard to (types of) actions. When this is done, the application of the moral standard issues not only in a belief about the act (the content of which is determined by the standard), but also in (dis)approval of it.

This suggests that the attitude of approval or disapproval is directed at a certain kind of property—or at bearers of that property on account of having that property—and that the

belief concerns whether the relevant object has the property in question. To illustrate, suppose that S employs a hedonistic utilitarian standard. S's judgement that it would be obligatory for her to lie in C amounts to approval of actions that maximise happiness, on account of being happiness-maximising, accompanied by a belief that S's lying in C would maximise happiness. On the proposal under consideration, degree of moral certitude is accommodated entirely in terms of the cognitive aspect of moral judgement, that is, the belief about whether the relevant object, action, or whatever, has the relevant property. In the case at hand, S's degree of certitude that it would be obligatory for her to lie in C is entirely a matter of her degree of certitude that her lying in C would maximise happiness.

But this will not give us fundamental moral uncertainty, since uncertainty about whether an act maximizes happiness is, according to Eriksson and Francén Olinder's own account, not a case of fundamental moral uncertainty. As they put it, in the abstract of their paper, '[a] person is *derivatively* [that is, not fundamentally] uncertain about whether an act is, say, morally wrong, when her certainty is at bottom due to uncertainty about whether the act has certain non-moral, descriptive, properties, which she takes to be wrong-making.' [emphasis added; see also 725]

Are there other candidates for beliefs that necessarily accompany attitudes of moral approval and disapproval that would make the account immune to the objection? When they discuss the second 'cause' of fundamental moral uncertainty, Eriksson and Francén Olinder claim that 'some cases of fundamental moral uncertainty originate in uncertainty about the application conditions of one's moral standard' [727]. Regarding someone who often agrees with the verdicts of utilitarianism but still is not fully certain that utilitarianism is correct, they claim that the reason he feels uncertain 'might at bottom be because he is uncertain about whether utilitarianism correctly describes what is right-making *according to his own standard*' [727, emphasis preserved].

However, it does not seem true that, *necessarily*, when one morally approves of something one also has a belief about what is right-making according to one's standard. Furthermore, and more importantly, it is clearly possible to be certain about what is a right-making feature *according to one's standard* and still be uncertain about what is right-making because one is uncertain about whether one's moral standard is correct.

Eriksson and Francén Olinder in effect agree that their proposal fails as a general account of fundamental moral uncertainty. After having identified the first 'cause' of fundamental moral uncertainty as having to do with indeterminacies of moral standards [725-6], and the second 'cause' as uncertainty about the content of one's own moral standard [726-9], they admit that neither of the two fully explains the phenomenon of degrees of fundamental moral certitude, precisely because one can be 'perfectly certain that [one's] standard is ... a hedonistic utilitarian one and that it is fully determinate [and] still be uncertain about whether hedonistic utilitarianism is correct, since [one] may hold open that [one's] own classifications are not the correct ones' [729]. But this is precisely the phenomenon that is central to the debate. Like Lenman's and Ridge's proposals, the classification account fails to accommodate degrees of fundamental moral certitude. Eriksson and Francén Olinder agree but maintain that they have an alternative account, according to which fundamental moral uncertainty can 'be straightforwardly explained without reference to standards' [729-30].

4. The Projectivist Account and Why it Fails

The alternative 'standard-independent' explanation that Eriksson and Francén Olinder offer is the following (it is also what they identify as the third 'cause' of fundamental moral uncertainty) [730]:

Even if moral judgements are not mental states of a kind that can (mis)represent the

world, we can be uncertain about whether they do correctly represent it as long as we (falsely) believe (or suspect) that they are such states and we recognize that we are fallible. In other words, we can have a (false) belief about our moral judgments—that they might misrepresent the world. ... [N]on-cognitivists can (and often do) refer to the idea of projection to explain why we have this false conception.

The thought here seems to be that degrees of fundamental moral certitude presuppose that we believe (falsely, according to non-cognitivism) about our moral judgements that they are (wholly constituted by) beliefs. This means that degrees of fundamental moral certitude require having (false) metaethical beliefs. This view has many problems.

First, it is clear that one can *make moral judgements* without having ever considered the *metaethical* question whether one's moral judgements are beliefs that can correctly represent moral facts. So this metaethical belief cannot be the belief that *necessarily* accompanies moral judgements (or attitudes of approval and disapproval). Second, and related to the first point, one can be *more or less certain* that one ought to maximize overall happiness without having beliefs about whether one's moral judgements that one ought to do so is a belief that can correctly represent moral facts. Fundamental moral certitude does not require metaethical reflection. Third, this view implies that fully convinced non-cognitivists cannot be fundamentally morally uncertain, since they are fully certain that moral judgements are not beliefs. So, if you fully believed non-cognitivism, you could no longer be more or less certain about fundamental moral principles. This is a highly *self-effacing* way of accommodating degrees of fundamental moral certitude: only by not fully believing non-cognitivism can degrees of fundamental moral certitude be accommodated.

Even bracketing these three critical points, there is a more fundamental problem. The projectivist explanation is far from 'straightforward', for it is not at all clear how false beliefs

about our moral judgements are supposed to accommodate or explain degrees of moral certitude. Of course, I can have a false belief that my moral judgement is a belief *that I hold with a certain degree*. But how could this make it true that the moral judgement *itself* comes in degrees? Since thinking that something is a belief cannot make it so, thinking that something has a degree of belief cannot make it have it either.

Perhaps the idea is that it is the degree of the (metaethical) *belief about* my moral judgements that determines the degree of moral certainty. To fit the general idea that ‘to be morally certain *to some degree* is to hold *to that degree* the belief that necessarily accompanies each moral (dis)approval’ [731], the underlying principle must be this:

(P) If you believe to degree *n* that your moral judgement that *x* is right (wrong) is a belief that correctly represents moral facts, then you are certain to degree *n* that *x* is right (wrong).

Principle (P) can be used to explain why non-cognitivists themselves can be morally uncertain. For even if you are a non-cognitivist, you might not be fully certain that non-cognitivism is true in which case you will have some small degree of belief in cognitivism. If you have a small degree of belief in cognitivism, you have a small degree of belief that your moral judgement that *x* is right is a belief that correctly represents moral facts, since the proposition that your moral judgement that *x* is right is a belief that correctly represents moral facts entails cognitivism, and, in general, if *p* entails *q*, the credence in *p* has to be small if the credence in *q* is small. Given (P), we get the result that you are certain to a small degree that *x* is right. So we now have an account of moral uncertainty that is applicable to committed non-cognitivists.

This is cold comfort, however. Moral uncertainty has been accounted for, but at the cost of

moral *certainty*! Here is why: (P) applies no matter what the content of the moral judgement is. For instance, it applies to the judgement is that *torturing babies for fun is wrong*. So, if you only have little confidence in cognitivism (because you are almost certain that non-cognitivism is true), then you have little confidence that the moral judgement that torturing babies for fun is wrong is a belief that correctly represents moral facts. We get the result that you have little confidence in the claim that torturing babies for fun is wrong. So, non-cognitivists cannot be sure, or even be certain to a high degree, that torturing babies for fun is wrong. Indeed, they cannot be sure, or certain to a high degree, about *any* moral judgement—not a nice result if you are non-cognitivist who wants to accommodate not just moral uncertainty but also moral certainty. Eriksson and Francén Olinder's paper occasionally gives the impression that the challenge for non-cognitivists is merely to explain how we can be morally uncertain (that is, have a low degree of certitude). But it is important to stress that the challenge is to accommodate *degrees of moral certitude*; the fact that we (including non-cognitivists) can be *more or less* certain regarding moral matters.

This concludes our critical discussion of the possible candidates for the belief that necessarily accompanies moral (dis)approvals and the degree of which can be identified with the degree of fundamental moral certitude. The candidates we have looked at are:

- (1) the belief that one's ideal self would approve of actions insofar as they have certain natural features (Lenman's proposal);
- (2) the belief that the action has a certain natural feature, for example, the property of maximizing overall happiness, and this belief triggers moral approval (no one's proposal—this is what Eriksson and Francén Olinder call 'derived' moral uncertainty);
- (3) the belief that a certain natural feature is right-making according to one's standard (Eriksson and Francén Olinder's classificatory account);
- (4) the belief that one's moral judgement is a belief that correctly represents moral facts

(Eriksson and Francén Olinder's projectivist account).

Since none of these beliefs necessarily accompanies moral judgements and comes in degrees that can be identified with degrees of fundamental moral certitude, we conclude that Eriksson and Francén Olinder's proposed accounts of fundamental moral certitude fail. Non-cognitivists must look elsewhere for a viable solution to the problem.²

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191-207.