Nondescriptivist Cognitivism: Framework for a New Metaethic

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We propose to break some new ground in metaethics by sketching a view about moral judgments and statements that departs from traditional ways of thinking about them. As the title suggests, our view combines a nondescriptivist account of moral judgments and statements—they are not in the business of describing moral facts—with the cognitivist idea that moral judgments are genuine beliefs and moral statements are genuine assertions. We claim that in addition to descriptive beliefs, there are (moral) evaluative beliefs which are neither reducible to, nor a species of, beliefs of the former type. We think that our kind of metaethical view has obvious advantages over the standard menu of options (versions of realism, rationalism, relativism, error theory, and forms of standard nondescriptivism)—advantages that will become apparent as we proceed.

Our plan is to begin (section I) by questioning a deeply embedded assumption of traditional metaethical thinking which we think has unfortunately and unnecessarily blocked from view the metaethical theory we favor and which, when rejected, opens up some new metaethical territory worth exploring. We then proceed in sections II—VI to outline our positive view by developing a new framework for understanding belief and assertion within which nondescriptivist cognitivism emerges as a consistent and plausible metaethical contender. In section VII we consider various challenges to our brand of cognitivism, explaining how our view can answer such challenges and also indicating some of the main tasks that lie ahead for any attempt to develop the view further.

Our central focus will be on moral judgments, with much of what we say applying mutatis muntandis to moral statements. Sometimes, but not always, we will explicitly extend points made about judgments to the case of statements too.

I. The Semantic Assumption

In order to focus on the semantic assumption that we think ought to be rejected, we distinguish three notions of semantic content.

First, let judgments whose overall content is expressible by declarative sentences be called *declarative* judgments, and let the overall content of such a judgment be called its *declarative content*. Declarative content, then, is possessed simply as a result of grammatical form. Typical moral judgments are expressible by declarative sentences (e.g., 'Apartheid is wrong'; 'Himmler was an evil man'), and so in metaethics all competing views—descriptivist and nondescriptivist alike—must grant that moral judgments have declarative content.

Even if all metaethical views recognize that moral judgments have declarative content, they disagree over whether such judgments also have *cognitive content*. Cognitive content is belief-eligible

and assertible content, and so to say that a judgment has such content is to say that the judgment is a genuine belief. Correspondingly, to say that a statement has cognitive content is to say that it is a genuine assertion. Although talk of cognitive *content* might be a relatively recent bit of philosophical nomenclature, talk of cognitive *meaning* has a history of use in metaethics, though the two expressions may be used to signify the same thing. Of course, there have been sharp divisions within metaethics over the question of whether or not moral judgments and statements have cognitive content and if so, whether such content is semantically primary. Cognitivists in metaethics affirm that typical moral judgments have cognitive content, while their noncognitivist opponents deny that the declarative content of a moral judgment is cognitive (or primarily cognitive).[1]

But notice that what has been taken for granted in analytic philosophy generally, and metaethics in particular, is the idea that for content to be genuinely cognitive it must be in the business of purporting to represent how the world is. And this brings us to a third notion of content—*descriptive* content. Descriptive content is content that purports to represent the world as being a certain way, and is characteristic of ordinary nonmoral beliefs about the world. The judgment that Clinton was impeached has as its overall cognitive content the descriptive content, *Clinton's having been impeached*.[2]

Now, according to our view, moral judgments are genuine beliefs and moral statements are genuine assertions. Consequently, moral judgments and statements have declarative content that is genuinely cognitive—that is, they have belief-eligible, assertible content. Cognitivism in ethics is the view that moral judgments are genuinely cognitive in their content, and so we are ethical cognitivists. Cognitive content has been assumed, by all parties in these discussions, to be the same thing as descriptive content. Thus, 'descriptivism' and 'cognitivism' have been seen as alternative labels for the same kind of metaethical position. In opposition to the tradition, we maintain that the declarative content of moral beliefs and assertions is not a species of, nor is it reducible to, descriptive content—content that represents the world as being a certain way. We therefore reject metaethical descriptivism; on our view, moral beliefs (and the sentences expressing them) are not descriptive.

This combination of cognitivism and nondescriptivism flies in the face of a deeply embedded assumption that we call the *semantic assumption*:

SA   All genuinely cognitive content is descriptive content—i.e., way-the-world-might-be content. Thus, mental states like beliefs and linguistic items like sentences that have cognitive content are in the business of representing some (putative) state of affairs or stating some (putative) fact.

This assumption, we claim, is a largely unquestioned dogma of both descriptivist and nondescriptivist views in metaethics, and (we think) is the main culprit that stands in the way of developing a fully adequate metaethical account of moral thought and discourse.[3] Let us briefly review how it figures in traditional metaethical thought.

Suppose one accepts what we call the *thesis of semantic unity*:

SU   Sentences with the grammatical and logical trappings of assertion have genuine cognitive content. Similarly, judgments whose content is expressible by such sentences have genuine cognitive content.

So now consider a typical (if somewhat simplified) line of thought behind versions of metaethical descriptivism. The descriptivist begins with the following observation about moral thought and discourse:

M   Moral thought and discourse manifest the relevant grammatical and logical features that are characteristic of genuine belief and assertion.

Now this claim, together with the idea that judgments having such grammatical and logical trappings really are genuinely cognitive (SU) and that all genuinely cognitive content is descriptive (SA) entail the main descriptivist claim:

D   Moral thought and discourse have descriptive content, i.e., declarative moral content is descriptive.

By contrast, the traditional nondescriptivist rejects metaethical descriptivism, recognizes that moral discourse has all the grammatical and logical trappings of genuine cognitive content, but then, given the semantic assumption, is forced to reject the thesis of semantic unity. That is, the traditional nondescriptivist reasons as follows: not-D; M; SA; therefore not-SU. And so the nondescriptivist, rejecting the thesis of semantic unity, must distinguish, for moral discourse, between surface features of moral thought and discourse and the supposedly deep features that reveal its true semantical workings. Hence, the project of the traditional nondescriptivist was to characterize the deep semantic workings of moral thought and discourse—often through reductive meaning analyses that essentially equated declarative moral content with some kind of non-cognitive content expressible in non-declarative language. Eschewing descriptive declarative content for moral thought and discourse, the traditionalist embraced some form of noncognitivism (e.g., emotivism).[4]

Our proposal is to break away from all this by rejecting the semantic assumption that weds genuine cognitive content to descriptive content. The line of thought we employ, then, could be expressed this way: we do recognize and take seriously the fact that moral thought and discourse display the grammatical and logical trappings of cognitive content, and along with the traditional descriptivists, we agree that such trappings are indicative of genuine, deep, cognitive content for moral thought and discourse; but since we reject descriptivism in ethics, we must hold (and think there is good reason to hold) that some forms of genuinely cognitive thought and discourse are not descriptive.[5] Our project involves staking out a metaethical position according to which this claim, in connection with moral thought and discourse, is both consistent and plausible.

Here, then, is an initial statement of our nondescriptivist cognitivism (henceforth, NDC):

(1) Declarative judgments with moral content are genuine beliefs, having genuinely belief-eligible, cognitive content. Thus, declarative statements with moral content are genuine assertions—their declarative content is cognitive.

(2) However, the cognitive content of such judgments and statements is not descriptive (way-the-the-world-might-be) content.[6]

It will perhaps help if we locate our metaethical position vis-à-vis standard views using a visual aid:

DESCRIPTIVIST COGNITIVISM   **NONDESCRIPTIVIST COGNITIVISM**   **NONCOGNITIVISM**

Descriptive Content   **Nondescriptive Content**

Cognitive Content   **Noncognitive Content**

Declarative Content

Notice that on our diagnosis of what is wrong with traditional metaethics, two levels of content—descriptive/nondescriptive and cognitive/noncognitive—are simply conflated owing to the semantic assumption. Rejecting the assumption and distinguishing these types of content opens up fertile metaethical territory that we plan to explore and cultivate.[7]

II. A Fresh Start

In developing a metaethical theory, one would like to accommodate what seem to be deeply embedded features of moral thought and discourse as plausibly and coherently as possible. One thing that seems clear is that moral judgments and moral statements exhibit many of the characteristics distinctive of genuine belief. First, we have already mentioned that moral judgments have the *logico-grammatical* trappings of genuine beliefs: the content of a moral belief is declarative, and can embed as a constituent of a judgment that has logically complex declarative content (e.g., the judgment that either Jeeves has already mailed Uncle Willoughby's parcel or Bertie ought to mail it).[8] As such, moral judgments can figure in logical inferences. They can combine with other beliefs to yield new beliefs that are content-appropriate given prior beliefs. Second, moral judgments also exhibit *phenomenological* features characteristic of beliefs. They are experienced as psychologically involuntary, and as grounded in reasons: given one's evidence, one cannot help but make certain moral judgments. And because of their reason-based involuntariness, moral judgments exert a felt rational authority upon us.[9] The belief-like nature of typical moral judgments is widely enough recognized and uncontroversial enough that we need not digress here in order to elaborate the case for this claim.

Moral judgments also seem to play a distinctive action-guiding role in a person's overall psychological economy that makes them in some ways unlike ordinary nonmoral beliefs. Typically, anyway, moral judgments directly dispose us toward appropriate action, independently of our pre-existing desires—whereas ordinary nonmoral beliefs only become action-oriented in combination with such prior desires. (Thus, the reason-based authority of moral beliefs typically gives them motivational force, over and above the motivational force of our pre-existing desires and often capable of

"trumping" them.[10]) Associated with this action-guiding role are certain distinctive phenomenological features too—notably, a felt demandingness, a phenomenological "to-be-done-ness." The action-oriented nature of typical moral judgments, with its accompanying typical phenomenology, has led many moral philosophers to embrace some form or other of ethical internalism. Despite difficulties in formulating a plausible form of internalism, we think the insight behind such philosophical views is correct—distinctive of moral judgments is their action-guiding role.[11]

The problem is to plausibly combine these two dominant features of moral judgments—their being a kind of belief and yet mainly in the business of action-guidance—into a plausible metaethical view. Many moral philosophers see a tension here, some opting for nondescriptivist views that would deny that moral judgments have overall cognitive content, others denying internalism. Of course, there are those who attempt to defend cognitivism and internalism, but not too successfully we think.

We are nondescriptivists, and we aim to develop a strain of this general kind of view that fairly accommodates both features just mentioned. Doing so requires that we face three serious tasks:

First Task: Articulate a conception of belief that does not require the overall declarative content of beliefs to be descriptive content.

Second Task: Make a case for the independent plausibility of this conception of belief.

Third Task: Argue that nondescriptivist cognitivism, formulated in a way that draws upon the proposed conception of belief, has significant comparative advantages over descriptivist forms of cognitivism.

The first task is the most basic, because it is not antecedently clear how the semantic assumption, which effectively equates cognitive content with descriptive content, could possibly be mistaken. This task is also the most important, because it is what will open up the new metaethical territory we seek to occupy. We propose to address this challenge by developing a generic framework for belief that does not presuppose that all cognitive content is descriptive content, and therefore is consistent with the claim that some beliefs have overall cognitive content that is not descriptive. (The framework is also consistent with the denial of this claim.) This is the business of section III.[12]

Of course it is not enough just to propose a conception of belief that is *consistent* with the claim that some beliefs have overall content that is not descriptive. For, the proposal might complicate the notions of belief, assertion, and cognitive content in ad hoc, implausible ways, and/or it might seem theoretically unmotivated (and hence, question-begging) from the perspective of advocates of the semantic assumption. The second task, then, is to show that the framework is theoretically plausible *independently* of the fact that it is consistent with the possibility that some beliefs have overall content that is not descriptive. We take up this project in section IV, where we argue that the proposed framework for belief is attractive even for those who accept the semantic assumption, because it provides a way for descriptivist versions of cognitivism to accommodate the internalistic, action-guiding, aspect of moral judgments.

Insofar as the framework turns out to be independently plausible, however, the third task then arises: arguing that nondescriptivist cognitivism, as situated within the framework, is more plausible than descriptivism—and in particular, is more plausible than the kind of descriptivist cognitivism that

is situatable within the same framework (thereby successfully combining descriptivism with internalism). Addressing this issue is the business of section V.

The discussion in sections III-V thus will constitute an articulation of both the metaethical position we advocate and the reasons for embracing it. In section VI we make some observations about the philosophical methodology employed in the preceding sections, in order to underscore how our approach departs from standard metaethical debates not only in substance but also metaphilosophically.

III. A Framework for Belief and Assertion

We will describe a generic approach to belief and assertion that provides the backbone of our brand of nondescriptivist cognitivism. We begin with a characterization of the base case for understanding beliefs and assertions—that is, beliefs and assertions whose declarative content lacks truth-functional or quantificational complexity, and also lacks any embedded deontic operators—and then turn to cases that have that kind of logical complexity.

1. The base case

Speaking most generally, a base-case belief is a kind of psychological commitment state, of which there are two main species: *is-commitments* and *ought-commitments*. Beliefs of both sort have what we call *core descriptive content*—a way-the-world-might-be content. So, for instance, the belief that Bertie will mail the parcel, and the belief that Bertie ought to mail the parcel, share the same core descriptive content, expressible by the non-evaluative that-clause, *that Bertie mail the parcel*. A parallel point applies to assertions, about which we say more below.

An ordinary descriptive belief (purporting to represent how the world is) is an is-commitment with respect to a core descriptive content, and so the belief's declarative content coincides with its core descriptive content. For descriptive base-case beliefs and assertions, then, their overall declarative content is descriptive.

By contrast, an evaluative belief is an ought-commitment with respect to a core descriptive content. Evaluative beliefs differ essentially from descriptive beliefs in the following respect: the core descriptive content of an evaluative belief does not coincide with its overall declarative content. For instance, the belief that Bertie ought to mail the parcel is an ought-commitment with respect to the core content, *that Bertie mail the parcel*; however, its overall declarative content is *that it ought to be that Bertie mail the parcel,* and so its overall declarative content does not coincide with its core descriptive content. Thus, whereas descriptive beliefs involve an is-commitment (a how-it is-with-the-world commitment) with regard to a core descriptive content, moral beliefs involve a different type of commitment: a how-it-ought-to-be-with-the-world commitment with regard to a core descriptive content.[13]

Some observations are in order. First, we previously distinguished three species of content: declarative, cognitive, and descriptive, where we were focusing on an item's *overall* content. Moral judgments certainly have overall declarative content because their overall content is expressible by declarative sentences. Furthermore, within the framework we are proposing, their overall content is also *cognitive* content since they count as genuine beliefs. The framework is officially neutral, however, about whether or not their overall content is *descriptive* content. According to the

metaethical position we will be advocating, moral beliefs do not have overall descriptive content, but the framework could be adopted by someone who thinks their overall content is descriptive. (More on this below.)

Second, even if one denies that the overall content of moral judgments is descriptive content, there is still a kind of descriptive content that is possessed both by ordinary descriptive beliefs and by moral beliefs (as illustrated above in the pair of statements about Bertie). We introduced our notion of core descriptive content to refer to such content. Once one construes a base-case moral judgment as an ought-commitment with respect to a core descriptive content, conceptual space thereby opens up for the claim that the judgment's overall declarative content is cognitive content on the one hand (so that the state is a genuine *belief*), but is nondescriptive on the other hand. Even though the state is a genuine belief, by virtue of being an ought-commitment with respect to a core descriptive content, it doesn't follow that its overall declarative content is descriptive content.

Third, on standard accounts of these matters, a belief involves a relation between a believer (speaker) and a proposition (or sentence, or whatever) such that what is believed is something having overall descriptive content. This conception of belief presupposes the semantic assumption and makes the very idea of nondescriptivist cognitivism incoherent. By contrast, our framework opens up the possibility that certain genuine beliefs have overall declarative content that is not descriptive. Thus, the framework calls into question the common assumption that a belief is always a relation between a believer (speaker) on the one hand, and on the other hand a *proposition* constituting the belief's overall declarative content.

Fourth, in maintaining that there are two distinct base-case species of belief—is-commitments and ought-commitments—we are maintaining that states of both types exhibit certain generic kinds of functional and phenomenological features that qualify them as genuine beliefs. However, in maintaining that ought-commitments are a distinct kind of commitment, to be distinguished from is-commitments, we are also maintaining that ought-commitments exhibit certain functional and phenomenological features that are distinctive of this sort of judgment. We have noted the action-guiding character of typical moral judgments, and here it is worth mentioning that understanding base-case moral beliefs as essentially ought-commitments with regard to a core descriptive content, helps accommodate the widely shared internalist intuition that there is some intimate relation between having a moral belief and action. That is, the very idea of an ought-commitment suggests a kind of commitment oriented toward appropriate action vis-à-vis the specific core descriptive content of the belief. The way to understand this manner of action-orientation is by way of examining the role of such beliefs in the overall cognitive economy of agents.

Just as beliefs are psychological commitment states with a certain distinctive role in psychological economy, assertions are speech acts that play a certain distinctive sociolinguistic role— a role in interpersonal dynamics. An assertion is a *stance-taking* speech act, an act through which (i) one expresses an is-commitment or an ought-commitment with respect to a core descriptive content, and thereby (ii) one positions oneself, within the context of sociolinguistic dynamics, vis-à-vis that core content. A stance is an orientation thereby occupied, within an interpersonal situation. An ought-stance, in particular, is a distinctively *action-guiding* orientation. For instance, to take an ought-stance

with respect to the core descriptive content, *Bertie's mailing the parcel*, is to engage in an action-guiding speech act whose role within interpersonal dynamics is importantly similar to the role of the corresponding psychological ought-commitment (the moral belief) within intrapersonal cognitive economy. This sociolinguistic role involves *reasons* for action, and a preparedness to provide them. By asserting that Bertie ought to mail the parcel, one normally signals one's willingness to defend one's ought-commitment on this matter over and against opposing ought-commitments, including a willingness to give reasons for such a commitment. Normally it is understood that the reasons one is prepared to give are of a certain distinctive kind that, e.g., appeal to impartial considerations bearing on the issue. In general, one enters the space of interpersonal moral discourse and reasoning bound by the sorts of conventions (often unstated and partly inchoate) that govern interpersonal deliberation and discussion about moral issues.[14]

2. The framework continued: logically complex cases

We now generalize our framework, by extending it to beliefs and assertions whose overall declarative content has truth-functional and/or quantificational logical complexity, and/or embedded deontic operators.[15] To begin with, let us restrict the notion of "core descriptive content" to *atomic* descriptive content—the kind of content expressible by atomic sentences. Given this stipulation, here is the key idea for generalizing our approach: whereas a base-case belief is a *logically simple* commitment-state with respect to a *single* core descriptive content, a non-base-case belief is a *logically complex* commitment-state with respect to *several* core descriptive contents. Whereas base-case beliefs comprise two logically simple commitment-types (viz., is-commitment and ought-commitment), non-base-case beliefs comprise a whole recursive hierarchy of logically complex commitment-types, corresponding to the various logical forms that can be exhibited by logically complex declarative sentences. The essential feature of any given logically complex commitment-type is its distinctive *constitutive inferential role* in an agent's cognitive economy (insofar as the agent is rational), a role involving the relevant core descriptive contents.

First let us consider cases of moral belief exhibiting truth-functional complexity, i.e., complexity involving connectives but not quantifiers. On our view, such a belief is to be understood as a logically complex commitment state with respect to a *sequence* of core descriptive contents. So, for example, consider the belief that *either Jeeves mailed the parcel or Bertie ought to mail the parcel*. This belief is a logically complex commitment-state of the logical type $[\phi \lor (Ought)\psi]$, with respect to the sequence of core descriptive contents <Jeeves mailed the parcel, Bertie mails the parcel>. The key to understanding this belief, and others of the same logical type, involves understanding their constitutive inferential role in the psychological economy of the agent. In particular, their role is to combine in a distinctive way with other beliefs (other commitment-states) to inferentially yield further beliefs (further commitment-states). One way to put the main idea about such logically complex commitment states is that the simple constituents of complex commitment states are logically "in the offing" in the sense that the complex commitment state involved in the disjunctive belief, when combined with an appropriate additional belief, rationally-inferentially yields an ought-commitment with declarative moral content. In the example at hand, the embedded moral constituent, *Bertie ought to mail the parcel*, is in the offing in the sense that the complex commitment-state in question, together

with the belief that Jeeves did not mail the parcel, inferentially yields (at least for the minimally rational agent) an ought-commitment with respect to Bertie's mailing the parcel.

Now consider cases of belief with quantificational complexity, i.e., complexity involving quantifiers (and perhaps connectives too). Such a belief is a logically complex commitment-state vis-à-vis a *set* of sequences of core descriptive contents. So, for instance, the belief that *anyone who pinched Uncle Willoughby's parcel ought to mail it*, is a logically complex commitment state of the logical type $(\alpha)[\Phi\alpha \supset (\text{Ought})\Psi\alpha]$, with respect to a set of sequences of core descriptive contents {<Bertie pinched the parcel, Bertie mails the parcel>, <Aunt Agatha pinched the parcel, Aunt Agatha mails the parcel>, . . .}, etc. Again, the essential feature of this type of commitment state is its constitutive inferential role in the psychological economy of the agent. For someone whose belief has the universally quantified declarative content in question, other beliefs with declarative moral content are "in the offing" in the sense that the complex commitment involved in the universally quantified belief, when combined with an appropriate additional belief (e.g., the belief that Bertie pinched the parcel) rationally-inferentially yields an ought-commitment with declarative moral content (e.g., the belief that Bertie ought to mail the parcel).

The aspect of logical complexity arising from embedded 'Ought' operators gets accommodated too, within this framework. Each belief-type involving embedded deontic operators will have its distinctive, constitutive, inferential role in the psychological economy of the rational agent. It is the business of deontic logic to systematize these logical roles.

As we said, on this approach there is a whole recursive hierarchy of commitment-types of increasing logical complexity, corresponding to the hierarchy of increasingly complex logical forms exhibited by declarative sentences that can express the overall declarative content of a belief. Each such commitment is directed toward a core descriptive content, or a sequence of core descriptive contents, or a set of sequences of core descriptive contents. And each such commitment has a constitutive inferential role in psychological economy—a role involving the core descriptive content(s) toward which the commitment is directed.[16]

These observations about beliefs with logically complex declarative content can be extended, mutatis mutandis, to assertions. Whereas a base-case assertion is a speech act of taking a *logically simple* stance with respect to a *single* core descriptive content, a non-base-case assertion is a speech act of taking a *logically complex* stance with respect to *several* core descriptive contents. A logically complex stance plays a constitutive inferential role in the dynamics of sociolinguistic intercourse that is analogous to the constitutive intra-psychological inferential role of logically complex beliefs. The constitutive inferential role is this: to combine with other sociolinguistic stances, taken by making additional assertions, to generate—often automatically and implicitly—certain further stances that are logically implied by one's overt stance-taking speech acts. Implicit is-stances and ought-stances are thus "in the offing" when one makes a logically complex assertion: such an assertion, in combination with appropriate additional ones, will logically generate implicit is-stances or ought-stances with respect to certain core descriptive contents.[17]

Suppose, for example, that one asserts, *either Jeeves mailed the parcel or Bertie ought to mail the parcel*, and one also asserts *Jeeves did not mail the parcel*. The former assertion is a logically

complex stance-taking speech act, of the logical type [ϕ v (Ought)ψ], with respect to the sequence of core descriptive contents, <that Jeeves mailed the parcel, that Bertie mails that parcel>. The latter assertion is a speech act of logical type ~ϕ, with respect to the core descriptive content, that Jeeves mailed the parcel. In performing these two speech acts together, one thereby comes to occupy, as a matter of the logic of speech acts, an ought-stance with respect to the core descriptive content, that Bertie mails the parcel.[18]

3. NDC as a consistent metaethical position

Our main task has been to provide a framework for belief and assertion that renders the basic tenets of NDC consistent. According to NDC, judgments and statements with moral content are genuine beliefs and assertions, having cognitive content, and yet the overall declarative content of such an item is not descriptive. If one accepts the semantic assumption, then such a view is outright inconsistent (since according to that assumption cognitive content just is descriptive content). According to our framework this assumption is not taken for granted; it is quite consistent with our framework to hold that some beliefs and assertions lack overall descriptive content. Consider, once again, base-case moral beliefs and logically complex moral beliefs.

As we have already noted in passing, nothing in the notion of a base-case belief or assertion, construed as an ought-commitment with respect to a core descriptive content, forces on us the claim that the overall declarative content of a such a belief or assertion is descriptive content. And the point generalizes: in light of the previous section, nothing in the notion of a morality-involving logically complex belief (or assertion)—understood as a logically complex commitment with respect to a multiplicity of core descriptive contents (where what is essential about the belief or assertion is its constitutive inferential role)—forces on us the claim that the overall declarative content is descriptive. Thus, the position we call nondescriptivist cognitivism is rendered consistent by our proposed framework.

On the other hand, the framework certainly does not *entail* nondescriptivist cognitivism. Rather, it is neutral with respect to competing metaethical positions that recognize that moral thought and discourse involves genuine beliefs and assertions—that is, competing versions of cognitivism. In particular, our framework is consistent with descriptivist metaethical views. The descriptivist, that is, could grant what we have said about ought-commitments and is-commitments being distinct commitment types, and about beliefs and assertions with complex overall declarative content being logically complex commitments vis-a-vis core descriptive contents, without having to deny that morality-involving beliefs and assertions have overall descriptive content (the fundamental claim of the descriptivist). Our framework, recall, leaves open whether or not the overall declarative content of a moral belief is descriptive.

IV. On the Plausibility of the Framework

A critic might be inclined to say that we are trading in the implausibility of metaethical descriptivism, with its burdensome metaphysical commitments, for a complicated and *ad hoc* framework for belief and assertion, and thus that there is a more or less straight trade off—metaphysical extravagance for semantic complexity. Not so, however, as we will now explain.

Not only is the framework consistent with descriptivism (as already explained), but there is good reason for the descriptivist to embrace our framework: viz., doing so allows the descriptivist to accommodate strongly held and deeply shared internalist intuitions about moral thought and discourse. Adopting the framework, descriptivists would maintain that the belief that, e.g., Bertie ought to mail the parcel is *both* an is-commitment with respect to the overall declarative content (which they understand to be descriptive), *that it ought to be that Bertie mails the parcel,* and an ought-commitment with respect to the core descriptive content, *that Bertie mails the parcel.* Given the specific action-oriented functional role and phenomenology distinctive of ought-commitments, descriptivists could thereby neatly combine their view with internalism. (The point generalizes to encompass morality-involving logically complex commitments as well, since action orientation is inferentially 'in the offing' for these too.) So descriptivists have no reason to suppose that our framework begs any important metaethical questions against them, and they have good reason to positively embrace it.

An adequate metaethical position should be faithful to the phenomena it seeks to understand. If the phenomena are sufficiently complex, then a corresponding degree of complexity in one's metaethical position is theoretically appropriate—not *ad hoc*. Moral judgment and moral discourse have internalist aspects—a form of complexity in the phenomena whose theoretical illumination evidently requires the kind of complexity exhibited by our proposed framework. So even descriptivists have ample reason to embrace the framework.[19]

V. Nondescriptivist Cognitivism versus Descriptivist Cognitivism

Although we will not attempt to explain why we think that all of the various traditional metaethical views are unsatisfying, we do want to say something about the plausibility of our view vis-à-vis descriptivist versions of cognitivism. Doing so is especially important because, as just explained, there is a version of internalist descriptivism that draws upon our own proposed generic framework for belief as a way of combining the idea that moral judgments are genuine beliefs (and moral statements are genuine assertions) with the idea that they are action-guiding. Why prefer our nondescriptivist cognitivism to descriptivism? In particular, why prefer our view to the kind of descriptivist cognitivism that accommodates the internalistic aspects of moral judgment and moral discourse?

We will briefly mention three philosophical reasons for doubting that the declarative content of moral beliefs is descriptive. First is what Jackson (1998) calls the *location problem* in ethics—the problem of locating putative moral facts and properties in the natural world. Pace Jackson and other moral realists, we do not think that the efforts of philosophers to locate moral facts and properties has been, or ever will be, successful. Here, we refer our readers to some of our past writings in which we show (so we think) that various realist attempts to solve the problem inevitably fail, and are destined to keep on failing. (See Horgan and Timmons 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1996a, 1996b, and Timmons 1999.) Of course, even if one cannot solve the metaphysical location problem for ethics, one might, like Mackie, hold that affirmative moral judgments purport to describe or pick out worldly moral facts and properties and thus possess genuine descriptive cognitive content, but that there are no such facts and properties. I.e., one can embrace an error theory. So it may be granted that mere failure to solve the

location problem is far from decisive evidence against descriptivism. But the location problem viewed in light of the next two problems is part of an overall case against descriptivist views in ethics.

Second, in arguing that moral judgments are a species of belief, part of our plan was to show that construing them as beliefs does not commit one to the further theoretical claim that they possess descriptive cognitive content. The point here is that attributing to such beliefs this sort of content is gratuitous for purposes of understanding them as beliefs and understanding their distinctive action-guiding role in our lives. In light of their psychological role and associated phenomenology, there simply is no apparent need to burden them with a kind of theoretical commitment which, given the location problem, cannot be discharged.

Third, the case against descriptivism receives additional support from considerations of convervatism with respect to the nature and evolution of human concepts. Applied to moral notions the argument would go like this. Moral discourse, and moral concepts employed in such discourse, play an indispensable role in human life that would survive rejection of the idea that there are objective moral facts that moral claims purport to describe. Indeed, after Mackie argued that all affirmative moral sentences are false because they involve (so he thought) metaphysical commitments to ontologically 'queer' properties, he did not advocate eliminating the use of moral concepts and moral discourse; rather, he went on to propose a normative ethical system based on a certain conception of human flourishing. Now if we assume that human concepts tend to evolve in a broadly pragmatic way and are thus not likely to have application conditions that are more demanding than is required for the purposes they serve, then the fact that moral discourse would survive the rejection of objective moral facts and properties strongly suggests that such discourse does not have any such metaphysical commitments.

VI. Semantic Illumination by Triangulation

Our main task is completed: we have sketched the rudiments of a new kind of metaethical theory, involving a generic conception of belief and assertion that renders the view a consistent position, and we have indicated briefly what virtues our view has vis-à-vis the more standard metaethical options. Obviously, filling out the theory and defending it against all relevant challenges would require a book or at least a series of articles. However, in the space remaining we will address, if only in a preliminary way, certain questions and matters of detail that have very likely occurred to the attentive reader. In this section we will make some remarks about philosophical methodology in relation to filling out our positive metaethical story about the semantics of moral thought and discourse. Then, in the following section, we will take up more specific questions concerning truth ascription, logical embedding, moral progress, and moral seriousness.

According to our nondescriptivist cognitivism, the contents of moral beliefs and assertions are sui generis in the sense that they cannot be reduced to or analyzed as equivalent to other types of declarative or nondeclarative contents (or even a combination of the two). In this respect, our view is unlike older nondescriptivist views according to which, for instance, moral beliefs and assertions are primarily commands and so have prescriptive content as primary in addition to any descriptive content they may also possess. In rejecting all reductive semantic projects in relation to understanding moral thought and discourse, the appropriate response to questions like 'What is the content or meaning of

moral judgment, M?' is simply to repeat the content of the judgment in question. Thus: 'What is the content of *Genocide is wrong*?' Answer: genocide is wrong. However, offering only such a disquotational response to these kinds of questions about content does not mean that our view is deeply mysterious or that we are obscurantists about matters of moral semantics. Quite the contrary. We maintain that one gains sufficient semantic illumination of the nature of nondescriptive cognitive content precisely by coming to understand the psychological states and speech acts that have it, *as* states and speech acts involving a certain distinctive kind of commitment (or stance taking) with respect to certain core descriptive contents. Such understanding involves coming to appreciate in enough detail the psychological role and associated phenomenology definitive of the relevant psychological states, and, correspondingly, by coming to appreciate in enough detail the sort of sociolinguistic role of the relevant speech acts. In short, illuminating the characteristic roles of moral thought and discourse helps one understand the sui generis kind of cognitive content moral beliefs and utterances possess. We call this kind of methodology for illuminating content, *triangulation*, which we have employed in sketching our semantic story about both base case and logically complex moral beliefs and assertions. Thus our break with metaethical tradition involves not only our proposed metaethical theory but our methodology as well.

VII. Work to be Done

We turn finally to various challenges that may have occurred to our readers, in order to indicate at least roughly how we propose to deal with them. Specifically, we take up issues of truth ascription, logical embedding, moral progress, and moral seriousness.

1. Truth ascription

According to NDC, moral judgments are genuine beliefs, and moral utterances are genuine assertions. But the concepts of belief and assertion are linked by platitudes to the concept of truth: a belief is a psychological state that aims at truth; to assert is to set forth as true. How does our view deal with matters of truth? After all, being nondescriptivists, we claim that moral beliefs and associated speech acts lack overall descriptive content; they are not in the business of representing or purporting to describe the world.

On our view, the proper way to gain illumination about matters of truth in relation to moral thought and discourse is to focus on truth ascriptions to moral statements as metalinguistic speech acts, and ask about the nature of these speech acts. When one thinks or remarks, 'The claim that apartheid ought to be stopped is true', what is one doing? The appropriate answer involves noting that such a truth ascription constitutes a *morally engaged* semantic appraisal: one that is infused with one's own moral commitment. The main idea can perhaps be conveyed by saying that truth ascriptions to moral statements involve a kind of appraisal in which semantic and moral are "fused"—which is to be expected, since ordinary uses of the truth predicate operate in accordance with schema T.[20]

In recent years, so-called *minimalist* treatments of truth have been developed and defended— views that attempt to make sense of truth ascription without robust metaphysical commitments. Our view is in the minimalist spirit though we would insist on two things. First, to understand truth minimalistically in one discourse does not commit one to minimalism in relation to every mode of

discourse.[21] Second, there is an interesting story to be told about moral truth ascription; our view is not a simple redundancy view.

2. Embedding

A certain problem involving embedded contexts has been frequently pressed against various forms of nondescriptivism. One common way of raising the embedding challenge is to point out that inferences like the following seem to be valid: (1) One ought not to kill; (2) If one ought not to kill, then one ought not pay someone to kill; thus, (3) One ought not pay someone to kill. The problem for, say, an emotivist is that according to emotivism, the meaning of premise (1) is to be understood in terms of its noncognitive emotive role in thought and assertion, viz., to express one's emotion and influence the attitudes of others. However, in premise (2), where (1) occurs as the antecedent of the conditional, (1) is not expressed with its typical emotive role; one who affirms premise (2) is not thereby committed to affirming its antecedent. But then it appears that one has to say that 'one ought not to kill' differs in meaning in its two occurrences in the argument which implies that, despite appearances, the argument is not valid; it commits the fallacy of equivocation. The critic pressing this objection presumably thinks that only if moral statements have descriptive content, and so can be understood in terms of some set of descriptive truth conditions—something that a statement carries from unembedded to embedded contexts—can we make sense of moral modus ponens and other such valid inferences.[22]

Our reply to this challenge is implicit in our above discussion of logical complexity. In developing our framework in connection with logically complex moral beliefs and assertions, we noted that the declarative content of such beliefs and statements can be triangulated in terms of their constitutive inferential role in modus ponens and other argument forms. Thus, the conditional statement, 'If one ought not to kill, then one ought not pay someone to kill', is to be understood primarily in terms of its role in mediating inference from an affirmation of its antecedent to an affirmation of its consequent, as in the little argument featured above. So on our view, to get a handle on embedded moral claims involves understanding the role of the kinds of logically complex statements that embed them. What one can say about the contents of embedded and unembedded occurrences of some one moral claim is that (1) they share the same core descriptive content, (2) in an embedded context an ought commitment with respect to that core content is "suspended," but nevertheless (3) the overall claim containing the embedded context expresses a logically complex commitment state whose constitutive role in inference is such that an ought commitment with respect to the relevant core descriptive content is "in the offing." To make these observations, we think, is to make sense of valid inference involving embedded moral constituents.

Often when the embedding issue is raised, those posing the challenge assume that one must first give an account of the meaning of moral statements, and then show that their meaning (according to the given account) remains constant when the statements are embedded. But, given our proposed framework for belief and assertion, this methodological assumption gets called into question. On our approach, *what it is* for a statement S with nondescriptive cognitive content to have constant meaning, whether unembedded or in various embedded contexts, *just is* for the states and speech acts whose overall declarative content includes S (i.e., whose overall declarative content is expressible by a

statement with S as constituent) to figure in certain specific constitutive inferential connections involving S's core descriptive content. This is a dialectical reversal, turning the standard embedding problem on its head. (Remember: on our approach, one explains nondescriptive cognitive content by explaining the psychological states and speech acts that have it, *as* certain distinctive kinds of psychological or sociolinguistic commitments with respect to certain core descriptive contents. Such commitments bear constitutive inferential connections to one another.)[23]

3. Moral progress and taking morality seriously

For a descriptivist-realist, intellectual moral progress is a matter of one's moral beliefs coming to better approximate the moral facts. But if moral belief and assertion are not primarily in the business of describing or representing in-the-world moral facts, then how can we make sense of genuine moral progress? Put another way, how can our view distinguish between mere change in moral belief and genuine progress? And, relatedly, if there is no metaphysical anchor for moral thought and discourse, then why take it seriously, why not construe moral discussion and disputes as being more like disputes about matters of taste?

These challenges focus on our irrealist moral metaphysics, and we consider them to be some of the most difficult for any moral irrealist. Here, then, is an indication of how we would respond to these challenges, though they certainly deserve a more thorough reply than we can offer here.

Of course, on our view, moral progress of the sort in question is not to be understood as a matter of bringing one's beliefs into closer proximity to a realm of moral facts. We propose that, instead, one think of moral progress as something to be judged from within a committed moral outlook: when one makes judgments about moral improvement, one does so from an engaged moral perspective. In judging, for example, that moral progress was made in the United States with the rejection of slavery, we are employing our current moral outlook and not simply registering the fact that one moral reaction to slavery was replaced with another; we are making a moral judgment about slavery which we think is backed by reasons. This way of dealing with moral progress is very much akin to what Wright says about the notion of moral progress available to a minimalist about moral truth.

> [T]he minimalist will have to admit that such ideas of progress, or deterioration, are ones for which we can have use only from *within* a committed moral point of view; and that the refinement of which our moral sensibilities are capable can only be a matter of approaching a certain equilibrium as appraised by the exercise of those very sensibilities. (Wright, 1992: 168-9).

Again, we think the challenge to make sense of moral seriousness does not require some metaphysical backing for moral thought and discourse. Rather, on our view, the challenge regarding moral seriousness is plausibly understood as a *moral* challenge: why ought we take our moral views seriously? And the appropriate response to such a challenge is to give moral reasons—reasons that, for instance, will likely appeal to the important role of morality in people's lives. Like our reply to the moral progress challenge, our reply here is to view the challenge as one to be appropriately dealt with from within a committed moral outlook.[24]

VIII. Conclusion

We think it is time for a change in metaethics, and only by challenging certain pervasive philosophical assumptions is one likely to make progress. Our proposal is to rethink fundamental assumptions about the nature of belief and assertion; specifically, we challenge the idea that all belief-eligible and assertible contents are descriptive—what we call the semantic assumption. We have set forth a framework for belief and assertion that does not presuppose the semantic assumption, thus allowing for the *possibility* of beliefs and assertions that are not descriptive. Nondescriptivist cognitivism embraces the framework, and also maintains that the overall declarative content of moral beliefs and assertions is *in fact* not descriptive. The virtues of this metaethical position are great. It surely deserves to be taken seriously as a theoretical option in metaethics. Indeed, we submit that it ought to be the default view.[25]

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[1] Both sides agree that something more is required for being a genuine belief and a genuine assertion than having declarative content. They agree, for instance, that if the declarative content of moral judgments and statements is reducible to (i.e., synonymous with, or paraphrasable by, or theoretically modelable by) the kind of content that is linguistically expressable by certain nondeclarative sentences—e.g., imperatives—then the judgments and statements in question are not full-fledged beliefs and assertions. So, even though it is grammatically permissible to append 'believes that' (and likewise 'asserts that') to any sentence with declarative content, the shared assumption is that being a full-fledged belief or assertion requires more—viz., declarative content that is not reducible to nondeclarative content.

[2] In this paper we restrict talk of descriptive content to indicate content that represents the world as being a certain way. One might use 'descriptive content' in a broad way that would apply to any meaningful declarative sentence, but that is not how we are using the expression. To say that the declarative content of a mental state, judgment, or sentence is descriptive, then, is to say that it purports to describe or pick out some kind of fact in the world. In metaethics, such facts might be understood to have a strong mind-independent status, as the moral realist claims, or they might be tethered to the beliefs or attitudes (actual or ideal) of individuals or groups, as relativists and rationalists would have it. In short, to have descriptive cognitive content is to purport to be descriptive of some sort of fact more robust in nature than is consistent with a minimalist understanding of fact talk.

[3] It is also worth noting that the semantic assumption is presupposed when philosophers employ the 'direction of fit' metaphor in attempting to distinguish beliefs from desires. Beliefs, it is said, aim at the truth and can be appropriately characterized (at least in contrast to desires) as psychological states that are supposed to fit the world; beliefs that fail to do so are mistaken. Desires, it is said, have an opposite direction of fit: they aim at satisfaction, which obtains when the world fits them.

[4] Error theories too embrace the semantic assumption, although with a theoretical twist. An error theorist assumes that *non-defective* cognitive content is descriptive, way-the-world-might-be, content. Given this assumption, moral-evaluative content is then construed as *defective* cognitive content: on the one hand it is belief-eligible and assertoric, because it *purports* to constitute or specify a genuine way the world might be; but on the other hand it is defective, because it does not *in fact* do so. This characterization holds for the classic version of error theory in Mackie (1977), and also for the more recent version in Schiffer (1990).

[5] It is crucial to understand, however, that we retain the traditional assumption that genuine cognitive content is not reducible to content expressible by nondeclarative sentences; i.e., we assume that if moral declarative content *were* reducible to nondeclarative content, then it would not be cognitive content, and moral judgments and statements would not be full-fledged beliefs and assertions (cf note 1).

[6] Are we, then, so-called *minimalists* about belief and assertion? That depends on how one uses the term 'minimalism'. Let *type-1 minimalism* be the claim that moral declarative content counts as cognitive content even if it is reducible to nondeclarative content; and let *type-2 minimalism* be the claim that moral declarative content counts as cognitive content even if it is not descriptive content. We espouse minimalism of type 2, but not of type 1. (The two

types of minimalism will be regarded as equivalent by someone who accepts the following *modified semantic assumption*: all declarative content either (i) is descriptive content, or (ii) is reducible to to nondeclarative content. We deny the modified semantic assumption, of course, in addition to denying the semantic assumption itself.)

[7] Someone who is a type-1 minimalist about belief and assertion (cf. note 6) will also reject the semantic assumption, but on different grounds than we do—viz., on the basis of the claim that declarative content automatically counts as cognitive content even if it is reducible to nondeclarative content. (A type-1 minimalist will consider the term 'noncognitivism' an inappropriate label for metaethical positions affirming the reducibility of declarative to nondeclarative content.) But insofar as the type-1 minimalist embraces the modified semantic assumption (cf. note 6), the menu of metaethical options will remain largely as it was before, except that the categories of 'belief' and 'assertion' will now be applied to the kinds of psychological states and speech acts described by traditional versions of nondescriptivism like emotivism and prescriptivism. Since we ourselves deny the modified semantic assumption, however, our position opens up fertile new metaethical territory even from the perspective of type-1 minimalism. For, it remains an important theoretical novelty to claim, as we do, that moral content is a kind of cognitive content that is neither descriptive nor reducible to nondeclarative content.

[8] The parcel contains Uncle Willoughby's book manuscript that he left on the hall table, to be mailed to the publisher. Bertie (Wooster) has reluctantly pinched the parcel with the intention of disposing of it, at the behest of his erstwhile fiancée Florence Craye. See P. G. Wodehouse (1967), "Jeeves Takes Charge." We say more about logic and embedding below.

[9] See for example, Mandelbaum (1955) and Smith (1993) for characterizations of these features and also those we mention in the next paragraph.

[10] To say that moral judgments directly dispose us toward action independently of pre-existing desires, and that they have motivational force independently of such desires, leaves it open whether (i) these judgments play this causal role all by themselves, or instead (ii) they generate new desires which then play that role.

[11] A problem with standard versions of internalism is that they make the connection between moral judgment and appropriate motivation exceptionless. Although we ourselves maintain that part of the concept of a moral judgment is that such judgments typically are motivational, we also hold that the connection to motivtion is "soft": it allows the possibility of abnormal cases in which (for some explicable reason) the typical motivating aspect is deadened or absent (cf. Timmons 1999, pp. 140-42). Moreover, it should be acknowledged that the action-guiding role of moral judgments is sometimes somewhat indirect, for instance when one condemns persons long dead for actions they performed long ago. Still, normally the action-guiding aspect of moral judgment is operative either directly or at least indirectly, with respect to potential behavior in situations either actual or counterfactual.

[12] Unless otherwise indicated, when we speak of the content of a judgment (or assertion) we mean its overall declarative content. Nondescriptivist cognitivism claims that *this* kind of content is cognitive, while also claiming that it is not descriptive. In the course of the discussion below we will describe an additional, "inner," kind of content involved in moral judgments which is descriptive but is distinct from their overall declarative content.

[13] For simplicity's sake, we focus exclusively on moral beliefs expressible linguistically by the deontic operator 'it ought to be that', thus ignoring those kinds of moral beliefs expressible linguistically by operators like 'it is permissible that' and 'it is good that'. We leave open how exactly to understand these latter beliefs as types of evaluative commitment state, although we expect that our general approach to understanding ought-commitment states can be appropriately adapted to the understanding of evaluative commitment states of these other sorts.

[14] What we are calling a "stance" is a sociolinguistic orientation whose role in social dynamics is largely parallel to the role of a commitment state within a person's own psychological economy. (Indeed, a stance is an *interpersonal* kind of commitment-state, as distinct from the psychological kind.) The notion of an assertion as a stance-taking speech act certainly deserves further elaboration—as does the notion of a stance itself, and the distinction between is-stances and ought-stances. In our view, one can make a good start on these matters by considering the treatment of the speech-act dimension of moral language in Hare (1952, 1970). Much of what Hare says about the moral statements as speech acts is both plausible and consistent with our own proposed framework for belief and assertion.

[15] Note that base-case moral commitment states are not logically complex in *this* sense, even though they do have deontic logical complexity, formalizable in terms of a single deontic operator appended to an atomic sentence. Also, we should now make a clarificatory comment about our official formulation of nondescriptivist cognitivism in section I above. Thesis (1) of NDC mentions declarative judgments and statements "with moral content"; these include not only base-case moral judgments and statements, but also logically complex ones with *constituent* moral content.

[16] What we have said here represents only a sketch of an account of logically complex commitment states; various questions are left open, for more extensive treatment elsewhere. For instance, we are inclined to add two further claims. First, a logically complex belief or assertion whose overall declarative content is descriptive will count *both* as a logically complex commitment with respect to a multiplicity of core descriptive contents, *and* as an is-commitment with respect to its overall declarative content. Second, although a logically complex declarative content can itself be the object of an is-commitment (or an ought-commitment), this is so only if this declarative content is *descriptive*.

We also suspect that a more extensive treatment should distinguish between *logical* commitments and *psychological* commitments, and should allow for the possibility that a logical commitment can exist even in the absence of corresponding psychological commitment. (Such a commitment would not be a *belief*, since beliefs are psychological states.) If an agent fails to make a rationally dictated inference, for instance, then that agent still has a logical commitment whose declarative content is the conclusion of the inference, even though the agent lacks the appropriate belief.

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