

An Empirical Argument against Moral Non-Cognitivism

ABSTRACT: According to non-cognitivism, moral sentences and judgements are not *about* anything; that is, they do not represent how things morally are. This paper presents an empirical argument against this view. We begin by showing that non-cognitivism entails the prediction that after some reflection competent ordinary speakers' semantic intuitions favor that moral sentences and judgements are not about anything. At first sight this prediction may seem to have been confirmed by previous research on folk metaethics. However, a number of methodological worries lead us to doubt this interpretation. We therefore conducted a psychological study that alleviates these worries as far as possible. It turned out that competent ordinary speakers' reflective semantic intuitions dominantly fail to favor that moral sentences are not about anything. This challenge to non-cognitivism is defended and supplemented by considering deflationary theories of moral truth and middle ground theories in the cognitivism/non-cognitivism debate.

KEY WORDS: non-cognitivism; moral psychology; moral semantics; folk metaethics; experimental philosophy

Introduction

The practice of morality raises the following two closely related questions in semantics and philosophical psychology: What do moral sentences mean? And what does it mean to make a moral judgement? One influential answer to these questions is provided by moral non-cognitivism (henceforth simply “non-cognitivism”).

Non-cognitivism is most readily associated with the metaethical theories of Ayer ([1936] 1952), Hare (1952), Blackburn (2000) and Gibbard (1990).¹ Its proponents generally agree on the following negative claim: moral sentences and judgements are not *about* anything; that is, they do not represent how things morally are (Schroeder 2010). Take, for example, the judgement that torturing puppies for fun is wrong. Non-cognitivists claim that by making this judgement we do not represent torturing puppies as having the moral property of wrongness.

¹ Another metaethicist who is often classified as a non-cognitivist is Stevenson. We do not mention him above because his theory fails to be non-cognitivist in a “pure” sense (see Sec. 7). Note, furthermore, that some philosophers (e.g., Eriksson 2009) have also denied that Hare was a pure non-cognitivist.

Rather, morality is supposed to have a more practical purpose. It is closely tied to motivating action. Blackburn, for example, states:

[...] the function of normative sentences is not to represent either peculiar Moorean facts about the world or more mundane empirical facts about the world. It is to avow attitudes, to persuade others, to insist on conformities and prescribe behavior. (Blackburn 2006: 148)

Non-cognitivism is a rather extreme view. If correct, it would have significant implications for our understanding of morality, including its metaphysical and epistemological status (Loeb 2008; Ridge 2013; Schroeder 2010). Nevertheless, it is quite popular among philosophers. This makes providing evidence for or against non-cognitivism important.

How can we assess non-cognitivism? Arguments in moral semantics and philosophical moral psychology have traditionally mainly appealed to *a priori* or non-scientific empirical evidence (see non-cognitivism's main proponents, as cited above, as well as, e.g., Dorr 2002; Geach 1958, 1964). In recent years, however, metaethicists have also increasingly referred to scientific evidence. For example, some non-cognitivists have suggested that their view is supported by the supposition that moral judgements evolved because they performed certain adaptive functions (Gibbard 1990; Kitcher 2005); and both cognitivists and non-cognitivists have utilized research about moral judgements' current empirical properties as well (such as their relation to emotions or their motivating effects in patients with certain kinds of brain damages) (e.g., Prinz 2006, 2007; Roskies 2003).²

In this paper we attempt to add to this growing body of empirical evidence about non-cognitivism. Our argument draws on a kind of research that has so far been surprisingly neglected by proponents of the scientific approach to the cognitivism/non-cognitivism debate, namely psychological research on folk metaethics (that is, psychological research on what ordinary people think about metaethical issues). We will present novel research of this kind that casts doubt upon non-cognitivism. It suggests that moral sentences are actually about something; that they do represent how things morally are.

Here is how we will proceed. First, we will explain non-cognitivism in more detail (Section 1). On the basis of this characterization, we will then argue that it entails the empirical prediction that after some reflection competent ordinary speakers' semantic intuitions favor

² In terms of its metaphysical and epistemological implications, non-cognitivism may also be claimed to be supported by more well-known science-based arguments, such as the argument from moral disagreement and evolutionary debunking arguments.

that moral sentences and judgements are not about anything (Section 2). At first sight this prediction may seem to have been confirmed by previous research on folk metaethics. However, a number of methodological worries lead us to doubt this interpretation (Section 3). We therefore conducted a psychological study that alleviates these worries as far as possible. It turned out that competent ordinary speakers' reflective semantic intuitions dominantly do not favor that moral sentences are not about anything (Section 4). This challenge to non-cognitivism will be defended and supplemented by considering deflationary theories of moral truth (Section 5) and middle ground theories in the cognitivism/non-cognitivism debate (Section 6).

1 Non-Cognitivism

In the introduction we defined non-cognitivism as the view that moral sentences and judgements are not about anything. This claim has important implications for morality's mental exemplification and truth-aptness.

1.1 Denial of Cognitive Involvement

Intentional mental states can be classified as either cognitive (belief-like) or non-cognitive (desire-like) (e.g., Platts 1979; Smith 1994). Whether a state falls in one or the other of these categories is typically taken to be determined by its functional role. Cognitive states are defined as aiming at correctly representing the world; as mapping how things are (*mind-to-world* direction of fit). Non-cognitive states, on the other hand, are rather thought to lead those who have them to change the world (*world-to-mind* direction of fit).³

Given this taxonomy of intentional mental states, non-cognitivism's claim that moral judgements and sentences are not about anything entails a view about their related mental states. To say or think that something is morally right, wrong, good, bad, and so on cannot involve expressing or having a cognitive mental state with content representing (mapping onto) any particular moral facts. Non-cognitivists are rather committed to the view that these sentences and judgements express or are constituted by non-cognitive mental states.

³ Elizabeth Anscombe has provided the most famous illustration of the belief-desire model (1963). Suppose a person is shopping for groceries. Beliefs, Anscombe claims, can be compared to a detective that keeps track of this person. The detective aims at representing what the person puts into her cart. Desires, on the other hand, can be compared to the person's grocery list. The list tells her what to put in the cart, based on what she wants to buy.

The particular nature of the relevant non-cognitive mental states is contested. For example, non-cognitivists have claimed that moral sentences express feelings of approval or disapproval towards their objects (Ayer [1936] 1952), intentions (Hare 1952)⁴, dispositions to feel sentiments of approval or disapproval (Blackburn 2000) or the acceptance of norms that require or permit us to have certain emotions (Gibbard 1990). In whatever way the relevant mental states are characterized, however, non-cognitivists all agree that they aim at changing rather than representing how things are.

1.2 Denial of Truth-Aptness

Moral truth is most commonly understood in a “correspondence-theoretic” sense (see, e.g., Huemer 2005; Miller 2009; Sayre-McCord 2015). In this sense a moral sentence or judgment is true if and only if it correctly represents how things are. For example, the sentence “Torturing puppies for fun is wrong” is true if and only if it is a fact that torturing puppies for fun is wrong.

Non-cognitivists deny that moral sentences and judgements represent how things morally are. But if these sentences and judgements do not represent moral facts at all then, obviously, they cannot represent these facts correctly or incorrectly. Given the correspondence theory of moral truth, non-cognitivists are thus committed to the view that moral sentences and judgements are not truth-apt; that is, that they are neither true nor false.

Denying moral truth-aptness raises a number of theoretical challenges (e.g., Geach 1958, 1964). Contemporary non-cognitivists have therefore typically insisted that while moral sentences and judgements are not truth-apt in a correspondence-theoretic sense, they are truth-apt in an alternative deflationary sense. The basic idea of deflationism is that to say that it is “true” that something is morally right, wrong, good, bad, and so on just means to say that one affirms this sentence or judgement (Blackburn 2000; Gibbard 2003). For example, by saying that it is true that torturing puppies for fun is wrong one merely affirms one’s commitment to the sentence “Torturing puppies for fun is wrong”.

⁴ Hare did not explicitly specify the kind of non-cognitive mental states that he took moral sentences to express. For the above interpretation see van Roojen 2013.

2 Empirical Predictions

Now that we have some understanding of non-cognitivism, let us turn to the question of its empirical predictions; in particular, its predictions with regard to folk metaethics.

The nature of non-cognitivism's predictions depends significantly on whether one takes an internalist or externalist approach to moral semantics and philosophical moral psychology. In this paper we assume an internalist approach (as defended, e.g., by Finlay 2008; Laskowski and Finlay 2017). On this approach the meaning of moral sentences and judgements is fixed by factors that are internal to ordinary speakers' minds. In particular, it is fixed by these speakers' intuitions, by which we mean their pre-theoretical dispositions to apply or refrain from applying concepts. Claims about the meaning of moral sentences and judgements are justified to the extent that they conform to these intuitions (Jackson 1998; Kauppinen 2007; Loeb 2008).

Given an internalist approach, non-cognitivism's empirical predictions might seem trivial. It simply seems to imply that ordinary speakers must be disposed to apply the terms "moral sentence" and "moral judgement" only to a kind of sentences and judgements that are not about anything; that do not represent how things are. But the situation is actually more complicated. Critics have put forward a number of objections against (internalism-based) scientifically informed arguments in moral semantics and philosophical moral psychology (e.g. Kauppinen 2007; Ludwig 2007, 2010). While these objections fail to undermine such arguments in general (e.g., Nadelhoffer and Nahmias 2007; Sytsma and Livengood 2015), they suggest that ordinary speakers' intuitions must fulfill three additional conditions in order to be relevant to moral semantics and philosophical moral psychology (see Hannon 2016; Pözlner 2018a, 2018c).

REFLECTION: The question of morality's "aboutness" is abstract and complex. In their everyday lives ordinary speakers typically do not think about this question. If a speaker reports his or her immediate intuition the likelihood of misinterpretations is therefore high. What matters for moral semantics and philosophical moral psychology are then not these immediate intuitions but rather speakers' reflective intuitions, that is, how they are disposed to apply moral concepts after having thoroughly thought about the case at issue (Kauppinen 2007; Ludwig 2007; Sosa 2007, 2009).

COMPETENCY: To be relevant for our purposes speakers' intuitions must also reflect minimal competency with regard to moral terms and concepts (Kauppinen 2007; Ludwig 2007, 2010; Sayre-McCord 2008). This competency must be specified in uncontroversial and

theoretically neutral ways. With regard to the cognitivism/non-cognitivism debate, for example, philosophers may discount the intuitions of speakers who fail to understand the difference between normative and metaethical statements about morality, or the difference between truth-apt and not truth-apt sentences.

SEMANTICS: Finally, ordinary speakers' intuitions about cases may sometimes be explained by their assumptions about the context of these cases or the intentions of characters (e.g., Kauppinen 2007). For example, a speaker might only respond that in a case of moral disagreement both parties are right because s/he assumes that one of the parties intends to provoke the other. Intuitions that are grounded in such pragmatic considerations must be discounted as well. Only *semantic* intuitions count as evidence about the meaning of moral sentences and judgements; that is, only intuitions that essentially are about this meaning.

In sum, then, a closer look suggests that ordinary speakers need not generally have the intuition that moral sentences and judgements are not about anything in order for non-cognitivism to be supported. The view only entails that *competent* ordinary speakers have this *semantic* intuition *after some reflection*.

Non-Cognitivism's Empirical Prediction with regard to Folk Metaethics: After some reflection, competent ordinary speakers have the semantic intuition that moral sentences and judgements are not about anything (that they do not express or are not constituted by cognitive mental states, and are not truth-apt in a correspondence-theoretic sense).

3 Previous Research

In recent years more and more psychologists have begun to investigate folk intuitions about moral objectivity (in the sense of morality's independence from the mental states of observers) (e.g., Beebe 2014, forthcoming; Beebe and Sackris 2016; Beebe et al. 2015; Fisher et al. forthcoming; Goodwin and Darley 2008, 2010, 2012; Nichols 2004; Sarkissian et al. 2011; Wright 2018; Wright et al. 2013, 2014). At first sight some of these studies seem to allow conclusions about non-cognitivism's above prediction. However, we believe that this impression is misleading.

3.1 Methods and Results

Most studies on folk moral objectivity have asked subjects to interpret cases of moral disagreement. In their extant forms these measures have not been fine-grained enough to cover

non-cognitivism as a specific variant of anti-objectivism, and thus do not provide information about the distribution of cognitivist versus non-cognitivist intuitions (see Pölzler 2018b). Subjects in Sarkissian et al.’s study, for example, rated how much they agree that “at least one of them [the disagreeing parties] must be wrong” (2011: 487). Disagreement with this statement cannot only be explained by subjects holding that there is no such thing as being right or wrong with regard to the moral question at issue (non-cognitivism), but also by their believing that both parties can be right (subjectivism).

In addition, some researchers have tried to determine people’s intuitions about moral objectivity in an alternative way as well, namely by means of truth-aptness measures (e.g., Goodwin and Darley 2008, 2012; Wright 2018; Wright et al. 2013, 2014). With the exception of Wright’s (2018) study, which involved different questions, these measures have been adopted from Goodwin and Darley (2008):

How would you regard the previous statement? Circle the number. (1) True statement. (2) False statement. (3) An opinion or attitude. (Goodwin and Darley 2008: 1344)

According to you, can there be a correct answer as to whether this statement is true?
[yes]
[no] (Goodwin and Darley 2008: 1351)

Researchers have interpreted (3) and [no] responses as indicating subjectivism. One might argue, however, that these responses rather entail non-cognitivism (Pölzler 2018). If truth-aptness-based studies were reinterpreted in this way, all of them would either provide evidence for non-cognitivism’s empirical prediction about folk metaethics or would at worst yield a mixed picture. In Goodwin and Darley’s (2008) study, for example, 62% of subjects chose the “opinion or attitude” option (experiment 1), and 47% chose the “no” option (experiment 2) — which would have to be interpreted as meaning that 62% and 47% of respondents have non-cognitivist intuitions.

But is this reinterpretation appropriate? In our view, there is reason to doubt that previous studies on folk moral objectivity provide valid information about the distribution of cognitivist and non-cognitivist intuitions, at least in the sense that would be required for arguments in moral semantics and philosophical moral psychology.

3.2 Worries

A first worry concerns the wording of the above truth-aptness measures. In our pilot study subjects' verbal explanations suggested that if unexplained, many of them understand the term "truth" in an objectivist sense. But for a moral sentence to be true cannot only mean that it correctly represents an objective moral fact; it can also mean that it correctly represents a subjective moral fact (such as a fact about the moral beliefs of individuals or cultures). Moreover, Goodwin and Darley's first measure may also have exaggerated the proportion of non-cognitivist responses by involving the term "opinion". This term cannot only denote a not truth-apt sentence, but also truth-apt sentences; in particular, truth-apt sentences that we are somewhat uncertain about (such as in "In my opinion, Donald Trump will be reelected") (Beebe 2015: 13-14).

To varying degrees, the above studies are also subject to more general methodological worries that one of us has raised elsewhere ([reference removed for review process]). First, some of the studies did not test whether subjects took the sentences that they were presented with to be moral. So even where they sided with non-cognitivism it sometimes may not have been *moral* non-cognitivism. Second, none of the studies made sure that subjects understood moral truth in a correspondence-theoretic way. But if they held some alternative (e.g., deflationary) account, then the studies' responses would not straightforwardly indicate intuitions about the cognitivism/non-cognitivism distinction. And third, despite some validity checks, one may also plausibly object that subjects systematically conflated moral truth-aptness with distinct issues (such as perceptions of consensus), or did not have any intuitions about this matter at all.

Finally, the above research on folk moral objectivity also was not aimed at informing moral semantics or philosophical moral psychology. It accordingly did not fully account for REFLECTION, COMPETENCY and SEMANTICS. The study that comes closest to doing so is Wright's (2018). Before presenting her main tasks she provided subjects with detailed explanations of the truth-apt/not truth-apt distinction and tested their understanding of these explanations. However, as one of us has argued elsewhere [reference removed for review process], Wright's explanations may have introduced a bias in favor of non-cognitivism (by linking non-cognitivism to disagreement, and providing controversial and one-sided examples of not truth-apt sentences).

To be fair, the extent to which any of the above worries applies is an empirical question. It is possible that subjects would have responded in the same way if the term "opinion" had

not been used in the non-cognitivist answer option, if it had been made sure that they do not conflate moral truth-aptness with distinct issues, if they had engaged in sufficient reflection, and so on. But as long as the above plausible alternative explanations have not been ruled out studies on folk moral objectivity nevertheless cannot be claimed to provide significant evidence about non-cognitivism's empirical prediction.

4 New Study

In response to worries such as those mentioned in the previous Section we conducted a comprehensive study on folk moral objectivity that was based on an improved experimental design ([reference removed for review process]). In our view, some results of this study provide valid evidence about non-cognitivism's prediction that competent ordinary speakers have the reflective semantic intuition that moral sentences and judgements are not about anything.

4.1 Subjects

Our online survey initially involved 172 subjects. To decrease insufficient effort responding (Pözlner forthcoming), and to conform to REFLECTION, COMPETENCY and SEMANTICS (Sec. 2), 55 of these subjects (32%) were excluded on the basis of the following criteria: (1) failure in one of several attention checks, (2) overly fast completion of the study, (3) bad performance in comprehension checks, (4) confused or irrelevant verbal explanations of their responses.⁵ Enforcing the above requirements left us with 117 subjects. Of these, 67 were from Amazon Mechanical Turk and 50 from the College of Charleston. 63% were female; their age varied between 18 to 64 years ($M = 29.6$); and they were 86% Caucasian, 4% African American, 4% Asian American, 3% Hispanic, and 3% other.

4.2 Methods

Our study involved a number of abstract and concrete tasks that were ultimately designed to capture intuitions about moral objectivity. In what follows we focus on those tasks that most directly relate to the cognitivism/non-cognitivism debate: our abstract and concrete truth-aptness tasks.

⁵ Failure in any of our attention checks led to subjects being automatically excluded from the study. In contrast, bad performance with regard to the completion time, comprehension check and verbal explanations requirements were only seen as a *prima facie* reason for exclusion. For example, if a subject completed the study very fast but did reasonably well in all or most comprehension checks and verbal explanation we nevertheless kept his/her data set.

At the beginning of our study we primed subjects to engage in reflection. For example, we informed them that they “cannot speed through” the study, that the study involves various comprehension and attention checks, and that we are only looking for people “who will be serious and conscientious about reading through and answering the questions carefully and honestly”. Then subjects received a detailed explanation about the distinction between metaethics and normative ethics, and were informed that our study is exclusively about metaethics. Their understanding of this explanation was tested by both a theoretical and a classification exercise.

Before their first truth-aptness task subjects also received a detailed explanation about the distinction between truth-apt and not truth-apt sentences:

Truth-Apt Sentences

Truth-apt sentences express beliefs about facts. These facts can be either objective (independent from mental states) or subjective (dependent on what particular individuals, the majority of individuals in a culture, or others think). In any case, in uttering these sentences we make claims about how things are; what is the case.

Sometimes we do not know whether a truth-apt sentence is true or false. However, even when this happens, the sentence is still truth-apt. The sentence is intended to make a claim about how things are – we just don’t know whether it does so successfully.

Sometimes a truth-apt sentence turns out to be false. But again, even when this happens, the sentence is still truth-apt. The sentence is intended to make a claim about how things are – it just does not do so successfully.

Not Truth-Apt Sentences

Other sentences are not truth-apt. In uttering these sentences we do not make claims about how things are; what is the case. We neither express beliefs about objective nor about subjective facts. Instead, not truth-apt sentences express feelings, intentions, emotions or attitudes. Since they do not make claims about how things are they are neither true, nor false.

Subjects’ understanding of this explanation was tested and improved by two kinds of comprehension checks. First, subjects had to complete the following theoretical exercise⁶:

Please select all of the following statements that are correct (you can select more than one):

- A false sentence cannot be truth-apt. [NOT CORRECT]

⁶ The order of the answer options was randomized.

- Truth-apt sentences can express beliefs about facts that are subjective, that is, facts that are determined by the moral beliefs of individuals, the dominant moral beliefs in cultures, and so on. [CORRECT]
- Truth-apt sentences only express feelings, emotions, intentions or attitudes. [NOT CORRECT]
- Even if we do not know whether a sentence is true or false it can still be truth-apt. [CORRECT]

After that subjects were asked to classify the following non-moral sentences as either truth-apt or not truth-apt.⁷

- My pencil is sharp. [TRUTH-APT]
- Don't run in the street. [NOT TRUTH-APT]
- She was very sad about what happened. [TRUTH-APT]
- Yikes! [NOT TRUTH-APT]
- Bummer! [NOT TRUTH-APT]
- Have fun storming the castle. [NOT TRUTH-APT]
- Walking in the street is generally safer than running. [TRUTH-APT]
- Garlic lowers cholesterol. [TRUTH-APT]
- Be happy about what happened! [NOT TRUTH-APT]
- John believes that it was fun storming the castle. [TRUTH-APT]

Subjects who failed to correctly answer the theoretical question and to classify all sentences correctly were shown the instructions again, and asked to complete the exercise/s that they had failed one more time.

Following these comprehension checks (which were supposed to test and increase reflection and competency), participants received either our abstract or concrete truth-aptness task (the order of these tasks was randomized). The abstract task looked as follows:

Think about moral sentences (sentences that express that something is morally good or bad, right or wrong, virtuous or vicious, and so on). Are these sentences truth-apt or not truth-apt?

- Yes, moral sentences are “truth-apt” -- that is, they intend to express how things are; what is the case (either with regard to the objective world or with regard to what particular individuals, cultures, etc. think about morality). Thus, these sentences are either true or false.
- No, moral sentences are not “truth-apt” -- that is, they do not intend to express beliefs about objective or subjective facts, but rather only express feelings, emotions, intentions or attitudes. Thus, these sentences are neither true nor false.

⁷ The order of these sentences was randomized.

Prior to the concrete truth-aptness task subjects were asked to rate ten item statements (see Table 1) as either dominantly moral or dominantly non-moral. We instructed them to “focus on the information given by the sentence and [...] not introduce additional assumptions or details about what happened or may have happened, or why” (which was supposed to decrease pragmatic influences). Then subjects were asked to classify all of the sentences that they had rated as dominantly moral as either truth-apt or not-truth-apt.⁸

Consider the following sentences. Here we are not interested in whether you believe these sentences are actually true. Our focus is rather on their truth-aptness.

Are these sentences truth-apt (i.e., they intend to express what is the case about individuals' moral beliefs, culturally dominant moral beliefs or the objective world; and thus, they are either true or false) or not truth-apt (i.e., they intend only to express feelings, emotions, intentions or attitudes, and thus, they are neither true, nor false)?

truth-apt

not truth-apt

In addition, subjects were also asked to explain their response to the abstract truth-aptness task (immediately after this task), and to explain any inconsistencies between their abstract and concrete responses and within their concrete responses (at a later stage of the study). This was supposed to engage reflection and allow testing the COMPETENCY and SEMANTICS requirements.

4.3 Results

Most subjects in our study did reasonably well in the truth-aptness comprehension checks. For example, 81% correctly chose the second and fourth statement in the theoretical exercise at first pass; and 33% correctly classified all sentences in the classification exercise at first pass, with the rest having been mostly able to fully correct their misclassifications at second pass (71%).

Both in the abstract and in the concrete tasks the majority of subjects' responses favored truth-aptness (Figure 1). In the abstract task 86 participants (73%) stated that, in their view, moral sentences are truth-apt; and 32 participants (27%) stated that they are not truth-apt. In the concrete task subjects' ratings varied with the particular (self-classified moral) statements

⁸ The order of the sentences was randomized.

that they were presented. Yet, all statements were dominantly classified as truth-apt (Table 1). Overall, the item statements prompted 76% “truth-apt”-responses and 24% “not truth-apt”-responses.

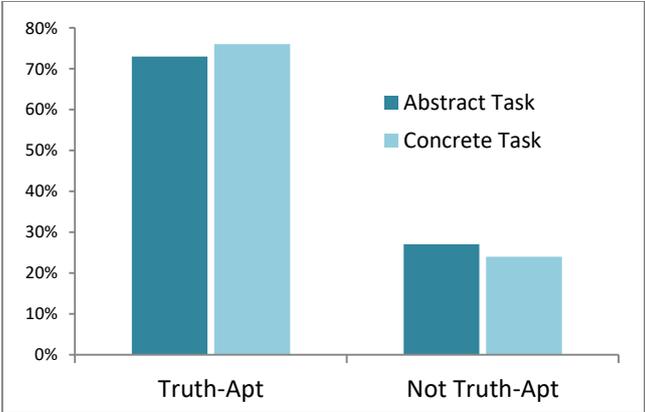


Figure 1: Proportion of “truth-apt” and “not truth-apt” responses in the abstract and concrete tasks.

Moral Statement	Truth-Apt	Not Truth-Apt
(1) A world in which wealth is distributed equally is more just than a world in which it is distributed unequally.	86%	14%
(2) Before the third month of pregnancy, abortion for any reason is morally impermissible.	85%	15%
(3) A country with the death penalty is morally worse than a country without.	84%	16%
(4) Consciously discriminating against someone, by not hiring them for a job they are clearly qualified for, just because of their race is not wrong.	82%	18%
(5) It is morally reprehensible of the current US administration to limit or prohibit immigration.	81%	19%
(6) John cheating (committing adultery) on his wife Elizabeth for no other reason than boredom with his marriage is morally permissible.	78%	22%
(7) Men who violently physically punish their children are cruel.	76%	24%
(8) Martin Luther King was a righteous man.	66%	34%
(9) It was horrendous of Martin Shkreli to overprice drugs that he knew sick people really needed.	64%	36%
(10) It is good to do unto others as you would have them do unto you.	62%	38%

Table 1: Proportion of “truth-apt” and “not truth-apt” responses in the concrete truth-aptness task.

Finally, subjects’ tendency towards truth-aptness also showed noteworthy intrapersonal consistency. 41 subjects (35%) consistently provided “truth-apt” responses across the abstract and

concrete tasks. In contrast, only 8 subjects (7%) consistently provided “not truth-apt” responses.

4.4 Discussion

Non-cognitivism predicts that after some reflection, competent ordinary speakers have the semantic intuition that moral sentences and judgements are not about anything. Our above study provides evidence about this prediction. Accounting for REFLECTION, COMPETENCY and SEMANTICS, the study’s “not truth-apt” response captures both non-cognitivism’s denial of cognitive involvement and its denial of truth-aptness. If non-cognitivism were correct subjects should therefore dominantly have been drawn to this response. But our results contradict this prediction. Both in the abstract and in the concrete truth-aptness tasks the broad majority of responses were in favor of truth-aptness. Our study thus presents a challenge to non-cognitivism.

Non-cognitivists may try to meet this challenge in a number of ways. Their two most fundamental potential objections — that subjects’ responses can be explained by their holding a deflationary theory of moral truth, and that non-cognitivism can be modified so as to account for our results — will be addressed in the following two Sections (Sec. 5 and 6). Here we will briefly refute three worries that concern more subtle questions about the interpretation of our results.

First, in our study we stated the “not truth-apt” option in terms of moral sentences expressing “feelings, intentions, emotions or attitudes”. Critics may object that this formulation covers only early non-cognitivism, and leaves out more complex proposals by philosophers such as Blackburn and Gibbard (who claim that moral sentences express mental states such as sentiments of approval or disapproval, or the non-cognitive acceptance of norms that govern emotions). Suppose we had included these more complex mental states in our “not truth-apt” option. Might it not have been the case that this option would have been picked far more often?

We do not find this alternative explanation plausible. Getting subjects to understand theories such as Blackburn’s and Gibbard’s may not have been feasible, or would at least have required lengthy instructions. Moreover, even in our original formulation subjects who tended towards such theories still had plenty of reasons to prefer the “not truth-apt” over the “truth-apt” response. First, the mental states that contemporary non-cognitivists appeal to are closely related to or sub-categories of feelings, intentions, emotions or attitudes. Second, the “not

truth-apt” response also explicitly stated that moral sentences “do not intend to express beliefs” (which is accepted by all non-cognitivists, including contemporary ones).⁹ And third, our formulation also covers non-cognitivism’s implication with regard to truth-aptness, namely that moral sentences are not truth-apt in the sense of correctly or incorrectly representing facts (which is also accepted by all non-cognitivists; for more discussion see Sec. 5).

Second, our “not truth-apt” option states that moral sentences “do not intend to express beliefs about [...] facts”. This description is somewhat inaccurate. Non-cognitivists do not deny that moral sentences state facts. They only deny that they state *moral* facts. For example, even on a non-cognitivist reading our item statement “John cheating (committing adultery) on his wife Elizabeth for no other reason than boredom with his marriage is morally permissible” states the non-moral fact that John cheated on his wife Elizabeth for no other reason than boredom with his marriage. Thus, non-cognitivists might object that more subjects would have gone with the “not truth-apt” option if we hadn’t suggested that it disallows for moral sentences to express beliefs about non-moral facts.

In our view this explanation is implausible too. Drawing the distinction between stating moral and non-moral facts would have additionally complicated our instructions and answer options. Moreover, it again likely would not have had much of an effect. First, the majority of our item statements (six out of ten) actually did not state non-moral facts at all. For example, the sentence “Men who violently physically punish their children are cruel” does not state that men in general or any particular men physically punish their children; and the sentence “Before the third month of pregnancy, abortion for any reason is morally impermissible” does not state that women in general or any particular women have abortions before the third month of pregnancy. Second, subjects’ responses to statements that do state non-moral facts (statements 5, 6, 8, and 9 in Table 1) and statements that do not state non-moral facts (statements 1, 2, 3, 4, 7 and 10 in Table 1) differed only slightly, with the fact-stating statements being considered only slightly less non-cognitivist than the not fact-stating ones, $t(33) = 2.2, p = .032$.

Finally, even though we excluded a considerable proportion of subjects prior to analysis non-cognitivists may object that we still failed to guarantee REFLECTION, COMPETENCY, and SEMANTICS. Subjects in our study were excluded on the basis of how they behaved in all tasks of our large study taken together. But a subject who showed sufficient performance

⁹ Some contemporary non-cognitivists hold deflationary theories of beliefs, according to which to say that a moral sentence expresses a belief in a fact is equivalent to just saying this sentence. On this basis one might claim that even the cognitive involvement part of our options did not give subjects drawn to contemporary non-cognitivist theories a reason to choose “not truth-apt”. For a brief discussion of this possibility see Sec. 5.

and understanding overall might nevertheless have done badly in our truth-aptness tasks in particular. So there is still a (slight) chance that people who engage in more reflection about the truth-apt/not truth-apt distinction, are more competent with regard to it, and are more driven by semantic considerations would dominantly choose the “not truth-apt”-responses; that is, in other words, that non-cognitivism manifests itself under more ideal circumstances.

To address this objection we introduced additional exclusion criteria that specifically pertained to subjects’ performance in and understanding of our truth-aptness tasks. First, we excluded any subject that did not get both the theoretical truth-aptness exercise and all truth-aptness classification exercises right at least at second pass. Second, we independently analyzed subjects’ verbal explanations of their responses to the abstract truth-aptness task, and excluded any subject whose explanation was classified as confused or irrelevant by both of us. This led us to exclude additional 55 subjects (47%), and left us with a remaining sample of 62 “ideal” subjects.

Contrary to the above objection, our stricter analysis did not yield a higher proportion of “not truth-apt” responses. If anything rather the opposite was the case. While not reaching the level of statistical significance, in both the abstract task and the concrete task our ideal subjects opted slightly more in favor of truth-aptness, compared to the subjects that we had excluded on the basis of our additional criteria (79% versus 65% in the abstract task, and 78% versus 73% in the concrete task). Moreover, while not analyzable statistically, the ideal sample was also slightly more inclined towards truth-aptness compared to the whole previous sample of 117 subjects (79% versus 73% in the abstract task, and 78% versus 76% in the concrete task). This falsifies the hypothesis that increased reflection, competency and semantic considerations lead people in the direction of non-cognitivism. Even under more ideal circumstances the majority of people seem to side with cognitivism.

While none of the above objections seem particularly powerful there are two worries about our empirical argument against non-cognitivism that deserve more serious consideration. These objections concern subjects’ understanding of moral truth and potential modifications of non-cognitivism.

5 Moral Truth

Suppose a person has the intuition that to say of a moral sentence that it is true simply means to affirm it (e.g., Blackburn 2000; Gibbard 2003). Moral sentences can be meaningfully affirmed. For example, it makes sense to affirm that torturing puppies for fun is wrong or that

helping others is good. Any person who was committed to such a deflationary theory of moral truth should hence be strongly inclined to consider moral sentences truth-apt. Non-cognitivists may argue that this is precisely what happened in our study. Subjects did not dominantly choose the “truth-apt” response because they favored cognitivism; they did so because, being non-cognitivists, they understood moral truth in a deflationary sense.

One way of testing this alternative explanation would be to run a study about ordinary people’s intuitions about the nature of moral truth. Is deflationary theory really widely favored? We tried to answer this question both as part of our above study and in a follow-up study. However, both of these investigations turned out to be unsuccessful. The first one (in which we asked people to choose between intelligible descriptions of the correspondence and the deflationary theory) sparked lots of confusion, as evinced by subjects’ verbal explanations.¹⁰ The second study (in which we compared people’s agreement/disagreement with moral sentences to their willingness to characterize these sentences as true/false) yielded a result that did not allow for any helpful inferences either.¹¹ These failed attempts suggest — at least in our view — that it may be very difficult to test people’s intuitions about the nature of moral truth.

Nonetheless, we think that there are good reasons to doubt non-cognitivists’ above alternative explanation. Several aspects of our study’s experimental design and results support that most subjects did *not* understand moral truth according to the deflationary theory; and that even if they did this might not have had a large effect on our results.

First, recall the comprehension check that required subjects to classify non-moral statements as either truth-apt or not truth-apt (Sec. 4.2). If subjects had assumed a general deflationary theory, encompassing both the moral and all non-moral domains, then many of them

¹⁰ For example, a noteworthy proportion of subjects explained that they had/had not gone for the correspondence theory option because morality is/is not objective. But correspondence theory is actually compatible with subjectivism as well as with objectivism.

¹¹ Our study involved two conditions, SUBSTANTIVE and TRUTH, which each asked for views about the ten moral item statements listed in Table 1. In SUBSTANTIVE subjects received tasks of the following kind: “Which of the following statements best fits your view? (1) X is morally m. (2) X is not morally m. (3) X is neither morally y nor not morally m.” Tasks in TRUTH had the following form: “Which of the following statements best fits your view? (1) The sentence ‘X is morally m’ is true. (2) The sentence ‘X is morally m’ is false. (3) The sentence ‘X is morally m’ is neither true nor false.” Deflationary theory regards the corresponding options in SUBSTANTIVE and TRUTH as equivalent. Any difference between these conditions would hence challenge the hypothesis that subjects are drawn towards this theory. However, in our study we did not find any significant difference between subjects’ responses in SUBSTANTIVE and TRUTH. This result is compatible with both deflationary theory and correspondence theory. For correspondence theorists will typically also opt for “It is true that x is morally m” whenever they opt for “x is morally m” (unless they are fictionalist error theorists or non-cognitivists — and that they are mostly non-cognitivists is precisely what we are challenging).

should have classified sentences such as “Don’t run in the street” or “Have fun storming the castle” as truth-apt. After all, it seems that these sentences can be meaningfully affirmed or disaffirmed (and according to the deflationary theory, it suffices for a sentence to be truth-apt that it can be affirmed or disaffirmed).¹² However, we found that only very few subjects classified sentences such as “Don’t run in the street” or “Have fun storming the castle” as truth-apt.

Second, subjects in our study were asked to explain their responses to the abstract truth-aptness task (Sec. 4.2). Those who had opted for truth-aptness did not express anything that could readily be interpreted as an adherence to the deflationary theory of moral truth, or a protest against our priming them with the correspondence theory. Many “truth-apt” responders even explicitly stressed moral sentences’ representative function. Consider, for example, the following explanations:

- “I believe that when most people are using moral sentences they are trying to tell you how things are.”
- “Moral sentences are truth-apt because they express what the particular culture believes to be true.”
- “I feel like these [moral sentences] would be very matter of fact sentences”
- “Moral sentences are truth-apt because you are stating what you think is a fact.”

Third, our truth-aptness tasks’ answer options were not only stated and explained in terms of non-cognitivism’s implications for (correspondence-theoretic) moral truth. We also explained that “truth-apt” sentences “express beliefs about facts”, and stated our “not truth-apt” option as saying that moral sentences “do not intend to express beliefs”. Non-cognitivists deny that moral sentences express beliefs about moral facts. Hence, even if some non-cognitivist subjects in our study assumed the deflationary theory of moral truth they still might not have been (consistently) drawn towards our “truth-apt” option. This option’s endorsement of cognitive involvement, and the “not truth-apt” option’s denial of such involvement, may well have led them to go with the latter, and to be rightly classified as non-cognitivists.

¹² Some non-cognitivists have tried to show that sentences such as “Don’t run in the street” or “Have fun storming the castle” cannot be meaningfully affirmed or disaffirmed, and hence even fail to be truth-apt on a deflationary theory of moral truth (e.g., Gibbard 1990). If our subjects held this view as well then the argument presented above would not work.

To this argument as well as to some of the interpretations of our subjects' verbal explanations non-cognitivists may respond by making deflationism “creep” (Dreier 2004) into intuitions about moral “representation”, “belief”, “fact”, etc. as well. Isn't it possible that by applying these terms to moral sentences people just mean to affirm them too; for example, that by saying that the sentence “Torturing puppies for fun is wrong” “represents reality”, “expresses a belief”, or “states a fact” they just mean that torturing puppies for fun is wrong (see Wright 1992; Timmons 1998)? If this were the case then the fact that our study's “truth-apt” option endorsed and our “not truth-apt” option denied that moral sentences represent reality, express beliefs, state facts, etc. could not have drawn non-cognitivist subjects towards the former option after all; and the fact that subjects used these terms in their verbal explanations could not be interpreted as a commitment to the correspondence theory of moral truth.

In our view, however, the hypothesis that many people understand notions such as moral representation, belief, fact, etc. in a deflationary sense is problematic. Theoretical considerations suggest that such understandings might diverge very far from ordinary discourse (e.g., Sinclair 2007). At the very least, it seems that it is not us who need to provide evidence against people assuming these additional deflationary theories; the burden of proof is rather on the side of non-cognitivists. But then how are they supposed to support the hypothesis that ordinary people understand moral “representation”, “belief”, “fact”, etc. in a deflationary sense at all? If (almost) any term that we can use to explain our views about moral truth and these related matters could be read in a deflationary sense then hypotheses about these views would become (almost) unfalsifiable — which is a most unwelcome consequence (e.g. Popper [1959] 2002).

6 Middle Ground Theories

A last way in which non-cognitivists might try to meet our challenge is by modifying their view in a way that makes it compatible with our results. In our study subjects dominantly regarded moral sentences as truth-apt. Nevertheless, a noteworthy minority (27%) denied truth-aptness on the abstract level, and half of our subjects (50%) denied it with regard to at least one concrete item statement. So cannot non-cognitivists simply move towards some middle ground between cognitivism and non-cognitivism — a middle ground that still preserves most or much of their original position's spirit?

Middle ground theories in the cognitivism/non-cognitivism debate have mainly fallen into one of the following six (partly non-exclusive) categories:

- (1) *Variantism*: Some moral sentences and judgements are about something. Other moral sentences and judgements are not about anything. That is, cognitivism and non-cognitivism are each correct for non-overlapping parts of moral discourse and thought (Gill 2009; Wright 2018).
- (2) *Indeterminism*: Moral sentences and judgements are indeterminate with regard to the cognitivism/non-cognitivism distinction. That is, they are correctly analyzed by both theories (like men with a certain amount of hair may be correctly described both as being bold and as not being bold) (Gill 2009; Joyce 2013).
- (3) *Hermeneutic Fictionalism*: Moral sentences are about something. Moral judgements, in contrast, are not about anything. That is, cognitivism is correct on the level of moral discourse, and non-cognitivism is correct on the level of moral thought (Kalderon 2005).
- (4) *Non-Descriptivist Cognitivism*: Moral sentences are not about anything. Moral judgements, in contrast, are about something. That is, non-cognitivism is correct on the level of moral discourse, and cognitivism is correct on the level of moral thought (Horgan and Timmons 2000; Timmons 1998).
- (5) *Hybrid Expressivism*: All moral sentences determinately express both cognitive and non-cognitive mental states (for example, similar to how pejorative slurs express both cognitive and non-cognitive mental states) (e.g., Boisvert 2008; Copp 2001; Ridge 2006).
- (6) *Incoherentism*: Moral sentences and judgements determinately are both about something and not about anything. This renders them incoherent (similar to the notion of a “round square”) (Loeb 2008).

In order for non-cognitivists’ above defense to work two conditions must be met: (1) at least one of these middle ground theories must be consistent with our study’s results, and (2) this theory must preserve most or much of non-cognitivism’s original spirit. But at least in their above generic forms no theory actually meets these conditions.

To begin with, most of the above theories fit our results rather badly. If variantism were true then at least some of our moral item statements should have prompted dominantly “not truth-apt” responses. But no statement was considered not truth-apt by more than 38% of sub-

jects, with most values being even significantly lower.¹³ Indeterminism, hybrid expressivism and incoherentism all predict that “truth-apt” and “not truth-apt” classifications will be distributed fairly equally for each statement. But in our study all statements were dominantly classified as “truth-apt”. Non-descriptivist cognitivism, finally, requires that moral statements dominantly prompt “not truth-apt” responses. But again, precisely the opposite was found. The only theory that fits our results reasonably well is hermeneutic fictionalism, which endorses a cognitivist understanding of moral discourse.

In addition, most middle ground theories also fail to preserve most or much of what motivates non-cognitivist analyses in the first place. Non-cognitivism’s main attraction has always been that it sidesteps a number of intricate and controversial metaethical questions (Schroeder 2010). If its proponents are right that moral sentences and judgements are not about anything (that they do not represent facts) then the question of whether these facts exist does not even arise. No kind of facts in the world can possibly deserve to be called moral (Loeb 2008). As a consequence, non-cognitivists also do not need to explain what moral facts look like, how we can come to know about them, how we can talk about them, and how we can think about them.

But the only middle ground theory that by itself spares its proponents from addressing these metaethical questions is incoherentism. All other theories claim that at least some parts or aspects of moral discourse or thought are about something, and in such a (coherent) way that allows for (some) moral facts to exist. This also holds for hermeneutic fictionalism. Proponents of this theory grant that at least when we *say* that something is morally right, wrong, good, bad, etc. we are purporting to represent a moral fact. In the absence of additional arguments, it could therefore be that such facts exist (see Friend 2008), and that hermeneutic fictionalists have to explain what they look like, how we can come to know about them, how we can talk about them, and how we can think about them.¹⁴

¹³ Variantists may object that we simply failed to include some of those moral sentences that are not about anything. This response does not strike us as particularly plausible. After all, we made sure that our item statements are as diverse as possible. They include statements about actions as well as about persons and states of affairs, statements that involve thin as well as statements that involve thick moral concepts, statements that are highly intuitive and statements that are highly counterintuitive, statements that are non-negated and statements that are negated, and so on.

¹⁴ To reemphasize, the above argument only states that unlike non-cognitivism, hermeneutic fictionalism (in its above generic form) does not by itself entail the non-existence of moral facts; that it is *compatible* with there being such facts. We do not mean to suggest that hermeneutic fictionalism by itself involves a commitment to moral facts. In fact, Kalderon (2005) himself explicitly argues against such a commitment.

Again, then, non-cognitivists most likely also cannot meet our challenge by modifying their view.

Conclusion

In assessing non-cognitivism various kinds of evidence might be deemed relevant. This paper focused on one particular kind of empirical evidence. First, we argued that non-cognitivism entails the prediction that after some reflection competent ordinary speakers' semantic intuitions favor that moral sentences and judgements are not about anything. Then we reported a psychological study on folk metaethics that contradicts this prediction, and defended our interpretation against a number of objections. Other kinds of evidence (empirical or *a priori*) may outweigh this reason to reject non-cognitivism. As long as we are only considering ordinary people's intuitions, however, views according to whom all moral sentences determinately are about something are at an advantage. Our argument suggests that metaethicists should adopt classic cognitivism (which endorses such an analysis for both moral discourse and moral thought) or hermeneutic fictionalism (which endorses such an analysis for only moral discourse).

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