

Moral Semantics and Empirical Enquiry¹

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People working in metaethics regularly take a stand as to what we are doing in claiming that some action is wrong, another right, that some characters are virtuous, others vicious, and that some institutional structures are just, others not.

Cognitivists argue that in making such claims we are expressing beliefs that have a moral content and that might be true or false. And then they go on to advance one or another account of what that content is, and so the conditions under which the beliefs expressed might be true. Thus, for instance, some argue that in claiming that an action is morally right we are saying that no alternative act has better consequences, others argue that we are saying that the action conforms with norms currently in force, while still others hold that we are saying the action has some *sui generis* property that is objectively prescriptive.

Alternatively, non-cognitivists argue that in making such claims we are not expressing beliefs but are instead expressing a non-cognitive state

of some sort. And then they go on to advance one or another account of what that distinctive state is, and so the conditions under which someone might count as holding a moral view about some matter. Thus, for instance, some argue that in claiming an action is morally right we are voicing our approval of it being done, others argue that we are advancing a universal prescription that it be done, while still others hold that we are expressing our acceptance of a system of norms that require the action.

Curiously, when one or another of these views is embraced, very little time and attention is given to gathering empirical evidence concerning what people are actually when they use moral terms. Even as metaethicists do regularly focus on the semantics of moral language, they do so (as Don Loeb notes) without systematically studying “what it is ordinary people are using the moral vocabulary to do.” (First paragraph of Section IV). In fact, metaethicists often treat such evidence as largely irrelevant. Don Loeb thinks that they are making a serious mistake.

Loeb’s own guess is that once we study people’s actual “linguistic dispositions” we will discover that no theory that offers a coherent semantic account of moral language will capture peoples’ actual use of

terms like “right”, “wrong”, “moral” and “immoral.” We surely cannot simply assume otherwise. For all we know, these words might well genuinely mean different things in different peoples’ mouths and mean nothing at all in the mouths of others. In particular, Loeb suspects that a cognitivist semantics will account for some peoples’ use of moral terms and not others, and he suggests that a correct semantic theory will have to recognize that at least some people use moral terms in a way that commits them simultaneously to thinking that there are objective moral facts and that there are no such facts.

It is worth noting too, though this is a different point, that there is no doubt that people would, if pressed, give different, often incompatible, accounts of what makes something right or wrong, moral or immoral. Deep disagreements about the nature of morality are commonplace. The sharp divide between consequentialists and deontologists is enough to establish the point.

Moreover, as Kant noted, if we consult honestly what people think and say, what we will find “in an amazing mixture, is at one time the particular constitution of human nature (but along with this also the idea

of a rational nature in general), at another time perfection, at another happiness; here moral feeling, and there the fear of God; something of this, and also something of that." (1785/1993, p. 21) Such confusion is as likely to be found intra-personally as interpersonally.

All told, however harmonious moral discussion might appear to be, a clear-eyed appraisal of moral discourse – one that takes proper account of what ordinary people are actually doing when they use moral terms -- is likely to reveal serious semantic and cognitive cacophony.

Against the background of this possibility, Loeb defends two claims: (i) that the acceptability of one or another of the standard metaethical views turns crucially on the results of empirical investigation of what ordinary people are thinking and saying and (ii) that due attention to what the evidence *might* show reveals an important, yet overlooked, metaethical position: moral incoherentism. As he sees it, the cognitive and semantic cacophony he suspects we would discover, were we to pay proper attention to empirical evidence, would undermine metaethical cognitivism and non-cognitivism alike, since no version of either could legitimately claim to capture what we all are doing in using

moral language, and it would also recommend seeing moral thought and talk as genuinely incoherent. The right view would then be, he thinks, that in using moral language we are not actually talking about anything, with the result this semantic discovery would be grounds for accepting anti-realism when it comes to moral metaphysics.

In what follows, I will focus on the first of these two claims.² I am unsure whether, in what I argue, I will be disagreeing with Loeb or just working to moderate the impression his arguments might give. Either way, I have no doubt that the issues Loeb has raised are of central importance and figuring out where one should stand with respect to them is crucial to having a well-worked out position in metaethics.

What Ordinary People Think and Say

According to Loeb, an “account of moral semantics is meant to represent what is being thought and said in *ordinary* circumstances by ordinary thinkers and speakers.” (p. XXX) No doubt, he acknowledges, developing such a semantics will “involve some degree of idealization”

since ordinary people can be confused in various ways. But he points out that there is a crucial difference between mere idealization and actually changing the subject. To offer a semantics that leaves behind pretty much entirely what ordinary people think and say is, he thinks, to change the subject. As long as we are considering cognitivism and non-cognitivism as accounts of what we are talking about (if anything) in using moral language we are, Loeb insists, committed to defending the accounts as capturing what “ordinary thinkers and speakers” are thinking and saying. For that reason, he maintains, these metaethical positions are answerable to the results of “careful and philosophically informed intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cross-cultural anthropological and psychological inquiry” (p. XXX) into the linguistic behavior of ordinary people.

For reasons I will turn to shortly, I think Loeb’s focus on “ordinary thinkers and speakers” is misguided. Before highlighting what I take to be the problem, though, let me register that Loeb is rightly careful to resist the idea that the empirical research would properly be primarily a matter of questionnaires or surveys seeking the ordinary person’s views about metaethics or moral theory. Instead, he has in mind studies that would

work to tease out the “the intuitions, patterns of thinking and speaking, semantic commitments, and other internal states (conscious or not)” of ordinary speakers. These are what would underwrite adopting one or another semantic theory to interpret what they say.

To bring out what strikes me as wrong about focusing on “ordinary thinkers and speakers,” let me briefly develop an analogy.

Suppose you were wondering whether God exists. You would no doubt consider the familiar arguments that appeal, for instance, to the need for a first cause, to apparent design, and to Pascal’s famous suggestion that betting on God makes sense. Suppose that, in light of equally familiar replies, you remain agnostic. But imagine that someone comes along and offers the following less familiar argument: “You believe in love, don’t you? Can you explain love? Do you have a full theory of love? Of course not. Love is a mystery. Right? Well, if you grant me that, you must grant as well that God exists, for God *is* love and mystery.”

What should you make of that argument? First off, while you would likely admit that there is love and mystery, you might well resist the claim that believing in love and mystery is the same as believing in

God. After all, the existence of love and mystery is compatible with there being no Creator and no Supreme Being, and with there being nothing even close to an omnipotent, omniscient, and all good Being of the sort that seems to figure prominently in many religions. If, in wondering whether God exists you were wondering whether there was such a Being, registering the existence of love and mystery will not address your problem.

When someone claims that God exists, you might point out, they don't mean that love and mystery exist; and when you wonder whether God exists you are not wondering whether there is love and mystery. In fact, as a claim about what people have meant in saying that they do, or don't, believe in God, the suggestion that they were talking (merely) of love and mystery is not very plausible, to say the least. So you might reasonably reply to the argument saying that it depends on changing the subject.

But suppose your interlocutor counters your skepticism by mobilizing carefully collected empirical evidence that nowadays what *ordinary* people mean, when they say that "God exists," really is that

“there is love and mystery”. What would be the appropriate response?

Well, if the evidence really is compelling, it would mean that you should find a new way to express your doubts, at least when you are talking with such people. But you would not then have also found any grounds for believing in what you had originally doubted. You would need to express the doubts differently, but they would not have been allayed at all.³ Nor would the evidence have shown that your doubts were incoherent or confused.

Empirical evidence about what ordinary people nowadays mean when they make various claims *is* relevant to how we should express our views (and of course it is relevant to how we should understand their claims). But if the concerns and questions we have were intelligible in the first place, discovering that the terms one was disposed to use to express those concerns and questions are not suitable, does nothing to address, nor to discredit, the concerns and questions themselves.

What if most people meant...

So imagine, as Loeb thinks might happen, that empirical evidence shows that, nowadays, what ordinary people mean, in saying that something is moral, is simply that it accords with social norms that are being enforced; or suppose the evidence shows that different people mean different things; or (most likely) that while some mean one thing, and others something else, still others use the terms with no specific meaning at all. This evidence would certainly be relevant to deciding how to express your own concerns and questions about the nature of morality. But if those concerns and questions were intelligible in the first place, discovering that the terms one was disposed to use to express them are not suitable, does nothing address the concerns and questions. Nor does it, taken alone, give any reason to doubt the intelligibility of those concerns and questions. Perhaps most significantly for our purposes, the evidence would have no particular implications when it comes to determining whether cognitivism or non-cognitivism captures what you are thinking and talking about in raising your concerns and questions.

Of course we need to be careful here. Whether one is wondering about the existence of God or the nature of morality, one normally takes

oneself to be addressing issues of common concern. The more idiosyncratic your concerns and questions, the less likely they are to have the significance you supposed. Moreover, the more one is convinced that, in talking of God, people have been talking merely of love and mystery, or that, in talking of right and wrong, they have been talking merely about social norms or expressing their tastes, the more reason one will have to think that the concerns that come with thinking something more is at issue may themselves be confused. Thus, in considering empirical evidence about what others are doing in making claims about God or morality one is presented with evidence about what one might, oneself, intelligibly be taken to be claiming. Our own capacities to think and speak about various things do not develop in isolation.

Still, it is no news to metaethicists that their semantic theories won't capture all the ways in which ordinary people might actually be using moral language. After all, people regularly misuse language, and even when misuse is not at issue, there is no reason to suppose that different people won't use the same terms with significantly different meanings. None of the metaethical positions that Loeb is challenging are committed

otherwise. What metaethicists are commonly claiming, however, is that their preferred account captures the important core of what *we* are doing in thinking and talking about what *we* characterize as morality. Of course, who the “we” are is regularly left unspecified. The “we” is not so capacious as to include all who use the terms ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘moral’ and ‘immoral’, yet it is supposed to include those who speak languages other than English (in cases where they have terms that are properly translated by *our* terms ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘moral’ and ‘immoral’, etc.) and it is meant as well to identify a group of people who can properly be seen as all thinking and talking about (as we would put it) what is right and wrong, moral or immoral.

This means that the various versions of cognitivism and non-cognitivism face two constraints: to be plausible (i) they need to be bringing within their sweep all whom we would recognize as thinking and talking about what is right or wrong, moral or immoral, in whatever terms, and in whatever language, they happen to be using and (ii) they need to be capturing accurately the semantic commitments of *these* people (when they are thinking and talking about morality). The two constraints

are not, in practice, independent. The fact that someone differs apparently in their semantic commitments will be grounds for treating them as thinking and talking about something different and the fact that we see them as sharing our semantic commitments will be grounds for seeing them as thinking and talking about what we are thinking and talking about.⁴ Still, each of the constraints works to limit the class of people for whom the moral semantics is being offered. And together they may well rule out a number of people who recognize as using moral terms in other ways.

Us and them

Emphasizing a distinction between what ordinary people might be saying and doing and what *we* are saying and doing, carries three risks.

First, it might suggest that metaethicists are giving competing accounts of something esoteric. But this would be a mistake. While neither cognitivists nor non-cognitivists are trying to account for all the ways in which people might well be using moral words, they do usually assume that the use they hope to capture is fairly widespread and important to

many people. Consider here the questions you might raise about God's existence. In wondering whether there is a God -- that is (as you think of it) a Supreme Being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and all good -- you would understandably see yourself as wondering about something that figures prominently in the thought and talk of others. To think and talk about whether there is a God, in this sense, is not (it seems) to be engaging in anything especially esoteric. At the same time, though, your own account of what you are thinking and talking about is not answerable, in any serious way, to the discovery (should it be made) that a lot of people mean something utterly different when they speak of God.

Second, it might suggest that cognitivism and non-cognitivism are immune from refutation, since (one worries) defenders of each can simply reject as not among the relevant 'we' anyone whose use of moral terms does not conform to the theory in question. But this would be a mistake as well. While cognitivist and non-cognitivists are (if I am right) trying to capture only how *we* are thinking and talking about morality, they share a fairly robust sense of the phenomena in question, with both sides recognizing that an acceptable metaethical view needs to do justice to that

phenomena. Although they disagree with each other, as well as among themselves, as to which account best captures what is going on when we are thinking and talking about morality, there is remarkable agreement about what needs to be explained or explained away. So while these views would not be seriously challenged by the discovery that ordinary people use terms such as 'right' and 'wrong', 'moral' and 'immoral' in variety of incompatible ways, the theories do stand or fall with their ability to capture accurately "the intuitions, patterns of thinking and speaking, semantic commitments, and other internal states (conscious or not)" not of all ordinary speakers but of those whom cognitivists and non-cognitivists alike recognize as engaged in the sort of thought and talk at issue.

Third, and finally, there is a risk that stressing that the metaethical accounts are trying to capture what *we* are thinking and saying may misleadingly suggest that in taking up a metaethical position one must oneself be a participant in moral thought and talk and see oneself as among those whose participation is being explained. There has got to be room to distance oneself from the practice one hopes to explain, as an atheist might, for instance, hope to explain what other people are thinking

and saying in speaking of God even as she herself does not engage in such talk. I suspect there is no way to understand appropriately what needs to be explained without being able oneself to think and talk in the ways in question, but one may have that ability without being disposed to put it to use.

Genuine Instances of Moral Thought and Talk

In any case, and especially in light of these risks, it might be better to characterize the relevant contrast differently: Loeb supposes that cognitivists and non-cognitivists are offering accounts of how ordinary people happen to use certain words, where the target population – ordinary people – is set without relying on ex ante substantive criteria for who counts as engaging in moral thought and talk. In contrast, I am suggesting, metaethicists commonly and rightly discriminate among the various ways people might use the terms in question, counting only some as genuine instances of moral thought and talk. Cognitivists and non-cognitivists should be seen as offering accounts of what those who are

genuinely engaging in moral thought and talk are doing. Such accounts are answerable to what such people are in fact doing, but discovering what *they* are doing is not the same as discovering how *ordinary people* happen to use certain terms.

The substantive criteria that are relied on in identifying genuine instances of moral thought and talk are themselves open to dispute, of course. Moreover, at the margins different metaethical positions will guard their flanks by identifying certain uses as relying on inverted commas or on disingenuousness, and rejecting those as not having to be accounted for within the theory. Still, the central cases of competent engagement in moral thought and talk are widely acknowledged and work well to fix in our sights what needs to be explained.

Conclusion

Whether Loeb would disagree with what I have claimed is a bit unclear to me. It may well be that the “ordinary people” he had in mind are just the people I am singling out as those who are engaging in genuine

instances of moral thought and talk. If so, though, it is worth noting that focusing on this group is fully compatible with thinking that the evidence Loeb imagines would establish moral incoherentism works instead to establish that fewer people than we assumed are actually engaging in moral thought and talk.

At the same time, though, it is important to recognize that, even supposing I am right about the aims of metaethics, the evidence might well end up supporting some version of what Loeb calls moral incoherentism.

Notes

1. Thanks are due to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Joshua Knobe for helpful comments and discussion of the argument in this paper.
2. When it comes to the second of Loeb's claims, my sense is that the positions he counts as instances of incoherentism fall into two (apparently incompatible) kinds: (i) those that see moral terms as expressing a concept, albeit an incoherent concept (on analogy with the concept of a 'round-square') that could never be satisfied and (ii) those that see the incoherence of linguistic practice as showing that moral terms fail to express concepts altogether. Views of the first kind are, in effect, error theories, while views of the second kind are versions of non-cognitivism. But the possibilities Loeb identifies differ in interesting ways from more familiar error theories and non-cognitivist positions. Unlike familiar error theories, incoherentist error theories find the error not in the metaphysics the concepts require, but in the concepts themselves; and unlike most versions of non-cognitivism, incoherentist non-cognitivism seems to reject the idea that there is any interestingly systematic (albeit non-cognitive)

role played by moral terms. These differences raise a number of interesting issues that, unfortunately, I do not have space to explore here.

3. And the situation would be materially the same if the evidence showed instead that different people meant different things by “God” and that some (perhaps many) really meant nothing in particular. Such evidence leaves the original questions and puzzles untouched and unanswered.

4. Putting things this way is a little misleading, since non-cognitivists standardly recognize the constraints I am identifying even though it is a stretch to say that, on their view, people who are engaged in moral thought and talk are, in any interesting sense, talking about anything. So perhaps the better way what to describe the first constraint would be: they need to be bringing within their sweep all who we would recognize as genuinely engaging in moral thought and talk concerning what is right or wrong, moral or immoral, in whatever terms, and in whatever language, they happen to be using. Even non-cognitivists, though, are concerned to make sense of how it is people so engaged seem to be talking *about*

something (even if, on their view, the appearances are, in a sense, misleading).