

A Theory of Metaethical Prescriptivism

Abstract: The ‘prescriptivist’ metaethical theory argued here makes the claim that moral assertions are neither true nor false; and thus, they are not knowable. The name ‘prescriptivism’ is *not* associated with Hare’s (1952, 1963) theory. This theory hypothesizes that ethical assertions and value affirmations are ‘prescriptions.’ ‘Descriptions’ are assertions that are literally *true or false*, and ‘prescriptions’ are assertions intended to be *agreed-upon* (but not literally true or false). The ‘correctness’ of any ethical assertion (or value affirmation) is dependent upon what persons accept, tolerate, or agree-to, and does not refer to an objective moral reality.

Introduction

The debate about whether ethical assertions (i.e., normative ‘ought’ assertions) can be knowable continues into the 21st century. Moral realists maintain that there are objective moral truths independent of what anyone believes. Moral realists hold that morality is a search for the truth about what is right, and where our obligations are. A moral realist such as Richard Boyd (1988) contends that: 1) Moral assertions are true or false, 2) The truth or falsity of moral assertions is independent of human opinion, and 3) Canons of consistent reasoning constitute a reliable method for obtaining moral knowledge.

In opposition, anti-realists claim that moral assertions are incapable of truth or falsity. The ‘non-cognitivist’ anti-realist theory here makes the claim that moral assertions are neither true nor false; and thus, they are not knowable. I argue that ethical assertions function to *prescribe* and not *describe*. The distinction between a ‘description’ and ‘prescription’ is hypothesized here:

A '**description**' is an assertion that purports to express a correspondence (or a representation) of some state of affairs, where its correctness (or incorrectness) is *independent* of its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by particular persons.

A '**prescription**' is an assertion that purports to express a stipulation (or rule) upon a practice, where its correctness (or incorrectness) is *dependent* upon its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by particular persons.

As will be explained below, the descriptive-prescriptive distinction presumes a 'speaker theory' of reference. With a theory of speaker reference (or 'speaker meaning'), a *sentence* (or *proposition*) is assumed to be *the primitive linguistic entity* where its *contextual use* is studied.

Part I of this essay is an exposition of 'prescriptivism.' After prescriptivism is defined, its associated assumptions about (1) ontology, (2) value, (3) speaker semantics, and (4) the structure of moral argument are described. **Part II** presents an analysis of the concept of 'proposition.' It is standardly believed that propositions are essentially true or false and are the objects of 'propositional attitudes.' Both of these beliefs are challenged, and it is shown using case examples, that there exist 'prescriptive propositions' (i.e., not truth-apt) and that 'propositional attitudes' are a fiction. Persons do not have 'attitudes' toward propositions.

Part III challenges the belief that 'moral properties' exist. **Part IV** explains why 'cultural relativism' is false. **Part V** examines a moral dilemma (viz. 'should Jill cheat on her philosophy test?') and discusses the concept of 'goodness.'

Part VI responds to Mark Schroeder's (2008, 2010) demand that all non-cognitivist theories should conform to current theories in 'formal semantics' about *sentence meaning*. With formal semantics, it is taken for granted that words, phrases, and well-formed sentences possess

meaning (in context) and that their systematic composition makes them meaningful. Both realist and expressivist theories attempt to explain the 'truth' of a sentence in terms of the systematic compositionality of the meaning of its parts (i.e., its words, syntactic structure). In opposition, the explanatory relevance of 'linguistic theories' about 'semantic meaning,' and the 'principle of compositionality' is questioned. Instead, a 'speaker theory' of reference is assumed.

A 'speaker theory' of reference and meaning (elaborated upon elsewhere) challenges formal theories of semantics where it is assumed that it is the composition of meaningful linguistic entities (and their referents) that make a sentence 'meaningful.' Instead with a speaker theory of reference, a speaker's referent, on occasion of use, is dependent upon the speaker's intentions. It is *persons* who use linguistic expressions to *refer* to various objects (or entities) and 'mean something' in a context. It is *persons* who intend that their assertion is 'truth-apt' or not. Words, phrases, and sentences (linguistic entities) don't literally refer (in natural language).¹

Part VII resolves the Frege-Geach problem. **Part VIII** briefly compares expressivism to prescriptivism and states why prescriptivism is a better explanation of the nature of moral assertions. Expressivism is a theory of linguistic meaning and formal semantics, where it is thought that the normative *words* like 'ought' and 'wrong' function to express 'non-cognitive attitudes.' Ethical assertions function to express states of mind; not represent facts. Expressivists believe that the meaning and function of words in moral language differ from representational descriptions. As stated, semantic theories about the 'meaning' of ethical assertions are misguided.

¹ With a 'speaker theory' of reference, a *well-formed sentence* is the *basic unit of meaning*, not the words that compose it. *Sentences* (and propositions) are the *primary meaningful constituents* of a language, and their *meaningfulness* is *not completely attributable* to compositional structure.

Part I. Metaethical Prescriptivism: Ethical Assertions are Prescriptions

I introduce metaethical prescriptivism:

Prescriptivism: Ethical assertions and substantive value affirmations are prescriptions.

The 'correctness' of any ethical assertion (or value affirmation) is dependent upon what persons accept, tolerate, or agree-to, and does not refer to an objective moral reality.

Ethical assertions are intended to direct, or affect, human action. They stipulate a form of practice as an intentional, purposeful activity. Examples of ethical assertions include 'you should place your fork on the left-hand side of the plate' and 'abortion should (or should not) be legal.' Metaethical prescriptivism maintains that ethical propositions may be *accepted* (or adopted) by persons, but that they are *neither true nor false*. The pertinent question: Is prescriptivism true or false? The evidence for believing prescriptivism is true is consistent with the following:

1) Ontology: A belief-desire-value-intention ontology regarding human behavior is assumed in a materialist philosophy of mind. A '*belief*' is understood as a functional mental state involving affirming, doubting, or suspending judgment about a propositional assertion. Beliefs function to *represent the world* (and assert something *objective* that is *true* independent of its acceptance by persons). Contrary to moral realism, there are no 'moral beliefs' because *moral assertions are not beliefs* (i.e., moral propositions don't represent the world). Moral assertions are not truth-apt, so they are not beliefs. There are no independent metaphysical 'moral facts.'

Against varieties of moral realism, it is assumed that the fundamental existent is *physical entities* (not objects). Mental states are best described in naturalist-like material terms. A '*desire*' is a functional brain state that is a primitive psychological, emotional, or hormonal state that motivates many of our actions. Beliefs and desires lead us to action. A '*value*' is a functional

physical brain state that measures the worth or importance of certain physical objects, events or actions. Assertions of value are the product of a person's desires, feelings, interests, beliefs, and other values in a social environment. An '*intention to act*' is a determination to behave in a certain way. An '*action*' is defined as behaviors that are under our control or could be, if we gave them enough thought. Not only do *intentions* (as functional brain states) manifest themselves in *actions*; the intention to communicate using language is often called a *speech act*. In various contexts, persons assert (i.e., express, utter, communicate) thoughts (i.e., well-formed sentences) that are intended to be either descriptive or prescriptive.

2) The Subjectivity of Value: According to non-cognitivists, claims about 'what is valuable' are subjective and dependent upon humans. This responds to the question, 'Do acts and objects have value independent of them being desired, *or* are actions and objects valuable because we desire them?' Non-cognitivists believe that the second response is true.

The conflict between cognitivists and non-cognitivists is characterized by opposing beliefs about the alleged 'objectivity' or 'subjectivity' of value:

(a) Value is objective (secularism). According to many secular moral cognitivists, value has a real nature and existence that is independent of humans. Moral value is independent of our psychology and of our likes, dislikes, interests, and desires.

(b) Value is objective (theism). According to many theists, there exists a supernatural entity \mathbf{x} knowing of all things (including moral duties) whose ethics should be followed.

(c) Value is subjective (secularism). According to secular non-cognitivists, value owes its existence to the interests, desires, and attitudes of humans (and other sentient creatures). Without sentient creatures, there would be no desires, no values, and no

assertions about what is good. The attribution of value isn't about the existence of an external element of reality. For the protection and well-being of the species, persons have developed rules (i.e., principles) of what are right and wrong actions, based upon the weighing of various values. Values can be changed or adjusted on the basis of new information, or with sensitivity to value conflicts or differences in value. Values evolve.

David Hume (1740) famously challenged the 'objectivity' of value in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Hume argued that even in a case of premeditated cold-blooded murder, there is no objective wrongness to such an act, but instead the act is morally wrong because it violates our *shared sentiments* (i.e., *feelings, emotions, values*) of what is good and bad. The prohibition against the killing of innocent persons is the result of moral sentiments including empathy, compassion, and guilt. Ethical assertions are not the perception (or misperception) of a moral truth, but instead express and codify ethical standards (see Nidditch, ed. 1978, pp. 468-469). Hume's fundamental intuition about the subjective core of morality seems to be true.

Hume's 'belief-desire theory' of moral motivation is also accepted here. Moral motivation involves the presence of beliefs and desires. On this theory of moral motivation, values are adopted (or condemned) for non-random subjective reasons, reflecting desired ways of life. A desire to participate and perpetuate life within civil societies seems to motivate the adoption of basic values. Widely held values (e.g., being respectful of people, keeping promises, telling the truth, not stealing, etc.) function to resolve conflicts of interests, develop positive character, promote happiness, and enable society to survive. A person cannot function without values, any more than without beliefs. Individual praise and social rewards lead to the pursuit of socially desired conducts. Feelings of guilt, a fear of social rebuke, and legal penalties constrain our

actions. Having (good) standards of value doesn't always motivate consistent actions; lapses in self-prescribed morality happen. Sometimes a person's 'weakness' of will, in combination with countervailing motivations and emotions may lead to an ethical lapse (or 'moral mistake').

Although desires are the primary motivator of intentional action, we do not always act upon brute desires (e.g., greed, infatuation) because we are 'informed' that some actions may have adverse consequences (to oneself and others). We pursue desires based on information and self-restraint, which are called 'informed desires.' Let us illustrate an 'informed' desire.

Sally desires inexpensive clothing. But suppose that Sally also deplores low wage sweatshop working conditions. If Sally learns that a certain brand of inexpensive clothing employs sweatshop conditions, Sally may no longer desire (or value, or intend) the purchase of that clothing item, even if it is inexpensive. Sally adopts a value hierarchy that prefers 'boycotting sweatshop items' over 'purchasing inexpensive clothing.'

This simple ontology of beliefs, desires, values, and intentions can explain most of our actions. A moral judgment is a complex mental state exemplifying these four functional states.

Not all ethical disagreements involve a disagreement in basic value. A basic value may be generally agreed-upon, but certain pragmatic issues come into play. For example, a community can agree that childhood education is good, but may disagree on what actions should be undertaken to achieve this outcome on a cost-effective basis. 'Should a new school be built, and if so, at what expense should it be built, and where should it be built?' John Dewey (1939) contends that assertions of what is 'right' or 'good' occur with changing circumstances, involving persons with distinct interests and conceptions of what is good.

3) The Speaker Semantics of Moral Assertion: According to metaethical prescriptivism, ethical assertions are prescriptions, even if they are falsely believed to be descriptions by a moral cognitivist. Moral assertions do not function to 'represent reality' as do beliefs, but instead they function to represent choice and guide action. Ethical assertions can be agreed-on, adopted, or accepted by persons having shared values. With prescriptions, *a social consensus is typically sought, and not the discovery of ethical truth.*

According to a prescriptivist, an ordinary assertion such as 'I *believe* that S should do a,' where a designates an action, is *not* a statement of belief at all. Instead, it is a prescription. It is more accurate to say that 'I *prescribe* that S should do a.' Moral cognitivists talk strongly of values and ethical assertions as being 'beliefs.' But non-cognitivists don't believe that ethical assertions are beliefs, because 'beliefs' are either true or false. It is more accurate to say that values can be adopted and endorsed, and that ethical behavior is prescribed.²

Another salient feature of moral assertions is that *sincere* assertions are *universalizable* and *categorical* as contrasted to merely stating one's personal preference, taste, or ideal. This aspect of morality was strongly emphasized by R.M. Hare (1952, 1963, 1981). Persons have specific reasons (i.e., facts and values) for having a categorical commitment for why an action should be done. Sincerely held ethical assertions express *a commitment to uphold one's adopted*

² This interpretation is at odds with moral realism. Russ Shafer-Landau (2003) applauds realism because it "preserves ordinary talk of moral truth." He says when *we* face a moral perplexity, "we often see ourselves as engaged in a search for the truth about who is in the right, or where our obligations lie. We can well explain the point and persistence of moral disagreement by attributing to agents the presupposition that there is a right answer awaiting discovery" (p. 23).

stance against conflicting stances. In other words, the same policy or principle applies in similar situations as a matter of consistency. This sincere commitment (or desire) to uphold one's own values consistently is compatible with Hume's belief-desire theory of moral motivation.

4) The Structure of Moral Argument: Hume's claim that an ethical 'ought' conclusion cannot be inferred solely from a set of descriptive 'is' premises is true. On the prescriptivist view, any argument with an ethical 'ought' conclusion is necessarily derived from a set of premises which includes at least one prescriptive (ought) assertion.

Let us observe how descriptions and prescriptions function in practical ethical reasoning. We will consider the enhanced ban on intoxicated driving. Beginning in 1980, a grassroots group called Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) launched a campaign to curb tolerance for alcohol-impaired driving in the United States. In the following example, suppose that Smith has been drinking and driving with a blood-alcohol content of 0.32 (i.e., a high level of alcohol intoxication). How does this fact lead to the conclusion that 'Smith should be subject to legal penalty'? Below is how a prescriptivist identifies 'descriptions' and 'prescriptions' in this case:

(#1) **Description:** Driver intoxication often causes auto accidents.

(#2) **Prescription (value):** Auto accidents have negative value.

(#3) **Prescription (ethical principle):** Drivers shouldn't be intoxicated.

(#4) **Prescription (ethical principle):** Intoxicated drivers should be subject to stricter enforcement and higher legal penalty for violation (the MADD principle).

(#5) **Description:** Smith was driving with a high blood-alcohol content of .32.

(#6) **Prescription:** Therefore, Smith should be subject to strict legal penalties.

The above argument illustrates how a prescriptive ethical conclusion #6 is the result of several prescriptive (ought) premises. Premises #2, #3, and #4 are prescriptions and depend upon human agreement of what ought to be valued. In contrast, premises #1 and #5 are descriptions and are true (or false) independent of human agreement.

We can shorten the above ethical argument into a deductive form as follows:

- (1) **Prescription (ethical principle):** If **S** drives impaired, **S** should be subject to penalty.
- (2) **Description:** Smith drove impaired.
- (3) **Prescription (ethical conclusion):** Therefore, Smith should be penalized.

Although this short argument has a valid *modus ponens* form, such that *if* all of the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true; it should be recognized that the argument is not sound, since the first premise is not literally true. In logic, it is stipulated that an argument is ‘sound’ if and only if its premises are true, and its form is valid. Given the definition of a prescription (that it is neither true nor false) *it is impossible to ever generate a sound ethical argument*, given the standard definition of what constitutes a sound deductive argument.

With a moral argument, the best we can do is to present a valid argument, where it is *assumed* (as a fiction) that the value and ethical premises have a truth value, and that the validity of the argument is determined by the standard rules of deductive logic. *The assumption* that ethical values and principles are 'true or false' is *false*, but there is no harm in assessing the validity of arguments, if it is understood that the value premises don't literally have a truth value.

Part II. What is a Proposition? Are there Prescriptive Propositions?

What is a proposition? Can there be 'prescriptive propositions' or are propositions essentially true or false? Traditionally, propositions have been thought of as sentences that are

exclusively true or false. The elementary accounts of 'proposition,' reveal its origins in metaphysical realism. This abridged definition is from the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*:

A '**proposition**' is an abstract object to which a person is related by a belief, desire, or other psychological attitude, typically expressed in a language containing a psychological verb ('think,' 'deny,' 'doubt,' etc.) followed by a that-clause. The psychological states in question are called propositional attitudes.

Scott Soames (2015) initially defines 'propositions' as follows:

'**Propositions**' are the "(i) the primary bearers of truth and falsity, (ii) the objects of belief, assertion, and other attitudes, (iii) the contents of perceptual and cognitive states, and (iv) the meanings of (some) sentences" (p. 9).

I challenge these kinds of definitions and suggest another. I argue against the first of these two conditions, namely that (i) necessarily propositions are either true or false, and (ii) propositions are the objects of attitudes. The first condition just implies by simple stipulation that there is no such thing as a 'prescriptive proposition.' The second condition makes an indefensible metaphysical claim that persons have 'attitudes' towards propositions. This 'attitude' relationship between 'persons' and 'propositions' is very dubious. Michael Morris (2007, p. 314) explicitly defines this fixed definiens term of a 'propositional attitude' as follows:

A '**propositional attitude**' is a psychological state which can be described by means of a 'that' clause ('She hopes that he will drown,' 'He thinks that his horse will win, etc.). The term derives from a particular theory of what these states involve, namely an *attitude* (expressed by a psychological verb like 'hope,' 'think,' 'fear,' etc. towards a *proposition* (what is meant by a declarative sentence—expressed by a 'that'-clause)).

With these basic definitions (representing current consensus opinion), a proposition **p** is understood as the 'content' of a belief, desire, value, etc. The 'referent' of S's psychological attitude is a 'proposition' which is whatever the *that*-clause refers to (i.e., denotes) in e.g., the sentence 'S hopes *that p*' where **p** might be *that 'Jill passes her philosophy exam.'* Before discussing 'metaphysical explications' of 'proposition' and 'propositional attitude,' let us first consider a definition of 'proposition' in its simplest of forms. In its most neutral characterization:

A '**proposition**' may be presented as a complete sentence, and when asserted in a context, it expresses the 'contents' of one's thought.

Let us examine a number of conceptual case studies, many familiar, to defend this definition.

- (1) The sentence 'It is now raining' (as a linguistic expression) is not by itself literally true or false. The sentence needs to be asserted in an environment and at a certain time to be true or false. It is the *proposition* expressed (in a context) by the sentence 'It is now raining' that is true when it is raining, and false when it is not raining.
- (2) The English sentence 'Snow is white' expresses the same proposition as the German sentence 'Der Schnee ist weis.' Given that these sentences are different, it isn't the linguistic entities (i.e., sentences of different language) that make the assertions true, it is the proposition (i.e., meaningful content) that is true.
- (3) The sentences 'Here is the red book' and the 'The red book is here' when asserted in a context to reference a particular book, express the same proposition.
- (4) 'Sam is mad' and 'Sam is angry' are different sentences. 'Mad' and 'angry' are *synonyms*, so either sentence may be used in a context. The proposition is true or false (about Sam) no matter which sentence is used.

- (5) The sentence 'Persons should not smoke tobacco' is understood by a metaethical cognitivist as a true or false proposition. For a non-cognitivist, this can be interpreted as a *prescriptive proposition* (not truth-apt).
- (6) The sentences 'It is permissible to feed the wolves' and 'It is allowable to feed the wolves' (by synonymy of 'permissible' and 'allowable') may be interpreted as the same *prescriptive proposition* (not truth-apt).
- (7) When **S** yells 'Ow!' she is implicitly *describing* herself as being in pain.
- (8) An 'interrogative' (e.g., 'Do you know where a gas station is?') may be interpreted as the conjunction of a description and prescription: 'I do not know x' (*description*) and 'please tell me x' (*prescription*).
- (9) With a 'warning' (e.g., 'Watch out!') a *prescription* is asserted, often accompanied by a *description* ('You'll get hit') about probable consequences of not heeding a warning.
- (10) In 'bequeathing' to assert 'I give and bequeath my wristwatch to my brother, after I die' is to *describe* one's wishes and *prescribe* to executors to abide by one's will.
- (11) The concept of a 'promise' is to sincerely *describe* one's intention to do something, and to *prescribe* to oneself to perform appropriate follow-up actions.
- (12) The 'solicitation of a bet' (e.g., 'I'll bet you \$25 that the Green Bay Packers will win') *describes* a bettor's willingness to bet money on his belief (prediction) about the outcome of a contest and *prescribes* to the listener to accept the wager.
- (13) A 'request' (e.g., 'Would you please close the door?') is a *prescription* that a person should aid the speaker, and implicitly *describes* that the speaker desires (or has value) that the door be closed.

(14) Whether a sentence is being used to describe, prescribe, or both, is relative to a social context. For example, a cook at a restaurant may assert to a waiter that 'The sandwich is ready' which *describes* the completion of the food order and *prescribes* the pick-up of the order to be served to a patron.

(15) The assertion 'In order to turn off the lights you must flip the switch' is ambiguous without context. The speaker may be informing the listener about how to turn off the lights in a room (i.e., *describing*) or the speaker may be requesting the listener to turn off the lights (i.e., *prescribing*).

The basic idea behind these examples is that *sentences in natural language* (i.e., linguistic entities) are *not true or false*, but it is the *proposition* expressed that is *apt* for truth or falsity (or *not apt* for truth or falsity). In a precise version, I define 'proposition' as the following:

A '**proposition**' is a sentence (or symbol) that when asserted (or displayed) at a time and in a context, presents the 'content' of human thought. The 'content' (or 'significance,' 'meaning') being a 'primitive' term where the *content* is attributable to *speaker meaning* (i.e., interpretation, significance). Different sentences (and symbols) may express the same proposition. The same sentence (as a linguistic entity) may be used in different contexts to express different propositions.³

³ This notion of 'content' contrasts with David Kaplan (1989) when he talks about the 'content' of a sentence and an expression: The content of a sentence, S, in a language, L, relative to a context, C, is found by taking the semantic values of parts of S and combining them in accordance with the semantic and syntactic composition rules of L.

Are Propositions the Objects of Propositional Attitudes?

To repeat, many philosophers believe that persons have 'propositional attitudes' (i.e., psychological 'mental attitude' states) towards propositions. 'Propositional attitudes' are said to account for a person's psychological state towards a proposition:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| (1) S believes that p. | S disbelieves that p. |
| (2) S assumes that p. | S doubts that p. |
| (3) S desires (or wishes) that p. | S dislikes (or has aversion) that p. |
| (4) S hopes that p. | S fears that p. |
| (5) S values p. | S disvalues p. |

But do persons really have 'attitudes' toward propositions? Five examples:

p1= 'Apples are wholesome.'

p2= 'Human-generated warming of Earth is presently occurring.'

p3= 'I'm going to the store to get groceries.'

p4= 'Abortion should be legal (with restrictions).'

p5= 'This sunset is gorgeous.'

Does my belief (or disbelief) toward **p1** and **p2** express a *relationship* (or an *attitude*) to that **p** (e.g., apples are wholesome, the earth is warming)? Does my proposal of an upcoming action (e.g., going to a grocery store) express a *relationship* of desire or action toward **p**? Does my value of (or disvalue) toward **p** (abortion should be legal) express an attitude relationship to that **p** (abortion should be legal)? Does my value of (or disvalue) of **p** (the sunset) express my attitude ascription to that **p** (the appearance of the sun at a moment)? In general, do persons in expressing their beliefs, desires, and values, have 'attitudes' towards a 'proposition'?

The critical response asserted here is that persons *do not* have *relations* (or '*attitudes*') toward propositions as the 'objects' of belief, desire, value, etc. Beliefs, values, and other attitude verbs aren't about a 'something.' This verbiage and its associated distinctions are fueled by the metaphysics of possible worlds, formal semantics, and stipulative definitions. Morris's fixed definiens definition, that a *propositional attitude* is a psychological state which can be described by means of a 'that' clause,' is pure stipulation. Propositions are not the objects of attitudes. Instead, it is more plausible and physically consistent with empirical evidence, that persons *believe p* or *value p* as existing *non-relational* functional mental states. In support of this position, a number of intuitive definitions, as mentioned above, are adopted:

A '**belief**' is a non-relational functional mental state involving affirming, doubting, or suspending judgment about a propositional assertion. Beliefs function to represent the world. A person believes a **p** as an existing (but changeable) mental state. There is no intervening relational 'attitude.'

A '**desire**' is a non-relational functional brain state that is a primitive psychological, emotional, or hormonal state that motivates many of our actions.

A '**value**' is a non-relational functional physical brain state that measures the worth or importance of certain physical objects, events or actions. Assertions of value are the product of a person's desires, feelings, interests, beliefs, and other values in a social environment. A person possesses a value but doesn't have an attitude toward it.

An '**intention to act**' is a determination to behave in a certain way. Not only do intentions (as functional physical brain states) often manifest themselves in overt actions; the 'intention to communicate' using language may be termed a 'speech act.'

That beliefs, desires, values, and intentions (as well as variously defined ‘concepts’) are physically based functional mental states that exist within individual persons, is consistent with ordinary thought and the evidence favoring ‘physicalism,’ whereby physical (or material) entities are the primary existent from which all other entities are composed of. Similarly, words and sentences are ultimately physical entities no matter if they are ‘in S’s mind,’ ‘written on paper,’ or ‘voiced loudly.’ In contrast, the metaphysical-semantic concept of a ‘propositional attitude’ as a psychological state towards a proposition, is an artificial construct stipulated in order to model the ‘meanings’ of words, sentences, and propositions. On the view here, any proposition about the state of S’s beliefs, desires, values, and intentions is describing the *attributes* (*or properties*) of the *content* of S’s *mental state* (e.g., belief, value) and is not manifested as a semantic relationship from ‘propositional attitude’ to ‘proposition.’

Part III: Are There Moral Properties?

Moral realists often talk about 'moral predicates' that refer to 'moral properties.' Most realists have an account of moral properties. What are 'moral properties' and how do they fit into the realist account? A standard description of moral realism from Andrew Fisher (2014, p. 5):

Moral realism: This is about what exists (ontology). The moral realist argues that moral properties exist and are in some way independent from people's judgments. E.g., If moral realism is correct then we can say that the act of killing someone has the property of wrongness, and that it has it independently of whether people think it does.

Michael Huemer (2005, p. 17) states that

... 'pleasure is good' asserts a *proposition*...which can be either true or false, just like the statements 'The sky is red,' and 'Weasels are mammals' does. Given this, the most

straightforward account of what the word 'good' is doing in the sentence is this: there is a property, *goodness*, which the word refers to, and the sentence ascribes that property to pleasure.

Are there moral properties? If *x* is good, does *x* possess the property of goodness? If *S* is honest, does *S* possess the property of honesty? Or is it a better explanation of these value judgments, that it is *persons* who 'attribute' (or predicate, evaluate) goodness and honesty to items as a matter of (positive) similarity. Intuitively (to me) it seems a better explanation that persons assert '*relations of similarity among items*' (as being 'good' or 'bad') as dictated by our interests, evaluations, and shared concepts (as items of resemblance), rather than properties as objectively '*residing in*' particular entities. That a moral realist postulates the 'existence' of 'moral properties' (e.g., goodness) as an ontological and epistemic basis for moral knowledge is very questionable.

Part IV. The Falsity of Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is a doctrine about the nature of morality. Cultural relativism follows from the empirical recognition that different societies have different moral codes. The modern impetus for the support of philosophical cultural relativism arose in the late 19th century with the Western study of cultural anthropology. Anthropologists were fascinated with a diversity of non-Western cultures, including the Eskimos. An influential scholar was Edward Westermarck (1932) who was a social scientist and wrote anthropological and philosophical works, defending forms of cultural relativism. In 1947, when the United Nations was debating "human rights," the American Anthropological Association issued a controversial statement declaring that moral values are relative to cultures and that there is no way of showing that the values of one culture are better than those of another. The following is a standard definition (among variations):

Metaethical Cultural Relativism (MCR): The truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification is neither absolute nor universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons. With respect to truth-value, this implies that a moral judgment such as 'Polygamy is morally wrong' may be true relative to one society, but false relative to another. The standards of justification in the two societies may differ, but there is no objective basis for resolving these differences. For any moral sentence and the sentence's negation, it is possible for both to be asserted truly. A proposition about the morality of an action is 'correct' for (or relative to) a society just in case the action conforms to a society's moral code or system of beliefs about morality.

A moral relativist, Gilbert Harman (1996) (not his precise definition above) states that "There are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others" (p. 5).

The prescriptivist does not accept cultural relativism as a true description of morality. Prescriptivism doesn't imply that the 'correctness' of an ethical assertion depends upon cultural moral frameworks and that assertions of ethical rightness just *means* that a certain action has cultural approval. Nor does it imply that any moral framework is 'equally as good' as any other. Instead, prescriptivism allows that *there are moral frameworks (e.g., a system of laws, agreements) that can be prescribed as being better* than others. For instance, it may be prescribed that 'forced female circumcision is wrong,' or 'human slavery is wrong' in all societies.

The concise (and true) reason why metaethical cultural relativism (MCR) is false, is that if the meaning (and truth) of ethical assertions was about their correctness 'relative to a culture,' this would indicate that persons would only be saying something (purportedly true) about the existing practices and codes of a culture. Persons would not be adopting a position on the

substantive correctness of a practice. This problem has been long recognized by critics of moral relativism. Harman's theory of non-objective 'cultural agreements' as the source of ethical normativity and variability, doesn't capture the *prescriptive* intent behind ethical bargaining.

Prescriptivism should not be associated with cultural relativism, conventionalism, anarchy, tolerance, or nihilism. Prescriptivism is a descriptive theory. No normative claims can be inferred from a descriptive theory. Let us rebut these various claims:

- 1) Prescriptivism does not make the *normative* claim that any conduct that is accepted (or tolerated) at a given time by a culture *is* morally permissible for that given time and culture. An ethical proposition isn't 'correct' relative to societal agreements.
- 2) Prescriptivism does not imply 'conventionalism,' a normative theory that you should always act in conformity with your society's norms.
- 3) Prescriptivism does not imply that persons should just arbitrarily pick their own value system, and merely follow their own interests, inclinations, and impulses without consideration of others. It doesn't endorse anarchy.
- 4) Prescriptivism doesn't imply that we should be tolerant of existing (or new) practices.
- 5) Prescriptivism does not imply moral nihilism (i.e., values are senseless and useless and should be abandoned). A person's normative character is based upon non-objective values and principles that he or she adopts and faithfully practices.

Part V. A Moral Question: Identifying Descriptions and Prescriptions

That prescriptivism is morally *neutral* when describing normative situations needs illustration. For example, it makes no judgment about whether Jill should (or should not) cheat on her philosophy test. This case is from Louis Pojman (1995):

Jill is presently getting a D in her philosophy course and sees an opportunity to raise her grade by cheating on an exam. She would like to get a better grade, for if she doesn't do better, her father will very likely take away her automobile, and her chances of getting into professional school will be severely diminished. So, Jill considers cheating. Yet she is troubled by the thought of cheating. Ought she to cheat? (p. 187).

How do desires, values, beliefs, and intentions fit into this story? Where are the descriptions and prescriptions? Let's follow the premises and outcomes in the reasoning of Jill's self-deliberation:

(#1) Prescription (value, principle): Jill accepts that in general, 'it is wrong to cheat.'

(#2) Prescription (desire, value): Jill desires getting into professional school, maintaining possession of her automobile, and getting a B on her test.

(#3) Descriptions: Jill wants to get a B test grade to raise her grade from D to C (true). Jill doesn't have time to study for this morning's test (true). Jill can achieve a B by cheating (either true or false). Jill will not get caught or punished (either true or false).

(#4) Prescription: Therefore, Jill ought or ought-not cheat.

This case illustrates how a moral conclusion involves *the personal weighing* of (1) values, (2) desires, (3) beliefs, and (4) normative principles in cases of value conflict. There is (most often) a strong connection between a person's values and motivations to act, but at times, following one's own ethical principles is fallible. As Jill actively deliberates whether to cheat this time (or not), she might vow to herself, to study harder and earlier in the future to avoid this predicament.

In this situation, under ordinary standards of morality and integrity, most of us would want Jill to embrace value premise in #1 as a more important compared to her present desires and values in #2. We urge her to adopt the second option of the ethical decision in #4. Among

our reasons for urging Jill not to cheat: (a) if everyone cheated the institution of testing would be disabled, (b) one should respect a test as a means for learning and verifying one's understanding, (c) cheating isn't fair to other students that don't cheat, and (d) she doesn't know that she will get a B by cheating, nor that she won't be caught and punished. But, if Jill is indifferent to the scholarship standards of others, and decides to risk cheating, there is no fact that makes Jill's decision objectively wrong and no sound deductive argument proving Jill's action is wrong.

The Concept of Goodness

With some popular contemporary (secular) Western opinion that affirms that personal values are 'subjective' and 'relative,' it might be thought obvious that what is 'good' is subjective and relative, and that prescriptivism is just elaborating upon common sense. But this is not the case. The widely favored philosophical view since the time of the early Greeks is that value is objective. Moral realists have claimed that 'goodness' and 'value' are 'natural properties' inherent in material objects, actions, experiences, and states of affairs, and that moral concepts can be defined in non-moral terms. From ancient times, philosophers speculated on what human values and actions are *intrinsically good*. The intrinsic goodness of something is thought to give persons a reason, or moral motivation, to attain it. G.E. Moore (1903) sought to clarify the notion of 'intrinsic goodness' as a 'non-natural' property. One of the most extensive lists of 'intrinsic goods' was collected by William Frankena (1973) and includes: life, activity, health, happiness, contentment, knowledge, aesthetic experience, love, friendship, power and experiences of achievement, self-expression, freedom, good reputation, honor, and esteem.

In contrast, from the perspective of a prescriptivist, Frankena's list is *not* a set of objective intrinsic goods. It is a list of subjective species and personalized relative goods. The question 'what *has* intrinsic value' contrasts with our metaethical question, 'what *is* intrinsic value?' The non-cognitivist asks how could you determine whether an item or action has intrinsic value? What does it mean for an item or action to be 'valuable for its own sake' that is independent of our interests? The concepts of 'intrinsic goodness' and 'inherent value' are indefensible postulations. They invite the mistaken belief of the existence of objective goodness and value. That **S** possesses 'personal values' and has an 'intrinsic interest' in **x**, is a better characterization.

J.L. Mackie (1977) offers the following response to theories of objective value and goodness. According to Mackie, an item **x** (e.g., action, physical item, state of affairs, policy, etc.) is valued, or is good, because we desire it, and not because it has intrinsically desirable properties. A good **x** satisfies some set of wants, interests, or requirements. Whether something is morally good is relative to a set of values, moral standards, or point of view. Mackie asserts that attempts to define 'goodness' in terms of non-moral properties or identifying 'goodness' with intrinsic objective properties is mistaken. Instead, 'good' is used as an 'adjective' for an item that satisfies some subjective want or interest. For example, in one context a car can be described (or prescribed) as a 'good car' (e.g., for a small family), but the same car is not a 'good car' relative to the interests of a race car driver (e.g., if it doesn't go over 120 MPH). Harman (1996) observes that "whether something is morally good, right, or just, is always relative to a set of moral coordinates, a set of values or moral standards, a certain moral point of view" (p. 17).

Summary: The Observational Evidence for Prescriptivism

Moral realists maintain that morality is objective and independent of us. Is this consistent with the evidence of actual moral phenomena? On the contrary, *shared values* among persons seems to *better explain* a moral consensus than the *discovery* of objective values. It is observed that some value agreements are difficult to attain, and differences may seem intractable. Sometimes conflicts arise from affective attitudes. 'Affective attitudes' are an emotional affection or repulsion towards an object or practice. Different persons have conflicting attitudes (e.g., the value of a fetus, use of recreational drugs, homosexual relations, and the proper treatment of animals) where a disagreement in value is 'basic.' But with the appeal to facts, values, consequences, and ethical arguments, changes in *beliefs* and changes in *values* can occur within a person and between generations (e.g., marijuana legalization, the legalization of same-sex marriage). Possessing true beliefs is crucial to having informed values. False beliefs and ignorance may lead to misinformed values and action that is harmful to oneself or others.

Part VI. Schroeder's Defense of Moral Realism based upon Formal Semantic Constraints

Mark Schroeder (2010), a proponent of realism, is concerned with problems with the formal semantics of non-cognitive sentences. Schroeder's argument against expressivism (and non-cognitive theories) is that these theories do not follow the rules of truth-conditional semantics (p. 26). Truth-conditional theories of semantics seek to best represent how *linguistic expressions* in natural languages can possess *meaning*. For Schroeder, with an adequate model, one can learn about the meaning of 'linguistic expressions' and the correlations between 'linguistic expressions' and 'meanings' by investigating how the meaning of a complex expression (e.g. a sentence) is the result of the meaning of simpler expressions (e.g. words) that it

is constructed from. Schroeder claims that to understand the 'meaning' of a *sentence* is to understand the sentence's compositional structure and to know under what conditions the sentence would be true. The goal of a truth-conditional semantic theory is to represent (or interpret) reality and natural languages in an explicit logical form, similar to how formal mathematical languages map (and evaluate) the validity of deductive arguments.

A fundamental part of Schroeder's truth-theoretic semantics is the adoption of the 'principle of compositionality.' Like most philosophers, he maintains 'compositionality' is *required* for understanding how the meanings of complex sentences are put together. This principle asserts that words are the basic components of sentences, and that the meaning of sentences depends (systematically) on the meaning of the words that they are composed of. It is assumed various *forms* of *linguistic expression* (e.g., proper names, predicates) have 'semantic functions' and may possess 'semantic values' that can *mean* this or *refer* to that. Linguistic items (words, sentences) are said to be *about*, *stand for*, or *represent* something (a thing, or an object). In order to understand the meaning of a word is to know what the word is 'about.' Semantics as now popularly practiced, utilizes formal models and consists of grammatical modeling and manipulation of linguistic entities in accordance with the standard rules of deductive logic. Schroeder states a dominant view about 'sentence meaning,' 'truth,' and word 'aboutness':

...The ideas that the meaning of a sentence consists of what would make it true and that the meaning of a word consists in what the word is about, are powerful and productive ideas. As a hypothesis about meanings, they have led to an enormously productive and successful research program in both linguistics and philosophy, which has shed light on

the meanings of a great variety of kinds of linguistic expressions... a very productive paradigm for understanding linguistic meaning (p. 29).

But are the theories of 'linguistic reference' and 'compositionality' empirically true? Do natural language sentences (asserted in context) have meaning *because* of their formal syntax and semantics? Is it true that one's *understanding* of the *meaning* of a sentence is knowing the sentence's compositional structure and knowing under what conditions the sentence would be true? Are linguistic entities (words, sentences, phrases) asserted in a context *about* something? Linguistic theories of reference postulate that there exists a 'reference relation' between 'words' and 'objects.' But I have argued elsewhere that this 'linguistic expression' to 'object' relation *exists in artificial languages* but *doesn't exist* in natural languages. Instead of seeking systematic theories of word reference, philosophers should seek to analyze the concepts and intentions in context(s) and describe *how sentences are used* by *speakers* to communicate various intentions.

A Rebuttal to the 'Principle of Compositionality'

Is the principle of linguistic compositionality empirically true? In opposition to the principle of compositionality, it is evident that persons learn their sentence use, grammar, and semantic rules *informally*. When learning a natural language (by immersion) the meaning of a sentence (a complex structure) is understood without conscious attention to the individual words and syntactic conventions that give sentences their structure. As a child, *sentence use* (and meaning) follows immediately from hearing, interpreting, and imitating adults. For a child, sentence meaningfulness comes first, and then comes the (optional) learning of the formal rules of the compositional grammar. The rules of syntax and semantics (including formal semantics) may allow explanations (and models) of how new and novel sentences are constructed, but there

is no evidence that these *compositional rules* are the reason for (or result in) 'meaningful sentences.' Contrary to linguistic compositionality, the *meaning* of a complex expression (e.g., a sentence) *for a person* is determined by the *composition of its conceptual content*, the pragmatics of a situation, and the person's background beliefs.⁴

The Problem of Inconsistent Ethical Assertions and Negation

Another problem for non-cognitivism according to Schroeder, is that non-cognitive theories have no explanation for moral propositions and their negation. Schroeder says, "the main *semantic property* of 'not' is that '**p**' and '**not-p**' are inconsistent sentences. And 'inconsistent' is usually defined in terms of truth; two sentences are inconsistent if they are guaranteed not to both be true" (p. 152). Non-cognitivists need to construct compositional recipes to explain how contradictory sentences 'x is wrong,' and 'x is not wrong' can be asserted in a single context.

In response, the prescriptivist maintains that the *speaker meaning* of a negated linguistic expression is *not* determined (or explained) by its syntax and the semantic referents of the sentence parts, but instead by simply understanding that 'not' is to 'make negative' a given proposition. The alleged contradictory moral assertions that 'same-sex marriage is wrong' and

⁴ I have argued elsewhere that the ability to understand novel sentences is better explained in terms of a 'compositionality of concepts.' Persons have mental representations of six kinds of 'concepts': Natural kind, group resemblance, fixed definiens, fictional entity, definite description, and proper name. With "Obama was the 44th President of the United States" a speaker and an audience possess the concepts of: 'Obama' and 'U.S.' as proper names, 'President of the United States' as a definite description, and the numeric '44th' as a fixed definiens concept.

'same-sex marriage is not wrong' are *not inconsistent* when stated by different persons (as different propositions). These conflicting moral positions are *consistent* with different persons having different beliefs and values. If a person isn't being self-inconsistent (e.g., simultaneously accepting **p** and **not-p**), there is no problem of meaning with respect to 'not.' Explaining how '*not*' functions when compositionally applied to *sentences* in a (non-contradictory) truth-theoretic semantics is *irrelevant* to a speaker's meaning. The meaning of moral propositions needn't be explained in terms of the compositional and logical consistency of *sentences* in a model.

Part VII. The Frege-Geach Problem

Schroeder pays great attention to the Frege-Geach problem. Peter Geach (1965) alleges that there is a problem in understanding how prescriptive premises (having no truth conditions) can function to produce valid moral arguments. Geach's primary problem with non-cognitive theories is that they do not specify any truth-conditions for a moral assertion. This allegedly presents a problem of equivocation when evaluating deductive arguments. We will review two problems of possible equivocation in ethical deductive arguments.

Problem #1: The Indeterminate Value of the Antecedent in Premise 1

This example is from Geach (1965, p. 463):

- 1) If doing a thing is bad, getting your little brother to do it is bad.
- 2) Tormenting the cat is bad.

Thus: 3) Getting your little brother to torment the cat is bad.

Geach claims that the word 'bad' should mean exactly the same in all four occurrences in the above argument. With respect to its meaning, Geach says the use of 'bad':

... should not for example, shift from an evaluative to descriptive or conventional inverted commas use. But in the major premise the speaker (a father, let us suppose) is certainly not uttering acts of condemnation: one could hardly take him to be condemning just *doing a thing*.

Geach alleges that since in the antecedent of the first premise, ‘doing a thing’ has an undetermined value, that the father *isn’t condemning* any particular thing. And if ‘tormenting the cat’ in the antecedent of the first premise isn’t asserted (and has an undetermined acceptance or non-acceptance value), then we are representing ‘tormenting the cat is bad’ in the second premise with potentially two different acceptance-values, and the above argument is invalid on the pain of equivocation. In critical response, contrary to Geach’s intuitions, why can’t it be taken that the father *is condemning* ‘doing a thing’ in the first premise, when what is implied ‘bad’ is either implicitly morally understood or explicitly stated in the second premise? Geach’s intuition that the first premise isn’t an instance of condemnation, isn’t persuasive.

Geach continues by criticizing R.M. Hare (1952, 1963). Geach says:

Mr. Hare does offer some sort of account of how acts of condemnation, although they are not propositions, can serve as premises. Hare argues forcibly that there is a logic of imperatives, although imperatives are not propositions; and he holds that condemnations like “tormenting the cat is bad” and “do not torment the cat” are alike in being species of prescriptive or action-guiding language. But we need not go into details of this; for Hare has offered us no imperative-logic model that even looks likely to yield an account of such moral reasoning as occurs in my example; and the fourfold unequivocal occurrence of “bad” in that example is enough to refute the act-of-condemnation theory.

Again, in critical response to Geach's worldview, condemning Hare's 'act-of-condemnation theory' that maintains that 'tormenting the cat is bad' and 'do not torment the cat' are species of prescriptive or action-guiding language; in contrast, Hare's intuitions appear to be *plausible* and *true*. No semantic model of linguistic reference (and aboutness) for the term 'bad' is required.

Adjusting Geach's problem to prescriptivism, our response is that we should assume that both of the premises and the conclusion are prescriptions. The first premise has the form of 'if prescription, then prescription.' If the antecedent and the consequent of the conditional in the first premise, and the second premise all have the same prescriptive acceptance value (i.e., affirming the positive value of cats and their well-being) and prescriptive meaning, then the moral conclusion is prescriptive, and the argument is indeed valid (but not sound):

- 1) If (it is prescribed that) [doing a thing: e.g., tormenting the cat] is bad, then (it is prescribed that) getting your little brother to do it is bad.
- 2) (It is prescribed that) Tormenting the cat is bad.

Thus: 3) (It is prescribed that) Getting your little brother to torment the cat is bad.

In this argument, we would reasonably assume that anyone who asserts the second premise as a prescription would also assert that 'tormenting the cat' in the antecedent of the first premise as having the same prescriptive value as the second premise, as a matter of consistency. The speaker meaning of 'Tormenting the cat is wrong' remains constant. As long as the prescriptivist who advances this argument understands that there is no literal truth value to the premises and the conclusion, then there is no equivocation in meaning.

Problem #2: The Indeterminate Value of the Consequent in Premise 2

Another problem is illustrated with the following similar moral argument:

- 1) Feeding the wolves is bad.
- 2) If feeding the wolves is bad, getting your little brother to do it is bad.

Thus: 3) Getting your little brother to feed the wolves is bad.

In a context, it could be the case that feeding wolves (e.g., in a residential neighborhood) is *bad* because of ills associated with the congregation of wild wolves among humans. In this situation, the alleged entailment to a moral conclusion might be thought to be invalid because even if premise 1 and the antecedent in premise 2 are consistently adopted (as assumed-true or prescribed), this leaves open as indeterminate the consequent about whether you should get your little brother to do something that is bad. Since the consequent is a separate undetermined value judgment, this leaves the entire conditional in premise 2 with an undetermined truth/adoption value, and the argument isn't valid.

The solution to this problem is to make explicit an implicit suppressed third premise:

- 1) (It is prescribed that) Feeding the wolves is bad.⁵
- 2) If (it is prescribed that) feeding the wolves is bad, then (it is prescribed that) getting your little brother to do it is bad.
- 3) (It is prescribed that) Getting your little brother to do bad things is bad.
- 4) Thus (It is prescribed that) Getting your little brother to feed the wolves is bad.

To repeat from above: With a moral argument, the best we can do is to present a valid argument, where it is assumed (as a fiction) that the value and ethical premises have a truth value, and that the validity of the argument is determined by the rules of deductive logic. The assumption that

⁵ As an aside, in other contexts, such as at a public zoo, where food is provided, it could be that it is permissible (or *good*) to feed the wolves. Premise 1 cannot be evaluated out of context.

ethical values and principles are 'true or false' is *false*, but there is no harm in assessing the validity of moral arguments, if it is understood that the value premises don't literally have a truth value. When using prescriptions, there is no equivocation in a speaker's meaning and intent.

Part VIII. Prescriptivism Compared to Expressivism

Expressivism is a family of theories that characterizes ethical assertions as *expressing* states of mind (i.e., non-cognitive mental states). Persons just have *moral attitudes* that express 'approval' or 'disapproval' of an action (or value, policy). Moral words and sentences are said to *express* or be 'about' the emotions, feelings, goals, norm-acceptance of a speaker. To assert that 'abortion is wrong' (or e.g., 'cheating on a test is wrong') is to assert one's *attitude* (or state of mind) about something that isn't a fact. For expressivists there are no ethical facts, and an ethical assertion doesn't express a true (or false) proposition **p**. Theorists include Simon Blackburn (1984, 1993), Allan Gibbard (1990, 1993), and Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons (2006).

In opposition, moral realists have claimed that non-cognitive expressivist theories do not follow the rules of formal truth-conditional semantics, and that this requires explanation. Schroeder's critique of noncognitivism is largely based upon the assumption that linguistic expressions have reference (to something) and that all 'propositions' (by definition) are either true or false. (Within a truth-functional semantics, there is *no such entity* as a prescriptive assertion). Some expressivists, in detailed symbolic notation, have attempted to respond to realist demands for a "respectable semantic theory" for moral language.

The prescriptivist response is to *deny* the expressivist's principal thesis that moral assertions *function to express mental states* as non-cognitive attitudes. Descriptive assertions (i.e., representational) and prescriptive assertions (i.e., non-representational) are not about

'attitudes' or 'mental states' towards a proposition. Instead, moral assertions function to express prescriptions. The prescriptivist identifies 'non-cognitive attitudes' or 'mental states' as identical to 'personal values.' Moreover, the prescriptivist doesn't posit the thesis that moral words (e.g., 'wrong,' 'good') have a different kind of meaning than non-moral words. Instead, attention is directed to the speaker's meaning of sentences. Further, it isn't incumbent upon the non-cognitivist to answer demands for a 'semantic model' of moral language. The rules of formal truth-conditional semantics are themselves, formulated by prescriptive constructions. More critically (as was mentioned above) it can be questioned whether linguistic entities when used in a natural language context can literally *refer* to or be 'about' or 'denote' various entities.

Conclusion

Moral cognitivists sometimes criticize noncognitive theories because it is alleged that non-realist theories cannot explain the concept of a 'moral mistake.' It is said that a 'mistake' cannot be made unless there is a moral proposition that is true or false that one can be mistaken about. This objection is without merit. A moral mistake can be talked about without assuming moral truth. Most people in the United States think that it was a moral mistake to deny civil rights to persons of color into the 1960s. A newly converted vegetarian might think that it was a personal mistake to have been once consuming meat. We can also admit to making 'moral mistakes' on a personal level when acting out of anger, greed, lust, selfishness, and a like, or from being unaware of non-moral situational facts, or not having knowledge of other persons' expectations or values; all without believing in an independent moral reality.

The distinction between descriptions and prescriptions helps provide a positive characterization of how morality and moral language works. A prescriptivist's moral talk remains

similar to that of a moral cognitivist, but without making any claim of moral knowledge. That values are relative to the existence of persons doesn't imply that what is morally right is relative to cultural convention, or that opposing assertions are 'equally correct.' Prescriptivists can talk about what is 'right and wrong' and 'good and bad' conduct (e.g., about drunk driving, abortion) without pretense of something that 'lies beyond' the values that we endorse. Despite the fact that there are no ethical truths, this doesn't preclude us from making reasoned (and formally valid, but not sound) ethical arguments.

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