

Fallibility for Expressivists

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Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 The Idealization Analysis
- 3 The Credal Analysis
- 4 Credences for Expressivists
- 5 Conclusion

Moral Expressivism

The primary function of moral language is not to describe the world, but rather to express conative states (e.g., desires, preferences, intentions).

Quasi-Realist Program

Aims to reconcile expressivism with the “realist” trappings of moral language.

- e.g., Blackburn [1993, 1998]; Gibbard [2003]

Realist Trapping	Quasi-Realist Explanation
Moral belief reports Moral truth talk	Moral beliefs are just conative states Minimalist theory of truth

Acknowledgments of Moral Fallibility

- (1) a. I believe eating meat is wrong.
- b. But I might be mistaken.

“[Discourses such as (1)] are the hardest context of all for an anti-realist to understand” (Blackburn [1973]: 127).

The Challenge

Realist Trapping	Quasi-Realist Explanation
Moral belief reports Moral truth talk Moral fallibility talk	Moral beliefs are just conative states Minimalist theory of truth ???

Idealization Analysis

Acknowledgments of moral fallibility are expressions of doubts as to whether one's moral beliefs will survive idealization.

- Blackburn [1973, 1998, 2009]; Horgan and Timmons [2015]; cf. Ridge [2015]

The Solution

My proposal: integrate moral expressivism with credal expressivism.

Credal Expressivism

The primary function of epistemic modals (“might”, “must”, “probably”) is not to describe the world, but rather to express credences.

- Yalcin [2007, 2011, 2012a,b]; Rothschild [2012]; Moss [2013]

Credal Analysis

Acknowledgments of moral fallibility are expressions of moral uncertainty.

The Solution

Realist Trapping	Quasi-Realist Explanation
Moral belief reports Moral truth talk Moral fallibility talk	Moral beliefs are just conative states Minimalist theory of truth Expressions of moral uncertainty

A Question

Realist Trapping	Quasi-Realist Explanation
Moral belief reports Moral truth talk Moral fallibility talk Moral uncertainty	Moral beliefs are just conative states Minimalist theory of truth Expressions of moral uncertainty ???

Realist Trapping	Quasi-Realist Explanation
Moral belief reports Moral truth talk Moral fallibility talk Moral uncertainty	Moral beliefs are just conative states Minimalist theory of truth Expresses moral uncertainty Degrees of plans towards reactive attitudes

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The Idealization Analysis

How can I make sense of my own fears of fallibility? Well, there are a number of things that I admire: for instance, information, sensitivity, maturity, imagination, coherence. I know that other people show defects in these respects, and that these defects lead to bad opinions. But can I exempt myself from the same possibility? Of course not... So I can think that perhaps some of my opinions are due to defects of information, sensitivity, maturity, and imagination, and coherence.

– Blackburn [1998]: 318

The Idealization Analysis

- (1) a. I believe eating meat is wrong.
- b. But I might be mistaken.

The Idealization Analysis

- (1) a. I believe eating meat is wrong.
reports that the speaker disapproves of eating meat
- b. But I might be mistaken.
acknowledges that a more enlightened agent might not similarly disapprove of eating meat

Immunity to Error for Idealized Agents?

The following worry seems coherent:

An agent might be apprised of all the relevant non-moral facts, and also be fully sensitive, imaginative, etc., and yet still fail to glom onto all of the moral facts.

- Egan [2007]

Immunity to Error for Idealized Agents?

- (2) Even if my belief that eating meat is wrong survives idealization, this belief might be mistaken.

Idealization Analysis paraphrase: **Even if my belief that eating meat is wrong survives idealization, this belief might not survive idealization.**

Blackburn's Reply: the incoherence of (2) falls out of the def. of "idealization."

- If a belief is false, "an improvement is clearly on the cards, namely, replacing it with the truth" (Blackburn [2009]: 206)

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Blackburn's Reply: the incoherence of (2) falls out of the def. of "idealization."

Objection: But then we don't have a non-circular analysis of acknowledgments of moral fallibility.

- An acknowledgment that a belief B might be in error is analyzed as an acknowledgment that B might not survive idealization, "idealization" is itself defined in terms of avoiding moral error.

Semantically *Ad hoc* and Implausible

The Idealization Analysis does not proceed compositionally; rather it proceeds in “piecemeal, *ad hoc* fashion” (Schroeder [2013]: 416)

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- (1) a. I believe eating meat is wrong.
- b. But I **might** be mistaken.

Semantically *Ad hoc* and Implausible

Expressivists deny that the following are equivalent:

- (3) It is not wrong to eat meat.
- (4) I would not disapprove of eating meat if I were an idealized agent.

But, according to the Idealization Analysis, the following are equivalent:

- (5) It might not be wrong to eat meat.
- (6) I might not disapprove of eating meat if I were an idealized agent.

- Schroeder [2013]

Semantically *Ad hoc* and Implausible

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- (3) It is not wrong to eat meat.
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But, according to the Idealization Analysis, the following are equivalent:

- (5) It **might** not be wrong to eat meat.
- (6) I **might** not disapprove of eating meat if I were an idealized agent.

Why would embedding (3) and (4) under “might” transform them into equivalent sentences?

We've seen grounds for dissatisfaction with the Idealization Analysis.

A more satisfactory analysis will:

- 1 Make sense of worries that idealized sensibilities might err.
- 2 Be compositionally well-motivated
- 3 As a result of (ii), avoid collapsing (5) and (6).

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Credal Expressivism

The primary function of epistemic modals (“might”, “must”, “probably”) is not to describe the world, but rather to express credences.

(7) It might be raining.

Descriptivist Analysis: (7) describes the world as being one where the contextually-relevant body of information is compatible with the proposition: *It's raining*.

Credal Expressivist Analysis: (7) expresses the speaker's non-zero credence in the proposition: *It's raining*.

The Subject Matter Argument

Credal expressivists often complain that descriptivism misdescribes the subject matter of modal belief.

If Fido believe he might get a bone, this does not seem to require having beliefs about which possibilities are compatible with anyone's information. Rather, it just requires assigning some non-zero credence to the proposition, *I will get a bone*.

- Yalcin [2011]; cf. Rothschild [2012]; Moss [2013]

The Subject Matter Argument

Similarly, moral expressivists often complain that (at least certain versions of) descriptivism misdescribe the subject matter of moral belief.

If Ana believes that stealing is wrong, this does not seem to require having beliefs about what she—or her community—disapproves of. Rather, it just requires disapproving of stealing.

The Disagreement Argument

Credal expressivists also object that descriptivism doesn't account for the conditions under which we disagree with modal claims.

If I disagree with your claim that it might be raining, I do not thereby disagree with the claim that *your* information is compatible with the possibility that it will rain.

- Price [1983]; Yalcin [2011]

The Disagreement Argument

Similarly, moral expressivists object that (at least some versions of) descriptivism can't account for the conditions under which we disagree with moral claims.

Contra simple subjectivism, if I disagree with your claim that stealing is wrong, I do not thereby disagree with the claim that *you*—or your community, etc.—disapprove of stealing.

- e.g., Stevenson [1937]; Schroeder [2010]: 69-70.

The Credal Analysis

- (8) a. I believe φ .
b. But I might be mistaken.

- (8) a. I believe φ .
reports that the speaker believes φ .
- b. But I might be mistaken.
expresses the speaker's non-zero credence in $\neg\varphi$, and hence their lack of certainty in φ .

The Credal Analysis

- (1) a. I believe eating meat is wrong.
reports that the speaker believes eating meat is wrong—i.e., that the speaker disapproves of eating meat
- b. But I might be mistaken.
expresses that the speaker assigns some non-zero credence to the possibility that eating meat is not wrong, hence the speaker isn't certain that eating meat is wrong

Problems Solved ...

Idealized Sensibilities and Immunity to Err

The first problem for the Idealization Analysis was to make sense of worries that even idealized agents could err.

- (2) Even if my belief that eating meat is wrong survives idealization, this belief might be mistaken.

Credal Analysis: (2) expresses the state of assigning some non-zero credence to the prospect that eating meat isn't wrong, conditional on her belief that eating meat is wrong surviving idealization.

Semantically Well-Motivated

The second problem for the Idealization Analysis was that it was semantically *ad hoc* and implausible.

By contrast, the Credal Analysis is semantically well-motivated:

It follows from a very general view about the meaning of *might* (Credal Expressivism)—a view should be independently attractive to moral expressivists.

Unlike the Idealization Analysis, the Credal Analysis does not treat the following as equivalent:

- (5) It might not be wrong to eat meat.
- (6) I might not disapprove of eating meat if I were an idealized agent.

According to the Credal Analysis, (5) is an expression of uncertainty, not a claim about what such-and-such an agent would disapprove of under such-and-such circumstances.

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A Worry

I've argued that we can analyze acknowledgments of moral fallibility in terms of expressions of moral uncertainty.

Clearly, this analysis will only work if expressivists can analyze moral uncertainty in the first place.

But can they do so?

A Worry

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Simple Expressivist Analysis of Moral Credence

S's credence that ϕ -ing is wrong is the degree to which S disapproves of ϕ -ing.

Smith's [2002] Challenge: the simple analysis cannot distinguish between two distinct dimensions of moral judgment:

- “Certitude”: degree of confidence in a moral claim
- “Importance”: degree of wrongness/rightness ascribed

Simple Expressivist Analysis of Moral Credence

S's credence that φ -ing is wrong is the degree to which S disapproves of φ -ing.

- Medium credence that eating meat is very wrong vs.
- High credence that eating meat is moderately wrong

Responding to Smith's Challenge

Preliminary point: Quasi-realists were already saddled with the challenge of making sense of moral uncertainty talk.

- (9) Ana is confident that lying is wrong, but she's even more confident that stealing is wrong.

By reducing acknowledgments of moral fallibility to expressions of moral uncertainty, we've reduced two problems to one

Responding to Smith's Challenge

Positive Proposal: Synthesize ideas from Gibbard [1990, 2003]; Sepielli [2012]; and Goldstein [2016] to deliver an expressivist account of moral credences that meets Smith's Challenge.

The Hidden Structure Analysis of Moral Judgment

(10) Ana believes stealing is wrong.

Hidden Structure Analysis: (10) says that Ana has a conative attitude towards certain reactive attitudes towards stealing.

- Gibbard [1990]; Schroeder [2008]

The Hidden Structure Analysis of Moral Judgment

Sepielli [2012] points out that this account can capture the distinction between Certitude and Importance:

- Degrees of Certitude correspond to degrees of the conative attitude
- Degrees of Importance correspond to degrees of the reactive attitude
- Medium credence that eating meat is very wrong
= moderate degree of conative attitude towards a high degree of blaming for eating meat
- High credence that eating meat is moderately wrong
= high degree of conative attitude towards a moderate degree of blaming for eating meat

A Residual Challenge

Moral and descriptive Certitude seem to have a lot in common.

- Bykvist & Olson [2009, 2012]

A Residual Challenge

In particular, both moral and descriptive Certitude seems to be subject to probabilistic coherence constraints.

But this is *prima facie* surprising if moral and descriptive Certitude are fundamentally different states.

Expressivists owe us an explanation of *why* Probabilism is true of both states.

Meeting the Challenge

According to the Hidden Structure approach, moral Certitude consists in degrees of a conative attitude.

One strategy for meeting the residual challenge is to pick this conative attitude wisely.

In his more recent work, Gibbard [2003, 2008, 2012] proposes identifying moral judgment with *plans*.

Plans vs. Descriptive Beliefs

One reason for identifying moral judgments with plans is that plans seem to be governed by some of the same normative constraints as descriptive beliefs.

Just as it's incoherent to have inconsistent beliefs, it's incoherent to have inconsistent plans.

Hypothesis

Degrees of planning are subject to the same coherence constraints as *degrees of belief*.

- Goldstein [2016]

Probabilism About Plans

Hypothesis

Degrees of planning are subject to the same coherence constraints as *degrees of belief*.

Probabilism about Plans

- **Normalization:** A rational agent should plan to bring about \top to degree 1.
- **Non-Negativity:** For any p , a rational agent should plan to bring about p to a degree ≥ 0 .
- **Additivity:** The degree to which a rational agent plans to bring about a disjunction of mutually exclusive propositions should be the sum of the degree to which they plan to bring about each of the disjuncts.

Luckily, Goldstein [2016] has given independent arguments in favor of this hypothesis.

Probabilism about Plans

In particular, Goldstein argues that combining a dispositional view of plans with a modal account of dispositions leads to Probabilism about Plans.

Bratman's Dispositional View of Plans

Planning to φ involves:

- being disposed to φ
- being disposed to avoid reconsidering whether to φ
- being disposed to seek out means of φ -ing

Modal Account of Dispositions

x is disposed to φ iff x φ s in a sufficiently high proportion of a certain domain of worlds where some stimulus condition obtains.

- Manley & Wasserman [2008]; cf. Vetter [2014]

Putting the Pieces Together

S's credence that eating meat is wrong = the degree to which S plans to blame for eating meat.

By Probabilism about Plans, it follows that moral credences are subject to probabilistic constraints.

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Conclusion

On the analysis proposed here, acknowledgments of moral fallibility are analyzed as expressions of moral uncertainty.

Moral uncertainty is in turn analyzed as degrees of plans towards various reactive attitudes.

Conclusion

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Moral belief reports Moral truth talk Moral fallibility talk Moral uncertainty	Moral beliefs are just conative states Minimalist theory of truth Expresses moral uncertainty Degrees of plans towards reactive attitudes

Thanks!