

PART II

Moral and Political
Philosophy

5

The Fact and Function of Meta-Ethical Pluralism

Exploring the Evidence

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At the heart of meta-ethics¹ is a debate about whether people's moral claims (e.g., statements such as "Abortion is wrong!") assert moral facts—and if they do, whether it is assumed that those moral facts are non-relative or mind-dependent. This debate not only involves the question about what is in fact the case about moral claims, but also the question of what ordinary, competent language users (the "folk") *take* to be the case when they utter moral statements. That is, when people say things like "Abortion is wrong!", do they take themselves to be merely expressing their positive/negative feelings toward abortion, or other "pro/con" attitudes or affective affiliations with community norms? Or, do they take themselves to be conveying beliefs about matters of fact? And, if the latter, do they consider those facts to be objective or non-objective in nature?

Philosophers have long been divided on this issue. Cognitivists maintain that people take themselves to be stating moral facts, though they disagree about whether people take those facts to be objective or mind-dependent/relative (Mackie 1977; Brink 1989; Smith 1994; Harman 1996; Darwall 1998; Shafer-Landau 2003). Non-cognitivists maintain that people take themselves to be expressing attitudes when they engage in

¹ Or at least, as Gill (2009) calls it, "descriptive meta-ethics", which involves providing the best analysis of our ordinary moral discourse.

moral discourse (Ayer 1952; Blackburn 1984; Wong 1984, 2006; Gibbard 1990; Dreier 1999; Rachels & Rachels 2009).

Loeb (2008) has observed that perhaps the perpetuation of this long-standing debate between philosophers “is evidence that inconsistent elements—in particular, commitments both to and against objectivity—may be part of any accurate understanding of the central moral terms” (p. 358). His supposition is that people engage in moral discourse as *both* objectivists and non-objectivists, *both* cognitivists and non-cognitivists, at the same time, insofar as they “use moral words *both* to make [objective] factual assertions *and* to do something incompatible with the making of such assertions” (p. 363).

Similarly, Gill (2009) challenges the view that “our ordinary [moral] discourse is uniform and determinate enough to vindicate one side or the other” of the meta-ethical debate. As an alternative, he proposes both that (at least some parts of) our ordinary moral discourse fails to support either meta-ethical position and/or that it sometimes provides support for one meta-ethical position, while yet other times providing support for the opposing position.²

If such variability—hereafter “pluralism”—in our moral discourse exists, then we ought to be able to find evidence for it using empirical methods.³ And recent empirical work has indeed uncovered evidence for meta-ethical pluralism in people’s moral discourse Nichols & Folds-Bennett 2003; Heiphetz & Young forthcoming; Nichols 2004; Goodwin & Darley 2008, 2010, 2012; Sarkissian, Park, Tien, Wright, & Knobe

² Of the two, Loeb’s (2008) incoherentist view is more extreme than Gill’s (2009) variabilist view insofar as he maintains that the realist/anti-realist commitments reflected in people’s ordinary moral discourse cannot be disentangled from one another into discrete uses that reflect one kind of commitment, on the one hand, and the other kind of commitment, on the other. See Sinnott-Armstrong (2009) for a discussion of these and other “mixed” meta-ethical positions.

³ Considering that the project at hand is descriptive meta-ethics, such an endeavor would be well motivated. Indeed, Loeb (2008) emphasizes the importance of an empirical investigation into this issue, holding that the discussion of people’s meta-ethical commitments must at some point involve an examination of their actual “linguistic dispositions” (p. 356; i.e., their intuitions, patterns of thinking and speaking, semantic commitments, and other internal states—both conscious and not). Gill (2009) agrees with this sentiment, writing that “If we leave open the possibility that our uses of moral terms are more variable and indeterminate than previously assumed, descriptive meta-ethics will have to involve much more empirical investigation . . . we will have to give much more time and effort than most 20th century meta-ethicists did to the gathering of data” (p. 232)—one recommended approach being the testing of people’s reactions to moral statements under “experimentally responsible conditions” (such as those employed by social scientists).

2011; Wright, Grandjean, & McWhite 2013; Young & Durwin 2013; Beebe 2014; Uttich, Tsai, & Lombrozo 2014; Wright, McWhite, & Grandjean 2014; Beebe, Qiaoan, Wysocki, & Endara 2015; Fisher, Knobe, Strickland, & Keil forthcoming).

This pluralism has shown up in two main forms—first, in the form of *interpersonal* differences in people’s meta-ethical commitments. Nichols (2004), for example, found that while some of the people he interviewed gave objectivist responses to questions about moral disagreement—stating that the wrongness of a particular action was grounded by objective facts (and that, therefore, if two people disagreed about it, one would be mistaken)—others did not, stating instead that there were no objective facts of the matter and that people making contrary claims could be correct. Sarkissian et al. (2011) found that while people gave objectivist responses to moral disagreement that occurred between members of the same culture, they gave more non-objectivist responses when it occurred between members of different cultures. Beebe et al. (2015) found age differences across cultures in whether people were objectivists, while Fisher et al. (forthcoming) found that being in a competitive vs. cooperative group setting influenced people’s objectivism. Finally, Young and Durwin (2013) found that people could be primed to make more objectivist vs. non-objectivist judgments.

Second, there is evidence for *intrapersonal* pluralism as well. Goodwin and Darley (2008, 2010, 2012) found that while people gave objectivist responses more frequently for moral issues than for other sorts of (non-moral) issues, they were nonetheless internally variable in their meta-ethical stance, giving objectivist responses for some of the moral issues, but not others. Wright et al. (2013, 2014) replicated, and expanded upon, this pattern of meta-ethical pluralism, verifying its presence even under more carefully constructed empirical conditions. Finally, Heiphetz and Young (forthcoming) have found this pluralism to be present not just in adults, but in preschool-aged children as well.

1. Current Project

1.1. *First objective*

Can we therefore conclude, in line with Loeb’s (2008) and Gill’s (2009) views, that meta-ethical variability exists in people’s moral discourse? Are people meta-ethical pluralists, sometimes believing that moral statements

assert facts, while at other times not; sometimes thinking the facts being so asserted are objective, while at other times not?

Unfortunately, philosophers have expressed a high degree of skepticism about drawing such a conclusion, arguing that the various methodological approaches used thus far lack sufficient clarity and rigor—for example, sometimes failing to adequately distinguish between a meta-ethical and a first-order normative ethical question, while in other instances failing to adequately distinguish between the different meta-ethical positions. These problems, and others, leave the results obtained thus far open to a variety of alternative explanations (Beebe forthcoming; Pözlner forthcoming)—such as the possibility that people are making second-order and/or epistemic, instead of meta-ethical, judgments, as well as the possibility that, since the methodology employed fails to adequately distinguish between realist and non-realist positions, the results suggesting a pluralism are actually a “false positive”. Thus we cannot yet conclude from the evidence that genuine meta-ethical pluralism has been found.

The first objective of this chapter, therefore, is to provide more rigorous empirical support for the existence of meta-ethical pluralism by presenting research conducted using more finely tuned methods for measuring meta-ethical pluralism—methods developed to more adequately operationalize the different meta-ethical positions (or, at least, fairly common versions of them) into measurable variables.

1.2. *Second objective*

Importantly though, the question is not just whether meta-ethical pluralism exists—but if it does, *why*? Gill (2009) suggests that we may simply be guilty of a degree of “internal incoherence” and the variability in our moral discourse is evidence of mistakes in our thinking (and speaking) about moral issues—mistakes that, unfortunately, could result in the adoption of “morally disastrous views” (p. 233). And Loeb (2008) appears to agree with this, arguing that “ordinary people are at bottom widely and irremediably, if perhaps only implicitly, conflicted about questions of moral objectivity” (p. 363), rendering their moral discourse irremediably incoherent.

There are no philosophical positions (at least, that I am aware of) currently on offer that provide cogent arguments for a metaphysically or epistemologically grounded pluralism in meta-ethics—the absence of which is a *prima facie* reason to view any pluralism on the part of

ordinary moral language users as the result of confusion or incoherence. Nonetheless, the second objective of this chapter is to argue that it serves an important *pragmatic* function. More specifically, I will argue that it aids in the individual and collective navigation of normative space within a morally imperfect world. It does so by creating and maintaining a civil space for discourse, one in which respect for another's moral autonomy is communicated, despite the existence of conflicting moral beliefs and practices (Calhoun 2000).

2. Objective 1: The Fact of Meta-Ethical Pluralism

One of the most common ways of articulating the debate in meta-ethics is in terms of realist and anti-realist positions. The realist position holds, essentially, that (1) moral statements are truth-apt, and that *at least some* of them are true, and (2) they are true in an objective (i.e., observer or mind-independent) way. An anti-realist position, therefore, denies one or both of these claims—holding that moral statements are not truth-apt (non-cognitivism) or that they are truth-apt, but either they are always false (error theory) or their truth is non-objectively determined (subjectivism/relativism). The studies presented below were attempts to test both of these claims.

2.1. *Objectivism vs. subjectivism/relativism*

This first study used methods developed to test whether people believe that moral statements can be true either *objectively* or *non-objectively*—or both. If people provide both objectivist and non-objectivist responses, even with these more fine-tuned measures, this will provide additional support for the existence of meta-ethical pluralism.

Developing more finely tuned measures of objectivism required distinguishing between two related, but distinct, forms of non-objectivism: namely, *subjectivism* (i.e., the truth of moral statements is based on mind-dependent facts—e.g., beliefs, attitudes, norms—at the individual and/or cultural level) and *relativism* (i.e., moral statements contain an essential indexical element, such that their truth requires relativization to facts about individuals and/or cultures). Previous studies have often failed to adequately distinguish between the two—for

example, treating evidence of universalism as evidence for objectivism (Pözlner forthcoming).

But the first step in the process was to successfully identify moral issues.⁴ To this end, 164 participants responded to the online survey posted on Amazon Mechanical Turk (70% female; 89% Caucasian, 5% African-American, 1% Asian-American, 3% Hispanic, and 2% other). They were asked to consider 20 different issues (e.g., “Smoking cigarettes in an enclosed public space”; “Engaging in prostitution”; “Selling children on the internet”; see Table 5.1 for a complete list) and identify what *kind of issue* they believed each one to be: *moral* or *non-moral* (the “non-moral” choices being *personal preference/choice* or *social convention/norm*). This step allowed for the individualization of the analysis of meta-ethical commitments to those issues each person actually considered to be moral.

Of the 20 issues presented, none were unanimously classified as moral (or non-moral), though 10 received a dominant⁵ moral classification. These included issues such as child trafficking (selling children on the internet), stealing, racial/gender discrimination, incest, euthanasia, and prostitution (see Table 5.1 for the breakdown).

Objectivism vs. Subjectivism. Once this step was completed, people were interviewed about their meta-ethical commitments, employing the issues they had previously classified as moral. To examine their commitments to *subjectivism* specifically, for each of the issues they had previously classified as moral, participants were first asked whether it would be morally acceptable or unacceptable for them to *x*—the “*x*” being filled with the specific moral issue under consideration (e.g., engage in prostitution).

⁴ While a seemingly straightforward task, previous research has found evidence for substantial disagreement, both between and within age groups, about which issues should be considered “moral” (Wright 2011; Wright et al. 2008, 2011; Wright 2011). It is important to note that while people appear to strongly disagree about the moral status of some (though certainly not all) issues, at the same time a large body of qualitative evidence shows that people significantly *agree* about what features (harm/unfairness) make something a moral, rather than a non-moral, issue (Wright 2011; Wright et al. 2008; Wright 2011). In other words, there does not appear to be substantive disagreement about the nature of the moral domain itself—at least within the dominantly western population sampled—instead, the disagreement centers around what sorts of issues belong in it.

⁵ From here on, by “dominant” we mean above the level expected by mere chance, which is a percentage (in this case, at least 39%) that is generated by the number of choices a person can make and the number of people making them.

Table 5.1 Domain classification.

| | Personal | Social | Moral |
|--|----------|--------|-------|
| selling children on internet | 7% | 8% | 84% |
| eating part of another human being | 10% | 13% | 77% |
| steal money and/or supplies from the large company where you work | 20% | 9% | 71% |
| conscious discrimination on basis of race/ gender | 10% | 20% | 70% |
| having sex with someone other than spouse | 25% | 6% | 68% |
| refusing to provide help to those who need it | 40% | 8% | 52% |
| helping terminally ill patients | 43% | 7% | 50% |
| engaging in prostitution | 39% | 17% | 44% |
| eating your pets (that died from an accident) | 31% | 25% | 44% |
| terminating pregnancy | 56% | 3% | 40% |
| burning the American flag | 20% | 52% | 28% |
| eating factory-farmed meat | 76% | 7% | 17% |
| watching pornographic videos | 80% | 7% | 14% |
| using recreational drugs | 75% | 13% | 12% |
| smoke cigarettes in enclosed public space | 37% | 52% | 11% |
| playing violent video games | 73% | 16% | 11% |
| using swear words in public | 50% | 41% | 9% |
| publicly criticize your government and engage in protest events | 61% | 33% | 6% |
| wearing pajamas to business meeting | 40% | 56% | 4% |
| getting tattoos/body piercings | 92% | 6% | 2% |

Second, they were asked to consider another person making a (sincerely endorsed) statement reflecting the *opposite* stance—i.e., if they had reported x being morally unacceptable, the statement they were asked to consider stated that “It is morally acceptable to x ” and vice versa.

Third, they were asked to report what they believed to be the case, their choices being:

- *It would be morally (un)acceptable for that person to x .* The person would be correct because the rightness/wrongness of x is determined individually, by each person’s beliefs, attitudes, or feelings about the act of x -ing or type of action that x -ing is.
- *It may or may not be morally (un)acceptable for that person to x .* Whether the person was correct would depend on the community

in which that person lives. The rightness/wrongness of x is determined by a community's collective beliefs, attitudes, or feelings about the act of x -ing or type of action that x -ing is.

- It would not be morally (un)acceptable for that person to x . The person would be mistaken (as would anyone else who made this claim). The rightness/wrongness of x is determined by the action or type of action it is, independently of the person's or his/her community's beliefs, attitudes, or feelings about it. That is, there is something about x -ing or the type of action x -ing is that makes it right/wrong regardless of what that person or other people think or feel about it.

The first two options were coded as *subjective*—insofar as the truth of the statement under consideration was determined by either the person's individual or his/her community's collective, beliefs, attitudes, or feelings about the act of x -ing or type of action that x -ing is. The last option was coded as *objective*—the truth of the statement determined by the action or type of action it is, independently of the person's or his/her community's beliefs, attitudes, or feelings about it.

The results showed clear variability in the meta-ethical responses people gave for each moral issue. For example, of the 10 issues dominantly classified as moral, none received a consistent meta-ethical response—though 7 were dominantly classified as objective, while the remaining 3 were dominantly classified as subjective (Table 5.2). Importantly, those issues dominantly classified as non-moral (either personal or social) were also dominantly classified as subjective.

There was also substantial *intrapersonal* variability: 78% of participants were pluralists, giving objective responses to some of the moral statements and subjective responses to others, while only 19% of the participants were consistent objectivists and 3% consistent subjectivists (Table 5.3).

Non-Relativism vs. Relativism. To examine their commitments to *relativism*, participants were first given a short paragraph introducing them to the idea of relative vs. non-relative terms.

Consider the difference between the term “triangular” vs. the term “tall”. The first of these terms is a *non-relative* term, meaning that the context in which it is uttered does not influence its truth value—e.g., the statement “That shape is

Table 5.2 Item-level variability.

| | Obj | Subj | Non-Rel | Rel | Cat | Non-Cat |
|---|-----|------|---------|-----|-----|---------|
| selling children on internet | 92% | 8% | 86% | 14% | 75% | 25% |
| eating part of another human being | 79% | 21% | 68% | 32% | 69% | 31% |
| steal money and/or supplies from the large company where you work | 76% | 24% | 70% | 30% | 45% | 55% |
| conscious discrimination on basis of race/gender | 80% | 20% | 69% | 31% | 70% | 30% |
| having sex with someone other than spouse | 63% | 37% | 56% | 44% | 61% | 39% |
| refusing to provide help to those who need it | 39% | 61% | 24% | 76% | 35% | 65% |
| helping terminally ill patients | 33% | 67% | 24% | 76% | 16% | 84% |
| engaging in prostitution | 51% | 49% | 37% | 63% | 43% | 57% |
| eating your pets (that died from an accident) | 53% | 47% | 37% | 63% | 45% | 55% |
| terminating pregnancy | 34% | 66% | 18% | 82% | 23% | 77% |
| burning the American flag | 50% | 50% | 42% | 58% | 38% | 62% |
| eating factory-farmed meat | 32% | 68% | 14% | 86% | 17% | 83% |
| watching pornographic videos | 29% | 71% | 18% | 82% | 12% | 88% |
| using recreational drugs | 36% | 64% | 27% | 73% | 23% | 77% |
| smoke cigarettes in enclosed public space | 28% | 72% | 21% | 79% | 30% | 70% |
| playing violent video games | 29% | 71% | 12% | 88% | 10% | 90% |
| using swear words in public | 19% | 81% | 11% | 89% | 5% | 95% |
| publicly criticize your government and engage in protest events | 27% | 73% | 16% | 84% | 10% | 90% |
| wearing pajamas to business meeting | 40% | 60% | 26% | 74% | 30% | 70% |
| getting tattoos/body piercings | 34% | 66% | 11% | 89% | 2% | 98% |

triangular [i.e., it is a shape with three sides and three corners]” is either true or false of the shape being talked about no matter who says it, when it is said, or what frame of reference is being used. If it is true that the shape being referred to is triangular in one context, then (barring something happening to change the shape) it will always be true that it is triangular, regardless of the person making the statement and/or the time, place, situation in which it is uttered.

Table 5.3 Intrapersonal variability.

| | Fully Non-Objective | Pluralist | Fully Objective |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| Subjectivity | 3% | 78% | 19% |
| Reasons | 6% | 82% | 12% |
| Relativity | 7% | 85% | 8% |
| | Fully Non-Cognitivist | Pluralist | Fully Cognitivist |
| Semantic Non-Factualism | 15% | 76% | 9% |
| Psychological Non-Cognitivism | 16% | 75% | 9% |

On the other hand, “tall” is a *relative* term, and, therefore, the statement “Naomi is tall” could be true or false, depending on the context/the frame of reference under which it is uttered—e.g., whether we are comparing Naomi, who stands 5’6”, to a group of women from a Black Hmong village in Vietnam (who, at their tallest, stand about 5”) or to a group of NBA players (who, on average, stand about 6’7”). It would also be the case that we’d consider the statement “Naomi is tall” to be true if uttered by a Black Hmong woman, but not true if uttered by an NBA player. In other words, for relative terms, the person making the statement and/or the time, place, situation in which it is uttered makes a difference. Frame of reference is important for determining truth-values.

Please keep this distinction between *relative* and *non-relative* terms in mind as you participate in the next exercise.

After reading this short paragraph, people were asked to consider for each of their previously classified moral issues two people who had both read about someone engaging in an issue-relevant behavior and then made two different (and opposing) statements about it—one stated that “It was wrong for that person to *x*” and the other stated that “It was not wrong for that person to *x*”.⁶ Given these opposing statements, participants were asked to choose which they thought would be the case, between:

- ONLY ONE of these statements would be correct—either it is true that it was wrong for that person to *x* or it is true that it was not wrong

⁶ Strictly speaking, what we are testing here is *appraiser*, rather than *agent*, relativism. While agent relativism holds that the appropriate frame of reference is the moral framework of the person who performs the act, or of the cultural group to which the person belongs, appraiser relativism holds that the appropriate frame of reference is the moral framework of the person who makes the moral judgment, or of the cultural group to which the person belongs.

for that person to x , regardless of who is making the statement or the contexts in which it is being made. Both statements cannot be correct.

- BOTH of these statements could be correct—whether it is true that it was wrong for that person to x or not wrong for that person to x depends on who is making the statement and/or the context in which it is made.⁷

The first option was coded as *non-relative*; the second as *relative*.

Once again, the results showed clear variability in whether people considered the truth of the moral statements to be relativized. For the same 10 issues as above, the statements about five of them were considered dominantly non-relative, whereas the statements about three of them were considered dominantly relative—the remaining two were split (Table 5.2). Again, statements about the issues classified as non-moral were also considered dominantly relative.

There also continued to be intrapersonal variability: 85% of the participants were pluralists, with only 8% of the participants consistently endorsing non-relativism and 7% consistently endorsing relativism (Table 5.3).

Categorical vs. Non-Categorical Imperatives. In the presentation of his error theory, Mackie (1977) argued that people’s moral claims made reference to objective values—values that were “categorically imperative” in nature (p. 29) and, therefore, providing people with a reason to do/not do the action *independently from* (and even *in spite of*) any actual desires, inclinations, beliefs (etc.) that they might have to do/not do it. To attempt to capture this, participants were also asked to consider, for each issue x , the following question:

If there were people who did not believe that there was anything wrong with doing x (or x -ing)—and, indeed, they wanted to do it—would there be any reason for that person to nonetheless refrain from doing it?

For each issue, they were asked to pick the best response from the following:

- *There would be no reason for them not to x .* They should feel free to x if they so desired.
- *There still might be a reason for them not to x .* People in their family/community might disapprove of x -ing or type of action that x -ing is.

⁷ Thank you to Edward Jarvis and others for help in formulating the subjectivism and relativism questions.

- *There still might be a reason for them not x.* It is against the law and they could get in trouble for *x*-ing or for engaging in the type of action that *x*-ing is.
- *There is still a strong reason for them not to x.* It would be bad⁸ for them to *x*, even if they don't think so and they wanted to do it (and even if no one else would disapprove or punish them for doing so).

The first three options were coded as *non-categorical*; the last as *categorical*.

Not surprisingly, people also displayed variability in their responses here—four of the 10 moral issues were dominantly considered categorical, while four were dominantly considered non-categorical, with the remaining two being split (Table 5.2). The non-moral issues were all dominantly classified as non-categorical. In total, 82% of the participants were pluralists, with 12% consistently choosing the categorical response and 6% the non-categorical response (Table 5.3).

In sum, this investigation revealed a high and consistent degree of pluralism in the way people think about moral issues and evaluate moral discourse. Across several distinct lines of questioning, people were both objectivists and non-objectivists. They reported that the status of some moral actions was objectively determined, moral claims about those actions non-relative, and reasons for/against them categorical, while at the same time reporting that the status of other moral actions was subjectively determined, moral claims about them relative, and reasons for/against them non-categorical. And they disagreed—for some moral issues more than others—about whether any particular moral issue should be treated objectively.

2.2. *Cognitivism vs. non-cognitivism*

The second study used methods developed to test whether people believe moral statements are truth-apt or not—specifically, examining whether people view moral statements as being the sorts of things that are either

⁸ We used the term “bad” here because elsewhere we’d used “unacceptable” and “wrong” and we wanted to demonstrate that variability in people’s meta-ethical responses is present across multiple evaluative terms.

true or false, like beliefs (*cognitivism*), or the sorts of things that are neither true nor false, like feelings or attitudes (*non-cognitivism*).⁹

To examine this, we had to first distinguish between two distinct non-cognitivist claims (Joyce 2009). The first is the claim of *semantic non-factualism*, which is the denial that moral statements express propositions or have truth conditions (i.e., that they are “truth-apt”). The second is the claim of *psychological non-cognitivism*, which denies that the mental states that moral statements are conventionally intended to convey are beliefs (or other related cognitive mental states). While typically non-cognitivists accept both of these negative claims, they can nonetheless come apart, so we decided to test each separately.

There were 122 participants who responded to an online survey, either as part of a college study or posted on Amazon Mechanical Turk (67% female; 88% Caucasian, 7% African-American, 2% Asian-American, and 3% Hispanic). Anticipating that the difference between the cognitivist and non-cognitivist positions would not be obvious, a carefully constructed “Introductory Exercise” was created that participants had to complete before they could move forward. Only those who did so successfully (94 participants or 77%) were invited to complete the rest of the survey.

Semantic Non-Factualism. To properly attune people to the difference between statements that are “truth-apt” and those that are not, they were instructed to read through the following very carefully and then answer some questions at the end:

Some statements assert propositions that are what we call “truth-apt”—that is, they are meant to reflect *matters of fact* about the world (though sometimes they may fail to do so), which means they will be either true or false. For example, if I said to someone that “Boston, MA is north of Miami, FL” I would be stating something that is truth-apt—it is either true or false. In this case, we can easily establish whether my statement is true or false (e.g., by looking at a map). And, as it turns out, it is true. If, however, I had stated that “Boston, MA is south of Miami, FL”, it would have been false. Either way, the important thing is that there is a *fact of the matter* (in this case, the geographical relationship between Boston and Miami) that my statement was meant to assert.

⁹ In some respects, support for the existence of meta-ethical pluralism here would be more interesting, since believing that moral statements can be both truth-apt and not truth-apt seems like a harder position to hold than that they are sometimes objectively grounded and sometimes not.

Determining the truth/falsity of statements like the above is relatively easy. But sometimes it isn't easy. Consider, for example, the statement that "The earth is the only planet in our galaxy with life on it". We simply don't know at this point (and, indeed, we may never know) whether this statement accurately reflects a matter of fact (that is, whether it accurately reflects how many planets in our galaxy actually currently support life). So, we have no way of establishing whether the statement is true or false—but, nonetheless, it is still truth-apt. It is either true or false—i.e., either the earth is the only planet in our galaxy with life on it or it isn't. So, if one person said "The earth is the only planet in our galaxy with life on it" and another person said "Earth is not the only planet in our galaxy with life on it", one of these people would be correct and the other one mistaken (even if we can't say at this point which one is which).

Consider, on the other hand, claims like "Peanut butter ice cream is delicious" or "Jazz music is the best form of music ever invented" or "Riding on the roller coaster at Elitch's is awesome!" Unlike the statements considered above, these statements aren't truth-apt. They are neither true nor false—there isn't a *fact of the matter* about the world that they are intended to reflect. In other words, there isn't an actual fact of the matter about whether peanut butter ice cream tastes delicious or riding the roller coaster at Elitch's is awesome. Some people enjoy the taste of peanut butter ice cream, others don't. Some people have a great time riding the roller coaster at Elitch's, others don't. So, if one person said "Riding roller coasters is awesome!" and another person said "Riding roller coasters is absolutely terrifying!" it wouldn't make sense to say that one of the two was correct and the other mistaken. This is because neither of these statements are intended to accurately reflect some fact about roller coaster riding—rather, they are expressions of people's liking/disliking of or approval/disapproval for something (in this case, riding roller coasters). In other words, statements like "Riding on roller coasters is exciting" or "Peanut butter ice cream is delicious" are not truth-apt—they are neither true nor false. Instead, they are expressions of what we call people's "pro/con attitudes" (i.e., their positive/negative feelings, likes/dislikes, approval/disapproval, etc.).

It is important to recognize that truth-apt statements about ice cream and roller coaster riding can be made—for example, "Meredith hates peanut butter ice cream" or "I really love riding the roller coaster at Elitch's" are both statements that are either true or false (either Meredith hates peanut butter ice cream or she doesn't, etc.). To illustrate further: Imagine that Meredith said "I hate peanut butter ice cream". In this case, she'd be stating something that is truth-apt, since her statement asserts a fact of the matter about herself (namely, that she hates peanut butter ice cream). But if instead she said "Peanut butter ice cream is disgusting", she'd be stating something that is not truth-apt, since it is a statement intended to express her dislike of peanut butter ice cream.¹⁰

¹⁰ This is highly nuanced and philosophically treacherous territory—especially when attempting to guide the "folk" through it. For example, it could be argued that "peanut

Table 5.4 Introductory exercise examples.

| Not Truth-Apt/Expression of Feelings/Attitudes | % correct | |
|--|-----------|------|
| Golden retrievers are better dogs than Chihuahuas. | 89% | 88% |
| Heavy metal music sucks! | 88% | 93% |
| Strawberries are tastier than raspberries. | 87% | 91% |
| Abstract art is a waste of time and space. | 89% | 92% |
| Walking on the beach at sunset is relaxing. | 80% | 83% |
| Truth-Apt/Assertion of Beliefs | % correct | |
| Penguins are birds that can't fly. | 97% | 97% |
| Golden retrievers are bigger dogs than Chihuahuas. | 94% | 98% |
| Water is H ₂ O. | 97% | 100% |
| Triangles are sturdier for construction (hold more weight) than squares. | 87% | 86% |
| Benjamin Franklin was the third president of the United States. | 94% | 95% |

For the questions that follow, please keep this distinction in mind, as you'll be asked to identify which statements you think are "truth-apt" (i.e., asserting *matters of fact* that are either true or false) and which statements you think are not "truth-apt" (i.e., expressing *pro/con attitudes*, and so are neither true nor false).

After reading this, participants were then given 10 statements (five of each type, see Table 5.4) and asked to identify them as either "truth-apt" or not. Only those participants who identified at least nine of the 10 correctly (94 participants or 77%) were invited to continue with the study.

At this point, the remaining participants were given 20 different issues to consider (see Table 5.5 for a complete list). Once again, they were asked to identify what *kind of issue* they believed each issue to be, *moral* or *not-moral*. Of the 20 issues considered, 12 were dominantly classified as moral: including issues such as trafficking children (selling children on the internet), stealing, rape, infidelity, cheating, incest, and racial discrimination (Table 5.5).

"butter ice cream is delicious!" is truth-apt, just relativized to the speaker. Nonetheless, there is also a reading of it in which it is not truth-apt, and not meant to be truth-apt, which seemed good enough for the goal of creating a way for participants to at least begin to see the distinction between statements of matters of fact vs. expressions of pro/con attitudes. As a first pass, there are likely to be a number of ways this instruction exercise can be improved. Thanks to John Parks for his helpful feedback here. For an excellent review of the issues—and pitfalls—associated with doing empirical research in this area, see Pölzler (forthcoming).

Table 5.5 Domain classification.

| | Semantic Non-Factualism | | | Psychological Non-Cog | | |
|--|-------------------------|--------|-------|-----------------------|--------|-------|
| | Personal | Social | Moral | Personal | Social | Moral |
| Selling children on the internet. | 3% | 5% | 91% | 6% | 6% | 89% |
| Taking things that don't belong to you. | 7% | 10% | 83% | 12% | 11% | 76% |
| Forcing someone else to have sex. | 11% | 6% | 83% | 14% | 10% | 76% |
| Cheating on an exam. | 14% | 5% | 80% | 15% | 10% | 75% |
| Cheating on one's spouse. | 11% | 11% | 78% | 18% | 9% | 74% |
| Knowingly overcharging someone for a product or service in order to make more money. | 20% | 11% | 70% | 17% | 13% | 70% |
| Consciously discriminating against someone on the basis of race. | 13% | 18% | 68% | 13% | 26% | 61% |
| Having consensual sex with another close family member. | 13% | 20% | 67% | 22% | 17% | 61% |
| Doing nothing in the face of people in our communities that could use our help. | 48% | 5% | 47% | 37% | 15% | 48% |
| Buying products made overseas in sweat shops. | 43% | 12% | 46% | 44% | 12% | 44% |
| Engaging in vigilante justice (take the law into your own hands) when you or someone you love has suffered an injustice. | 46% | 18% | 36% | 50% | 17% | 33% |
| Getting a 1st trimester abortion. | 63% | 1% | 36% | 70% | 4% | 26% |
| Burning the American flag in protest of our governmental policies. | 51% | 24% | 25% | 51% | 27% | 22% |
| Watching pornographic videos. | 72% | 4% | 24% | 76% | 7% | 18% |
| Using illegal drugs. | 61% | 16% | 23% | 66% | 16% | 17% |
| Eating factory-farmed (instead of free range) cows, pigs, and chickens. | 80% | 6% | 14% | 61% | 22% | 17% |
| Smoke cigarettes openly in enclosed public places. | 57% | 30% | 13% | 84% | 3% | 13% |
| Recycling paper, plastic, cardboard, and metal. | 66% | 24% | 11% | 52% | 36% | 12% |
| Gay couples getting married. | 72% | 18% | 10% | 59% | 32% | 9% |
| Privately owning guns or other dangerous weapons. | 83% | 12% | 5% | 82% | 11% | 7% |

Once this step was completed, participants were asked to consider for each issue the statement “It is wrong to *x*” (the “*x*” being filled in with the particular issue under consideration—e.g., selling children on the internet) and then identify whether they thought each statement was either:

- “truth-apt” (*assertions of matters of fact* that are either true or false).
- not “truth-apt” (*expressions of positive/negative feelings, pro/con attitudes, etc.* that are neither true nor false).

Of the 12 issues dominantly identified as moral, 3 were dominantly identified as truth-apt, 4 as not truth-apt, and the remaining 5 were split between the two. The issues dominantly classified as non-moral were also dominantly identified as not truth-apt (Table 5.6).

Thus, once again, we found meta-ethical variability, with people treating *some* moral statements as assertions of matters of fact while treating *other* moral statements as expressions of pro/con (presumably con) feelings/attitudes.

This variability was also once again intrapersonal: 76% of the people were pluralists, identifying some moral statements as truth-apt and others as not, while only 9% of the participants provided consistently cognitivist responses and 15% consistently non-cognitivist responses (Table 5.3).

Psychological Non-Cognitivism. Switching focus to the second related, though distinct, claim of non-cognitivism (the denial that moral statements are meant to express beliefs or related “cognitive” mental states), a separate group of 116 participants responded to an online survey, either as part of a college study or posted on Amazon Mechanical Turk (61% female; 89% Caucasian, 6% African-American, 1% Asian-American, and 4% Hispanic). They were given the following Introductory Exercise:

People make different kinds of statements—some of which *assert beliefs*, others of which *express feelings*. Consider, for example, if I said to someone that “Boston, MA is north of Miami, FL”. What I am doing is expressing my belief that something is the case—namely, that there is a fact of the matter about the geographical relationship between Boston and Miami. My intention is to assert a belief, which in this case turns out to be true. But, there are also times when the beliefs we assert with our statements are false, like if I would have said “Boston, MA is south of Miami, FL” instead. But that does not change the fact that such statements assert a *belief* about something being the case. For our purposes, it doesn’t matter whether the beliefs being asserted are true or false—all that matters is that we sometimes make statements that are intended to assert beliefs about things that we take to be matters of fact about the world.

The same goes for statements that involve beliefs whose truth/falsity cannot be established. For example, I might state something like, “The earth is the only planet in our galaxy with life on it”. This isn’t the sort of belief that can currently be established as true or false—we don’t know at this point (and, indeed, we may never know) whether my belief accurately reflects a fact of the matter about life in the galaxy or not. But, nonetheless, my objective in making this statement is to assert a belief about something I take to be true, even if it can’t be established for sure whether or not I’m correct.

Consider, on the other hand, my statement that “Peanut butter ice cream is delicious!” or “Jazz music is the best form of music ever invented” or “The roller coaster at Elitch’s is terrifying!” Here, these statements are not intended to be assertions of beliefs about matters of fact—i.e., that peanut butter ice cream is the sort of thing that is, in fact, delicious or that riding the roller coaster at Elitch’s is the sort of activity that is terrifying. Rather, they are expressions of *positive and/or negative feelings and attitudes* that I have about the subject matter (in this case, really liking peanut butter ice cream and not liking the roller coaster at Elitch’s).

When I make these sorts of statements, I am fully aware that they aren’t true or false (like the statements considered above). While it may be true that I like the taste of peanut butter ice cream and don’t enjoy riding on the roller coaster at Elitch’s, there isn’t actually a *fact of the matter* about peanut butter ice cream being delicious or the roller coaster being terrifying—after all, it would make perfect sense for someone to reasonably state the opposite and neither of us would be mistaken. In other words, the objective of statements like “Riding on roller coasters is terrifying” or “Peanut butter ice cream is delicious” is to express our positive/negative feelings (pro/con attitudes, liking/disliking, approval/disapproval) about something, not to assert beliefs about things that we take to be true.

Of course, I can believe (i.e., take it to be true) that I or someone else really likes peanut butter ice cream and doesn’t like riding the roller coaster at Elitch’s and my statements can assert such beliefs—such as if, for example, I were to say “Meredith really loves peanut butter ice cream” or “Peanut butter ice cream is my favorite”. These statements involve beliefs about Meredith and myself that are either true or false. But statements like “Peanut butter ice cream is disgusting!”, on the other hand, are not.

To further illustrate, consider the following two statements:

- Larry loves Bon Jovi
- Bon Jovi rocks!

The first statement involves the *assertion of a belief* about Larry (namely, that he loves Bon Jovi—which could be true or false); the second, on the other hand, does not assert a belief (there is no fact of the matter about Bon Jovi “rocking” that can be established as true or false) but instead *expresses a person’s positive attitude* (their appreciation, enjoyment, approval) toward Bon Jovi.¹¹

¹¹ The same concerns raised in footnote 10 apply here as well.

For the questions that follow, please keep this distinction in mind, as you'll be asked to identify those statements you think were intended to *assert beliefs about matters of fact*, those intended to *express positive/negative feelings, attitudes, etc.* about a topic, and those intended to do both.

After reading this, participants were then given the same 10 statements (Table 5.4) and asked to identify them as statements that were intended to (1) express positive/negative feelings, attitudes, etc., (2) assert beliefs about matters of fact, or (3) both.¹² Only those participants who identified at least nine of the 10 correctly (98 participants or 84%) were asked to continue with the study.

At this point, the remaining participants were given the same 20 issues to consider. As above, they were asked to identify what kind of issue they believed each to be and of the 20 issues considered, 11 were dominantly classified as “moral”—not surprisingly, the same as before, with the exception of first trimester abortions, which dropped below chance (Table 5.5).

Once this step was completed, they were asked to consider for each issue the statement “It is wrong to do *x*” (the “*x*” being the particular issue under consideration) and then identify whether the statement was intended to:

- assert *beliefs* about matters of fact
- express positive/negative *feelings, attitudes, etc.*
- both.

Of the 11 issues dominantly identified as moral, 3 were dominantly identified as only expressions of positive/negative feelings/attitudes, 5 were dominantly identified as asserting beliefs (either alone or accompanied by an expression of feelings/attitudes), and the remaining 3 were split. As before, all issues classified as non-moral were also dominantly identified as expressing positive/negative feelings/attitudes (Table 5.6).

¹² Since often our utterances do more than one thing—e.g., convey a belief while at the same time expressing an emotional reaction—we felt that it was important to include this third option. But for the purposes of analysis the last two options were collapsed together, since the issue of primary importance was whether there was an assertion of a belief, regardless of whether it was accompanied by an expression of a feeling/attitude. As Sinnott-Armstrong (2009) reminds us, it is not inconsistent with cognitivism for feelings/attitudes to be uttered alongside beliefs in the same statement: “We can state facts and also express emotions or issue imperatives at the same time, such as when someone says ‘There’s a spider on your leg’ in order to state a fact and also to express fear and to warn and alert you to danger” (Sinnott-Armstrong 1993).

Table 5.6 Item-level variability.

| | Moral Only | | | Moral Only | | | | |
|--|---------------|-----------|---------------|------------|--------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| | Non-Objective | Objective | Non-Objective | Objective | Express Feeling/Attitude | Assert Belief/Both | Express Feeling/Attitude | Assert Belief/Both |
| Selling children on the internet. | 27% | 73% | 27% | 73% | 5% | 95% | 6% | 94% |
| Taking things that don't belong to you. | 48% | 52% | 41% | 59% | 7% | 93% | 7% | 93% |
| Forcing someone else to have sex. | 26% | 74% | 23% | 77% | 22% | 78% | 16% | 84% |
| Cheating on an exam. | 48% | 52% | 49% | 51% | 47% | 53% | 45% | 55% |
| Cheating on one's spouse. | 58% | 42% | 57% | 43% | 38% | 62% | 36% | 64% |
| Knowingly overcharging someone for a product or service in order to make more money. | 59% | 41% | 50% | 50% | 35% | 65% | 32% | 68% |
| Consciously discriminating against someone on the basis of race. | 47% | 53% | 32% | 68% | 29% | 71% | 22% | 78% |
| Having consensual sex with another close family member. | 60% | 40% | 50% | 50% | 37% | 63% | 24% | 76% |
| Doing nothing in the face of people in our communities that could use our help. | 89% | 11% | 80% | 20% | 62% | 38% | 56% | 44% |
| Buying products made overseas in sweat shops. | 78% | 22% | 67% | 33% | 57% | 43% | 44% | 56% |

| | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|
| Engaging in vigilante justice (take the law into your own hands) when you or someone you love has suffered an injustice. | 78% | 22% | 79% | 21% | 53% | 47% | 50% | 50% |
| Getting a 1st trimester abortion. | 83% | 17% | 67% | 33% | 67% | 33% | 57% | 43% |
| Burning the American flag in protest of our governmental policies. | 74% | 26% | 48% | 52% | 58% | 42% | 35% | 65% |
| Watching pornographic videos. | 92% | 8% | 73% | 27% | 71% | 29% | 31% | 69% |
| Using illegal drugs. | 69% | 31% | 52% | 48% | 67% | 33% | 38% | 63% |
| Eating factory-farmed (instead of free range) cows, pigs, and chickens. | 93% | 7% | 77% | 23% | 45% | 55% | 0% | 100% |
| Smoke cigarettes openly in enclosed public places. | 80% | 20% | 50% | 50% | 82% | 18% | 55% | 45% |
| Recycling paper, plastic, cardboard, and metal. | 77% | 23% | 40% | 60% | 54% | 46% | 36% | 64% |
| Gay couples getting married. | 77% | 23% | 56% | 44% | 52% | 48% | 25% | 75% |
| Privately owning guns or other dangerous weapons. | 86% | 14% | 100% | 0% | 68% | 32% | 33% | 67% |

Taken together, these results provide additional support for the existence of meta-ethical variability in people's cognitivist/non-cognitivist commitments—they viewed some moral statements as intended to only convey expressions of people's feelings/attitudes, but others to convey beliefs about matters of fact. And again, there was substantial intrapersonal variability: 75% of people gave pluralist responses, while only 9% of the participants provided consistently cognitivist responses and 16% consistently non-cognitivist responses (Table 5.3).

3. Objective 2: The Function of Meta-Ethical Pluralism

Altogether, the data collected and reported above, alongside previous research, supports the presence of pluralism in the way people think and talk about moral issues, and evaluate moral statements, across several distinct meta-ethical positions. And though it is certainly likely that the methods used here, while an improvement on previous research, have still failed to fully capture relevant meta-ethical distinctions and/or tap into people's meta-ethical commitments in important ways, they nonetheless reveal that something very interesting—and pluralistic—is going on with people's moral discourse.

But what is to be made of this pluralism? Contrary to Gill's (2009) and Loeb's (2008) suggestion that it is evidence of an "irremediable incoherence" in people's moral discourse, I would argue that it has a clear pragmatic function, which is to assist in our ongoing individual and collective navigation of normative space by creating and maintaining a civil space for discourse (Calhoun 2000).

Wright et al. (2013, 2014) argued for the view that meta-ethical pluralism serves an important "psycho-social" function by modulating the level of permissible choice and dialogue about moral issues, both within and between socio-cultural groups. To illustrate: viewing a moral issue as objectively grounded removes it from the realm of legitimate personal/social negotiation (i.e., individual and/or social attempts to condone and/or promote it are deemed unacceptable, censorship/prohibition supported). On the other hand, viewing a moral issue as non-objectively grounded allows people to acknowledge its *moral* significance (i.e., that it is not simply a personal/conventional matter), while at the same time

maintaining room for open and respectful dialogue and debate—thus, social censorship/prohibition are viewed less favorably.

3.1. *Objectivism vs. subjectivism/relativism*

If meta-ethical pluralism serves this function, then people should be more willing to privately and publicly support—and less inclined to shun or condemn—“moral divergence” (i.e., moral views that are different from their own) when they view that divergence as being non-objectively grounded. To examine this, 122 participants (67% female; 88% Caucasian, 7% African-American, 2% Asian-American, and 3% Hispanic) were asked to report their level of public and private tolerance for potentially divergent moral beliefs/values. Specifically, they were asked how willing they would be to privately and publicly engage in dialogue with someone who believed that *x*-ing (the “*x*” being filled in with each moral issue) was morally acceptable, as well as to privately and publicly support and/or shun him/her for engaging in *x*-ing (3 = *very willing* to −3 = *very unwilling*).

In addition, they were asked both to consider what would be true of the person *x*-ing (e.g., “They would probably not be that different from me”; “They would not have the same values as I do”; “They would be a bad person”, etc.) and what would be true of themselves if they were to *x* as well (e.g., “I’d never do it!”; “I’d be happy/proud that I did it, even if other people didn’t accept it”; “I wouldn’t think it’s that big of a deal”) from 3 = *very true* to −3 = *very not true*. These questions were then collapsed into four summary tolerance variables: *private tolerance* (Cohen’s $\alpha = 0.85$), *public tolerance* (Cohen’s $\alpha = 0.70$), *judgments about other* (Cohen’s $\alpha = 0.89$), and *judgments about self* (Cohen’s $\alpha = 0.68$).

Comparing the difference in people’s tolerance for divergent moral actions that they viewed as objectively grounded to their tolerance for those they viewed as non-objectively grounded revealed that they were significantly less tolerant of the former—both privately and publicly: paired-sample *t*-tests, $t(157) = 8.8$ to 10.3 , $ps < 0.001$.

They also had more negative views of anyone who engaged in these issue-relevant actions, $t(157) = 10.1$, $p < 0.001$, and of themselves, were they to engage in them, $t(157) = 4.6$, $p < 0.001$ (Figure 5.1).

It is worth noting that prior work (Wright 2011; Wright et al. 2013) suggests that this is not merely a function of attitudinal strength—i.e., the

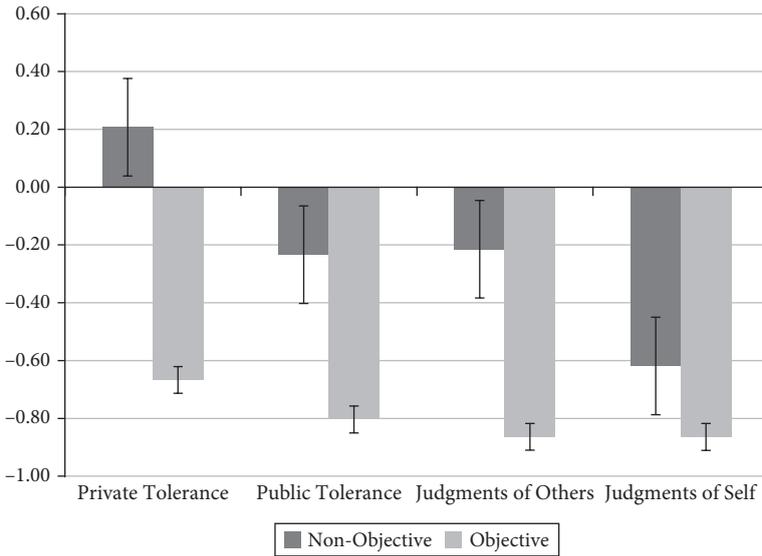


Figure 5.1 People's tolerance for divergent moral actions: objective vs. non-objective.

strength with which these beliefs were held. Specifically, they found no difference in belief strength between participants' non-moral and moral beliefs, or between those moral beliefs they grounded objectively vs. those they grounded non-objectively. This suggests that the differences in tolerance reported here is unlikely to be a consequence of differences in conviction or the strength of belief, but rather in what is believed to ground those beliefs.

3.2. *Cognitivism vs. non-cognitivism*

For the second set of studies we added questions about people's internal motivation. For each issue, 122 participants (67% female; 88% Caucasian, 7% African-American, 2% Asian-American, and 3% Hispanic) were asked what would be the case for someone who had honestly stated "It's wrong to x ", and yet had done x .

Specifically, they were asked to rate (3 = *strongly agree* to -3 = *strongly disagree*) the degree to which the following would be the case:

- They would feel guilty if they ended up doing it.
- They would feel disgusted by others that did it.

- They would feel motivated not to do it.
- They would feel outraged at others that did it.
- If they did it, they would actively try to avoid doing it again in the future.

People were also asked questions about how they would respond toward someone who engaged in each issue-relevant action, their response options including both negative (e.g., “I would try to convince him/her to stop”, “I would be disgusted”, “I would seek to have that person punished”) and positive (e.g., “I would think that person was worth getting to know better”, “I would understand, it’s his/her choice”) statements. These questions were then collapsed into two summary tolerance variables: *intolerance* (Cohen’s $\alpha = 0.85$) and *tolerance* (Cohen’s $\alpha = 0.71$).

We compared the difference in people’s tolerance for divergent moral actions when they had classified statements about those actions as non-cognitive (expressions of feelings/attitudes) to their tolerance for divergent moral actions they had classified as cognitive (assertion of beliefs). This revealed that people attributed significantly stronger internal motivation to someone engaging in a divergent moral action when the statements made about those actions were viewed as cognitive rather than non-cognitive, $t(143) = 6.4, p < 0.001$.

They also displayed significantly less *positive* tolerance—and more *negative* tolerance—toward anyone who engaged in them: $ts(144) = 10.9$ and $11.2, ps < 0.001$, respectively. And finally, they reported that it was significantly less okay for either themselves, $t(144) = 3.5, p = 0.001$, or someone else, $t(144) = 2.7, p = 0.007$, to engage in them (Figure 5.2).

These results together provide additional support for the view that meta-ethical pluralism is not just a sign of incoherence, but serves a purpose (Wright et al. 2013, 2014), allowing for moral disagreement to be treated differently, depending on how it is viewed. Some divergence (i.e., divergence viewed as non-objectively grounded) is to be tolerated—though certainly not to the same degree as divergent non-moral actions—and the “source” of that divergence treated respectfully. Other (objectively grounded) divergence is to be strongly prohibited and punished. For some divergence, social discussion about the moral issue remains open, while discussion about other moral issues is considered “closed”. And while all moral issues are expected to “pull hard on us” internally, motivating us to refrain from them—and making us feel

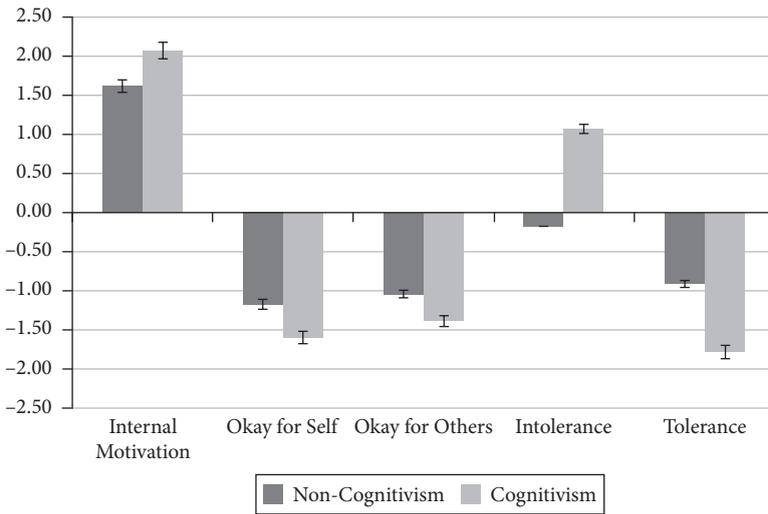


Figure 5.2 People's tolerance for divergent moral actions: cognitivism vs. non-cognitivism.

ashamed/guilty/disgusted at ourselves and others when we fail—some moral issues are expected to have more pull on us than others.

4. Concluding Remarks

The objective of this chapter was two-fold. The first was to argue that meta-ethical pluralism exists—and that the empirical scholarship showing that people are both realists and anti-realists cannot be simply dismissed on the basis of being philosophically inadequate, because even when we increase the level of clarity and rigor, the pluralism clearly remains. The second was to argue that, contrary to the view that this pluralism is incoherent or a sign of confusion, it serves an important pragmatic function, aiding in our individual and collective navigation of normative space within a morally imperfect world.

An objectivist might argue that just as many of our current beliefs about the physical nature of the world will one day turn out to be false (and therefore need to be replaced), many of our current moral beliefs will likewise turn out to be wrong—and therefore need to be changed. But the socio-cultural, and personal, difficulty of rejecting previously held moral beliefs and adopting new ones can be much greater than that

of rejecting previously held scientific beliefs in favor of new ones. After all, our moral beliefs occupy the very center of what we take ourselves to value and who we take ourselves to be—without them, we would no longer be who we are (Strohming & Nichols 2014). Thus this sort of transition—from one set of moral beliefs to another—can require a major social/political/cultural (and personal) transformation. Such transformations cannot happen overnight. Indeed, if pushed too hard, they can result in significant psychological distress and socio-political conflict. For change to happen, we need sufficient “normative space” for people to successfully navigate disagreement and divergence.

The view being argued for here is that meta-ethical pluralism helps to facilitate these transformations, providing the normative space required. On the one hand, it allows people to acknowledge the moral significance of an action, event, or situation without yet requiring (or even being allowed to require) the censorship and prohibition that typically accompanies moral issues. It “holds open” the social space for people to carefully consider an issue, to engage in social debate and dialogue—to achieve a sort of reflective equilibrium—before granting the issue its full (objective) moral weight.¹³ On the other hand, it also allows people to continue to hold onto their moral convictions about an issue, while at the same time creating room for discussion and alternative choices/practices—with the hope that at some point the issue will shift out of the moral domain altogether.

Consider, from our own past, the social/political/cultural transformation required to embrace the fact that the ownership of other human beings is not a legitimate means to economic gain (one that individuals can choose to engage in or not), or merely a social custom—rather, it is an inhumane and morally intolerable practice. Living in the south (indeed, in the city where over half of the soon-to-be slaves arrived in the US to be sold), many of us have been exposed to the historical dialogue that treated slavery as a topic for social debate and discussion, where people of influence openly and publicly argued both sides.¹⁴ But, this is no longer the case—indeed, it would be hard to imagine an open public forum on the topic being actually considered, much less allowed,

¹³ For some additional insight into the process of moralization, see Rozin (1999).

¹⁴ An example of which was brought vividly to life by Spielberg’s recent cinematic depiction of the adoption of the 13th amendment in *Lincoln*.

unless only as a historical lens. So, we might argue that this issue has successfully moved through normative space, being first recognized and discussed as having important moral significance—and yet, something that people had the freedom to choose to do or not do, based on the pangs of their own moral consciences—to finally (via a combination of reflective dialogue, rhetoric, and force) being granted its full moral weight and, thereby, forbidden.¹⁵

On the flip side, consider the transformation required to acknowledge that a behavior previously prohibited as morally repugnant and punishable—e.g., same-sex relationships—is in fact a behavior of no more moral significance than any of the other relationship choices we make. Today, same-sex relationships are a more common (and more widely accepted) sight on the streets of the cities in which we live—something that once was considered by many to be an outrage, even a “lynch-able” offense.

Of course, even if this is correct, unless a reasonable philosophical defense of pluralism can be given, objectivists such as myself must acknowledge that an error theory of some sort (albeit, quite different from Mackie’s (1977)) may be warranted after all—namely, that people’s moral discourse erroneously treats certain moral issues as non-objectively grounded and/or non-cognitive. But, as mentioned earlier, my account provides at least a *pragmatic* defense to this practice, something akin to a form of “exculpatory pretense”, such as was introduced to explain other linguistic practices (Turri 2013). That is, perhaps people merely talk (not necessarily consciously) *as if* a moral issue is non-objectively grounded so as to create/maintain a space for choice, discussion, and debate—long enough, at least, for agreement between reasonable parties to be reached, at which point the issue’s actual objective status is acknowledged or the issue’s moral status is abandoned.¹⁶

¹⁵ This is not to say that it is still not globally practiced—sadly, perhaps to an even greater degree than ever before.

¹⁶ This idea receives some support from the relationship between perceived consensus and objectivity found by Wright et al. (2014) and Goodwin and Darley (2010, 2012). The former found that perceived consensus (both within one’s own and across different cultures) mediated the relationship between people’s meta-ethical commitments and their tolerance for divergent moral beliefs/values, while the latter found that manipulations of perceived consensus resulted in corresponding changes in objectivity—the greater the consensus, the greater the objectivity reported. These findings suggest a tight (and most likely bi-directional) relationship between the two variables.

Such a practice is entirely consistent with (and justified by) the moral demands of civility (Calhoun 2000), which requires, among other things, that collective spaces respect the moral autonomy of the individuals who occupy that space—even when, as is common in a morally imperfect world, those individuals have morally divergent views.¹⁷

We must not neglect the non-objectivists/non-cognitivists, however. After all, the presence of meta-ethical pluralism can be accounted for within those frameworks as well, perhaps more easily so. It seems less problematic that people would speak non-objectively/non-cognitively about some moral issues, while speaking objectively/cognitively about others.¹⁸ After all, a number of the non-objectivist/non-cognitivist positions on offer (e.g., Blackburn 1984; Gibbard 1990; Timmons 1999) go a long way toward accounting for the cognitivist/objectivist-sounding language people use to discuss moral issues.

Either way, one thing is clear—the “descriptive” story about people’s meta-ethical commitments is not nearly as uniform as was once supposed. And if people’s linguistic dispositions in any way reflect deeper meta-ethical truths, then this complexity presents both philosophers and social scientists with important “food for thought”.

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¹⁷ Indeed, as Calhoun (2000) points out, the “principal point of having norms of civility is to regulate discussion of controversial subjects so that dialogue among those who disagree will continue rather than break down” (p. 269). She goes on to state—consistent with my suggestions above—that such civility is only required for those moral issues for which there is substantive disagreement. For moral issues on which there is extensive social consensus, on the other hand, “we need not respond civilly to a view or behavior once there is social closure on its intolerability” (p. 271).

¹⁸ Thank you to Terence Cuneo for pointing out that it may actually be more problematic than it looks. As he writes, “the major argument in Mark Schroeder’s *Being For* is that non-cognitivism faces a huge challenge: roughly, how sentences that express both cognitive and non-cognitive elements could bear the right sort of logical relations with one another, since they would require totally different semantics. Schroeder’s argument is that either we have to go fully non-cognitivist or fully cognitivist.”

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