

Between Non-Cognitivism and Realism in Ethics: A Three-Fold Model

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ABSTRACT: The aim of the paper is to propose an alternative model to realist and non-cognitive explanations of the rule-guided use of thick ethical concepts and to examine the implications that may be drawn from this and similar cases for our general understanding of rule-following and the relation between criteria of application, truth and correctness. It addresses McDowell's non-cognitivism critique and challenges his defence of the entanglement thesis for thick ethical concepts. Contrary to non-cognitivists, however, I propose to view the relation between the two terms of the entanglement as resulting from the satisfaction of a previously applied moral function. This is what I call a "Three-Fold Model".

KEY WORDS: Disentanglement, ethics, McDowell, rule-following, three-fold model.

Introduction

The approach I shall be taking here can be said to move from questioning how a particular case of conceptual use fits into the rule-following considerations to figuring out how our understanding of the latter may be affected by considering the peculiarities of the former. Reflection on what could be a proper account of the rule-guided use of thick ethical concepts invites consideration of what I shall call a Three-Fold Model of conceptual explanation. The peculiarity of this and similar cases, in turn, suggests the existence of significant differences in what we do when following rules.

The paper is correspondingly divided in two parts. In the first part, the question I am concerned with is how to give a proper account of the rule-guided use of thick ethical concepts. I will explore the possibility of giving an alternative explanation to the available realist and non-cognitivist ones. To pave the way to this proposal, I will first focus on some

relevant aspects of McDowell's (1981/1998) critique of the non-cognitivist disentangled model and show that McDowell's success in proving the inadequacy of the non-cognitivists' explanation is not enough to refute the very possibility of disentangled accounts. However, disentanglement in itself cannot explain the required non-arbitrary and non-subjective nature of the connection between the evaluated and the evaluation and McDowell is, to that extent, right. We, therefore, seem to need an account that explains this connection without dismissing its cognitive character. My aim is to show that my proposal could deliver the needed account.

The second part of the paper studies the implications of the proposed model and the understanding of the rule-guided use of thick ethical concepts it involves and suggests the need of case-sensitive studies of what we are each time doing in following rules.

First Part: The Case of Ethics

1. Background

Contemporary moral realism does not seem conceivable without the appeal to thick ethical concepts and the support of the entanglement thesis. Much of the recent meta-ethical discussion has therefore focused around these concepts, whose peculiarity, as opposed to mere abstract or thin evaluative ones like "good" or "should", consists of their being both descriptive and evaluative. Among those concepts would be ones such as "cruel", "lying", "stealing", "generous", "pious" or "chaste". The alleged impossibility to tell apart the moral evaluation from the described behaviour in most cases would support the claim that what is being sorted out by these concepts is a corresponding value-laden property. That is, if the concept applies, if we agree that it is rightly applied to this person or its behaviour – and if we know how to use the concept we will know at least in some cases that it does – then it is an ontological fact we can rely on that this person or behaviour is morally condemnable (at least it would be so by those thick ethical concepts that include a moral condemnation). It is not merely the way we judge such behaviour but the way things are and can be registered as being from a well-instructed, conceptually aware human perspective, or so the realist claims.

The topic has been much discussed in recent literature, so I will just give a short reconstruction of the main problem and focus on aspects of the discussion of rule-following that, with some relevant exceptions,¹ have not been very much considered. In what follows, I will be appealing

¹ See Lang (2001).

to John McDowell's (1998) discussion of this subject in his "Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following".

2. McDowell's Non-Cognitivism Critique

McDowell's critique in the referred paper, though targeted primarily against non-cognitivists, has wider reaching aspirations. It attempts to show the incompatibility of disentangled accounts of thick ethical concepts altogether with an adequate explanation of their rule-guided use. My first task will be to see how successful McDowell is in this more ambitious objective.

According to non-cognitivists, such as Blackburn (1981), thick ethical terms, far from registering some value-laden properties of the world, as realists defend, result out of the projection of our own evaluative reactions upon value-neutral properties. It is actually some such property that the concept is registering and what constitutes its cognitive content; the evaluative being some added non-cognitive, affective extra, expressing our likes and dislikes.

McDowell's aim is to prove the implausibility of this non-cognitivist explanation wrong, together with its utter incompatibility with any proper account of the rule-guided use of thick ethical concepts. If at all feasible, the non-cognitivists' disentangled attempt to give such an account would fall under Wittgenstein's rejected picture of "rules as rails" (McDowell 1998: 203–212). Non-cognitivists tend to believe that for each language practice there must be some aspect of a language-independent world we are each time referring to. Conceptual application would be a matter of following pre-existent tracks reality would have laid in advance. According to McDowell, the fear is that if there are no reality constraints to our language practices, as constructivists on the opposite side claim, then anything goes. There would be no reason why these practices are one way rather than another. So we tend to believe that finding some such external support is the only way to justify them. This attitude non-cognitivist would share with positions such as Platonism and metaphysical realism. The attractiveness of these positions would reside in the unattractiveness of the alternative. We tend to embrace them as a reaction to the understandable "vertigo" we experience when facing the possible lack of a justification for our linguistic practices in some corresponding language independent reality, so McDowell.

Instead of insisting on the necessity of some genuine connection with an outer world, we should, McDowell (1998: 211) claims, learn to live with this vertigo and come to see that nothing is lost. The constraints

and necessities of our language practices are not to be found in some background reality but in ourselves. There are no given models for our conceptual uses, no ready-made world that requires corresponding conceptualizations, but just our own common ways of making sense of the world: our own reactions, ways of finding things similar or dissimilar, disgusting, funny etc. (206). It is these common capacities that allow us to be in tune with each other and upon which linguistic constraints are based. McDowell's realism should allow us to see that being aware of the groundlessness of our language practices does not mean losing touch with reality, but rather coming to realize what our reality is all about. The point is not that different linguistic practices would express different ways of our relation to each other and reality. Rather, McDowell's claim is that we cannot step out of our linguistic practices and try to encipher in each case how our language relates to reality and what our contribution is. There is no such a neutral point of view from which to do that. All our linguistic discourses are at the same level in that sense. They and the corresponding knowledge baggage constitute what we call reality, an ontological middle ground onto which we can fearlessly step, a factual ground we can safely rely on.

Non-cognitivists' disentangled explanations of thick ethical concepts are for McDowell, on the contrary, an example in the above fashion of the search for some genuine substrate of (value-neutral) features that supports and guides conceptual application. So, his main objective is to show that no such model for thick ethical concepts could actually work.

To this purpose McDowell (202–217) argues in the following way: if non-cognitivists are to give any consistent account of the rule-guided use of thick ethical concepts, they must be able to tell by each concept which is the common value-neutral feature we are consistently reacting to. Otherwise, they could not explain how we know in which cases the concept is to be applied. But, unfortunately, this is not a requirement that they could hopefully meet. Since, in the abstraction of evaluative considerations, we would mostly not be able to tell what all cases falling under a thick ethical concept have in common. In McDowell's words, such items "need not form a kind" recognizable as such. The reasons why they belong together would be precisely those reasons that are left out of the non-cognitivist account: those regarding the evaluative appreciations and sensibility of the language users.

We will see this argument in some more detail but, to start with, there are actually two different assertions McDowell can be seen as making here: what I will call the Generation Argument (GA) and the Application Argument (AA).

- (i) (GA): It should make no sense whatsoever to pick out a value-neutral class equivalent to that picked out by the thick ethical concept without taking into account such evaluative considerations.
- (ii) (AA): It should not be possible to distinguish value-neutral common features among the members of the extension of a thick concept once the class is constituted.

McDowell actually wants to assert both (i) and (ii), but they do not necessarily have to go together.

2.1. McDowell's Argument for (AA)

The argument for (AA) says that the class of individuals, actions or whatever that belongs to the extension of a thick ethical concept needn't have any "shape" if we leave out the evaluative concerns. Given a list, we could not tell what they all have in common.

However long a list of items we give to which the supervening term applies, described in terms of the level supervened upon, there may be no way, expressible at the level supervened upon, of grouping just such items together. Hence there need be no possibility of mastery, in a way that would enable one to go on to new cases, a term which is to function at the level supervened upon, but which is to group together exactly the items to which competent speakers would apply the supervening term. Understanding why just those things belong together may essentially require understanding the supervening term. (McDowell 1998: 202)

The point is that such items needn't have anything in common at the level supervened upon. That is also the reason why the possibility envisaged by (AA) is not plausible. If they didn't have anything in common we could not sort out such a set (at the level supervened upon) a posteriori either.

I believe the argument reaches non-cognitivists or projectivists, such as Blackburn (1981), who would need to claim that it is at some such directly apprehensible level that we are to find the common features we are responding to. The attempt to see the guiding criteria for conceptual application in our own reactions, as Blackburn by way of comparison with the case of funny also suggests, does not seem plausible. We may have positive and negative reactions (Boos! and Hurrays!) to all kind of situations, but how should we know which thick concept C1, C2, or C3 to apply? Our reactions are the same, one to all positive and another to all negative cases. Unlike the comic case, where there may be no more than gradations in the intensity of the comic reaction (amusing, funny, hilarious, etc), here we are dealing with a plurality of thick concepts whose difference seems to lie somewhere else, and we do need some cri-

teria for the application of each one of them. Therefore, McDowell would be right in demanding that if a consistent, rule-guided application of these concepts on non-cognitivist terms is to be possible, the criteria must lie in the non-evaluative features. The claim that there may be some such common features, even if we cannot really tell, as Blackburn has defended, again, would not help much: How should they guide us, then?

However, even if there should be nothing value-neutral in common at such a basic level, that is not to say that there couldn't be anything in common at some other value-neutral higher order level. In such a perceptual way, neither could we recognize what is common to individuals falling under terms such as "Republican" or "Dean", "tool" or "present". Our morally neutral class may be of such a kind as well, a class sharing some describable non-moral features which would not be observable from an external, non-conceptual perspective. Therefore, to claim that there are no shared morally neutral features in the non-cognitivist sense does not show, as McDowell wants to defend, that what the thick concept sorts out is some non-detachable morally laden property. It has not been shown that there is no "higher order morally neutral class" in the sense just considered, we could be separately evaluating and, thus, that the moral evaluation need not necessarily pertain, as an ontological matter (in McDowell's sense) to the behaviour being characterized. Since it is precisely the latter that McDowell's realism wanted and needed to prove, this option opens at least a breach in the realist aim.

Acknowledging this possibility we can conclude that (AA) is not compulsory and the argument does not necessarily refute disentangled explanations of the sort considered.

Let us consider now a Higher Order Disentangling Defender who claims, as we just have, that our morally neutral class is not at a non-conceptual level. He claims that what the members of the extension of a thick concept have in common could be a set of conceptually describable non-moral features that would guide the application of the thick concept. So the moral value need play no role in explaining why conceptual application in thick cases succeeds. As with many other non-moral concepts, we can learn to apply them without necessarily relying in conceptually independent shared natural features.

2.2. McDowell's Appeal to (GA) as a Reply

The situation is now the following: The disentangling defender is arguing that there is no reason why there could not be some describable morally neutral type of behaviour identifiable at a higher order level – that guides our application of a thick ethical concept. For example, "someone saying something intentionally false" or "a woman having a specific gender role in a society". Once the class is identified, the value is added and the concept applied.

But now McDowell could counter bringing his GA into play: But why at all should we pick up such a class as morally relevant? The higher order disentangling proposal would still fail to give an explanation in this regard. What is missing is an explanation that meaningfully connects the purported class as apt for the moral evaluation.

An apprentice may learn to apply the term but he would not understand why such independently discernible behaviours or persons are to be called “morally good”. He would be like a child sticking red labels on all square things, without making any more sense of this than following orders. We seem to need some special reason to fix attention on this or that particular behaviour as suitable for qualifying it as good. Some explanation of this connection is actually required, something that is not registered in the scheme offered by the Higher Order Disentangling Proposal. To this extent McDowell would be right.

We have arrived at the following situation: we could defend the possibility of a (higher order) disentangled account of thick concepts in the terms questioned by (AA). We could see how a rule-guided use of thick concepts could be explained on such a basis. However, the bond between such a class and the moral evaluation is still lacking and the very sorting out of such a class as suitable for the moral evaluation is not explained.²

Now, if the relation between the evaluated behaviour and the moral evaluation is not supposed to be a causal relation, nor a direct logical implication, nor some special capacity of ours to recognize it directly per sensibility, how should we understand it? We want to know why this or that type of behaviour is to be called “good”. But behaviours may be good for satisfying very different purposes: to stay healthy, to satisfy oneself, to become accepted in some sect, to placate the gods, the clouds, or whatever. What we are looking for is something specific, not just good, but morally good. So, our question is now the following:

- (i) What makes some kind of behaviour morally good?

Before going any further we have to spell out what we mean with “morally”. A standard explanation would be to say that morality has to do with those specific relations of men to each other (and their surroundings) that we want to expect from them.

Substituting we obtain:

- (ii) What makes some type of behaviour good relative to the relation of men with each other and their surroundings that we want to expect from them?

² Lang (2001: 203) makes some similar observations in his commentaries on McDowell.

Followers of Kant will conclude, for example, that a behaviour is good in the sense of (ii) if its general observance would equally protect the preferences (Hare 1963), or the needs and interests of the affected (Habermas 1983). But whether or not we accept these particular conclusions, the point is that whichever conclusion we may arrive at, it will deliver the function (call it MF) relative to whose fulfilment some morally neutral behaviour is to be called “morally good”.³ As a result, we may conclude in a general and provisional way that

(iii) A behavioural type is morally good if it fulfils a well defined MF.

The important thing here is to see the need for some such function, some condition whose satisfaction explains why some behavioural type and not another is sorted out as suitable to be considered good in a specific moral sense. McDowell’s requirement in (GA) would be so met.

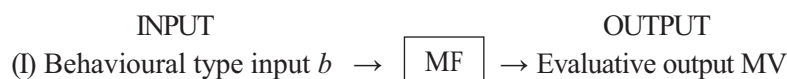
The resulting position importantly differs from non-cognitivism in the most significant respects: a) conceptual application here is not dependent upon our causal reactions to the world; rather it is a way of sorting out the corresponding type of behaviour and – because we have concluded that such behavioural types are to be morally evaluated such and so – applying the concept to it, b) the morally neutral type of behaviour need not be considered from a non-conceptual perspective and c) we have to do with a cognitivist position: there are reasons that explain why the moral evaluation applies to the behaviour, reasons that could be reconsidered. The position differs clearly, too, from the realist position because the moral evaluation does not necessarily pertain to the behaviour being considered, and, should we come to a different conclusion regarding the satisfaction of MF by the behavioural type, we could always change or eliminate the bond between both.

3. The Proposal: A Three-Fold Model

3.1. *The Binding Engine*

This binding function acts as an engine between behavioural types and moral evaluation. We have to deal with a function that, working at some morally neutral level, yields the moral evaluation as a result:

³ We may need to differentiate here between moral and ethical cases. Some behaviour may be good in an ethical sense if it is relative to the specific situation of a given society and for the interests of its members; or when we have to do with the regulation of aspects of social life that allow different solutions without collision with accepted universal values. Some thick concepts may have this more restricted character. If this should be so, it would be even more pressing to spell it out in order to identify or dispel apparent disagreements.



and conceptual application of C to all cases of type b .

Applying this rule we obtain: a specific behaviour b_1 fulfils the moral function, therefore the moral value and concept can be applied to all cases of such a type b_1

- (1) b_1 fulfils MF
- (2) $MV(b_1)$
- (3) $C_1(b_1)$

However, by our rule-guided application of the so achieved moral concepts the rule we follow is a simpler derived one such as:

- (II) Behavioural input b_1 (assumed MV) $\rightarrow C_1(b_1)$

Because it has already been proved that behavioural type b_1 fulfils the MF, it is now a priori that whichever token falls under type b_1 , it has a given MV. By this more simple rule it remains implicitly assumed that MF is fulfilled and therefore the MV applies.

- (I) Specifies the general rule through which the bond between the behavioural type and the moral evaluation is made that will be unified in a corresponding thick ethical concept. (1)–(3) specify how this general rule applies to particular cases. It should be noted, however, that the corresponding behavioural types are sorted out from the perspective of their satisfaction of MF. That is, because some given behaviour fulfils MF we conclude that all those of the same type should receive the same evaluation.
- (II) Specifies the rule followed in applying the concept. This application would succeed on a disentangled basis in the sense questioned by (AA). It is the presence of a token of b_1 that will give rise to the application of the thick concept, the fulfilment of the moral evaluation being simply assumed thereby.

To be sure, the conclusion is not that those characteristics these behaviours have in common is their fulfilment of the moral function. This would be common to all moral behaviours and would not allow us to know which specific thick concept to apply in each case. What the members of the extension of a thick concept would have in common is their being behaviours of a given conceptually describable type (b_1 , b_2 , b_3 , etc.) that fulfils the moral function and are for that reason suitable for the moral evaluation.

**Second Part:
The Three-Fold Model and its Implications**

The presented model is what I call a “three-fold model”. It attempts to give a more satisfactory disentangled explanation of thick ethical concepts and their rule-guided use, one that could respond to McDowell’s challenge. This attempt required explaining the non-arbitrary bond between the evaluated behavioural pattern and the moral evaluation. To such a purpose I concluded that there is some function that, when fulfilled by some type of behaviour, qualifies it as morally good. So the content we are dealing with is established by some operation that assigns, by each ongoing input, a given output. Thick ethical concepts result out of synthesizing some such result into a concept.

This would be our case, so how should we understand it? It seems to me that, when it comes to the form the articulation of the rule takes, we are dealing with a complex case. The peculiarity of our case relies on the fact that here we apply the rule in virtue of a pattern whose very suitability for the evaluation and thus conceptual application is dependent upon its proved fulfilment of a previous procedure. And this has important consequences. Should there be an error in our calculations working out such a procedure, the conceptual rule that ties the moral evaluation to the pattern would have to be withdrawn and with it all the truths and presumed facts made previously on its behalf. So, the simple rule we do follow must be considered derived⁴ and provisional, or at least subject to proof. No early truth or facts should be presumed on its behalf.

Now, if this is the situation, what is the relation between the criteria of application of the concept and the correctness of corresponding statements? As it appears now, we would have to say that:

Mastery of the simple MP rule and its proper application guarantees neither the truth nor the correctness in what is said.

That is, even if our best judgements – concerning whether or not we have to deal with the pattern on whose behalf we apply the evaluative concept – should be determinant in order to establish the correctness of the statement, what they state, what has been proved, is that a given token falls under the general (conceptually condensed) law. And, as our calculations in the determination of the conceptual rule could go wrong, so far our judgements do not necessarily determine the truth of the asserted content.

⁴ I have lately found support for these conclusions in Boghossian’s idea of conditionalised concepts in his (2003). I am working on the relation of my conclusions to his proposal but this cannot yet be included here.

If this is right, we should not step so fearlessly upon McDowell's middle-ground "reality", as it may reveal thinner ice than hypothesized.

To put it otherwise, attending to a model such as the 3FM presented:

- a) shows that the patterns on whose basis we actually follow and apply some concepts are decisive neither for establishing the truth nor the correctness of what is being said on their behalf;
- b) warns, therefore, against a too hasty identification of proper use of conceptual conventions with truth or correctness of what is said and against speaking of corresponding facts in such cases.

This is not to say that our statement may be wrong because truth outruns our epistemic justifications; we may be completely right (true) in our proof that a given item qualifies undoubtedly as a case of the law. What we haven't proved in applying the concept is that what the law says is right about them. This we simply assume on conceptual application. Mastery of conceptual application is, therefore, just a guarantee for doing the first right, but not the second. So maybe we should say that the facts stated are simply facts about truly falling under a law, rather than necessarily facts about truly being morally wrong, say. And, because this may be so by these concepts and others (many scientific concepts surely respond to this or similar models, too), it is our duty to reconstruct the path that connects the contents of our concepts with the patterns on whose behalf they are applied. At least we should if we are to know what we are doing each time in asserting them.

To finish with, what is the import of these conclusions to the rule-following considerations? On the one hand, we are confronted with the phenomena of following derived rules, rules whose rightness is dependent upon the rightness of conceptual content itself. This has, for its part, consequences relative to what we are doing in asserting the rightness of conceptual applications. There may be relevant differences in this respect between different kinds of concepts. We can thus conclude that there are different things we do in following rules, different things we assert as right in applying them and, therefore, case specific considerations are called for.

Final Remarks

It should be noted that the model presented for the ethical case could be applied at higher order levels. That is, it could be applied to some already evaluative characterized behaviour, whose suitability for moral evaluation, and hence its satisfaction of MF, we would now question. For example, some behaviour whose characterization includes it being disin-

terested could become a candidate for further moral evaluation through its fulfilment of MF. The significant contrast is here made between a previous characterization and a newly introduced evaluation whose relation with the former must be explained and could be modified. This way we can accommodate the claim that some thick ethical concepts base themselves on other thick concepts, without thereby having to accept that there should be no possible detachment of the attributed moral evaluation and the previously characterized behaviour. We may find out, for example, that the such and so disinterested behaviour, were it to be generally practiced, would have the most negative effects on those affected by it.

This surely adds further complexity when trying to assess the rightness of our assertions in applying the newly derived thick ethical concept through our procedure, as the truth of the assertion would now be dependent on the rightness of the first thick characterization and then of the second. However, the danger is not that of relying on the objectivity of some such characterizations, but in thinking the connections made are irremovable and not subject to review when it should be necessary.

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