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THE CONVERSATIONAL PRACTICALITY OF
VALUE JUDGEMENT*

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ABSTRACT. Analyses of moral value judgements must meet a practicality requirement: moral speech acts characteristically express pro- or con-attitudes, indicate that speakers are motivated in certain ways, and exert influence on others' motivations. Nondescriptivists including Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard claim that no descriptivist analysis can satisfy this requirement. I argue first that while the practicality requirement is defeasible, it indeed demands a connection between value judgement and motivation that resembles a semantic or conceptual rather than merely contingent psychological link. I then show how a form of descriptivism, the interest-relational theory, satisfies the requirement as a pragmatic and conversational feature of value judgement – thereby also accommodating its defeasibility. The word “good” is always indexed to some set of motivations: when this index is unarticulated in many contexts the speaker conversationally implicates possession of those motivations.

KEY WORDS: cognitivism and noncognitivism, conversational implicature, descriptivism and nondescriptivism, motivational internalism, relational theory of value, semantics and pragmatics, value judgement

Judgements of moral goodness have a characteristic practicality: an intimate connection with action, attitude, and what we think ought to be done. Hence there is a *practicality requirement* on metaethical theories about the meaning of moral speech acts of the form “*T* is good.” Any adequate analysis must capture this connection with action, attitude, and normativity. Champions of nondescriptivism about moral discourse such as Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard argue that nondescriptivism has to be correct, because all forms of descriptivistic analysis are incapable of satisfying this practicality requirement, a feat which (they argue) can only be accomplished by postulating a link to speakers' motivational attitudes in the semantic conventions of moral language. I examine (in Section I) the descriptivist strategy of accommodating practicality by appeal to contingent but ubiquitous psychological or social facts about motivation, and

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agree with nondescriptivists that it fails, because it is the moral speech act itself, independent of background information, that carries the practicality. I then argue (in Section II) that there is at least one form of descriptivism, the *interest-relational theory*, that satisfies the requirement, hence that we need not be nondescriptivists. Practicality, I shall argue, is a conversational rather than semantic feature of evaluative speech acts, generated not by what we say, but by what we neglect to say.

I

The practicality requirement has several distinct components. First, consider Gibbard's claim that "the special element that makes normative thought and language normative . . . involves a kind of endorsement."¹ Moral assertions have a particular *communicative function*: of conveying that the speaker holds some nonpropositional attitude such as approval. One element of the requirement, therefore, is

Attitudinal Expression: uttering a genuine moral judgement has a communicative function of expressing a favourable (or unfavourable) attitude.

A second element is illustrated by Blackburn's claim that a moral judgement "by itself determines practical issues."² To be disposed to utter a genuine moral judgement is to have reached a decision about what to do or how to feel. Should someone agree that a certain action would, in the present situation, be morally good, we would be bemused if he then earnestly enquired what this had to do with him, and we would have reason to doubt whether he understood the meaning of his utterance. This prompts the principle:

Motivational Internalism: being disposed to utter a genuine moral judgement entails possession of some degree of corresponding motivation.³

Although this element of practicality involves the necessary state of mind for, rather than a communicative function of moral utterances, it is closely related to the former principle in that the attitude expressed is, if not

¹ Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 33.

² Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 70.

³ The internalism requirement is sometimes formulated as the necessity of *recognizing the justification* for certain responses rather than *being motivated* toward these responses, a distinction nondescriptivists tend to gloss.

the very attitude identified as motivational state, psychologically derived from it.

A third element involves the *motivational efficacy* of moral judgement (I shall have little to say about this, except to suggest eventually that descriptivism offers a superior solution). An important mark of the concept of normativity – on most views – is motivational power. Moral judgements have an interpersonal and social function, as Blackburn says, of “putting pressure on choice and action.”⁴ The practice of moral utterance exists in large part so that we are able to influence each others’ attitudes and behaviour, hence any satisfactory theory of moral language must be able to account for this motivational effect. This yields the principle

Motivational Efficacy: utterance of value judgements exerts influence on the motivational attitudes of others.

So formulated, this threefold practicality requirement is too strong. But in this crude form the nondescriptivist argument against descriptivism is easily stated. Take moral utterances of the form “*T* is good” as paradigmatic. According to descriptivism, the meaning of such a judgement consists in description of the object of judgement *T*, value judgement predicates the concept “good” of *T*, ascribing the property of moral goodness to *T*, hence value judgements are factual statements, which are true or false depending on their correspondence to facts about the moral value of *T*. Blackburn and Gibbard, however, maintain that all these claims are misguided: moral judgement is not description, there are no representational moral predicates, moral properties, or moral facts. The meaning, function, and significance of moral value judgement lies elsewhere than in reporting the way the world is, such as in “expressing attitude, endorsing prescriptions, or, in general, putting pressure on choice and action.”⁵

Blackburn and Gibbard concede, however, that the phenomenology of moral judgement (its surface and logical grammar, and our linguistic behaviour and intuitions) provide *prima facie* evidence for the claims of descriptivism. Moral judgements, they claim, are “disguised” in propositional or descriptive form.⁶ Blackburn even labels his version of nondescriptivism “quasi-realism,” defined as the attempt to explain the apparently “realist” (descriptivist) phenomena of value judgement with “anti-realist” (nondescriptivist) resources. Given this *prima facie* advantage to descriptivism, why would anyone subscribe to nondescrip-

⁴ Simon Blackburn, *Essays on Quasi-Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 3.

⁵ Blackburn, *Essays on Quasi-Realism*, p. 3.

⁶ Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, p. 51; Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, p. 8.

tivism? Blackburn and Gibbard urge that we *must* be nondescriptivists nonetheless, for just one reason: no form of descriptivism can satisfy the practicality requirement.

According to Gibbard, the sole irredeemable failure of descriptivism is its inability to accommodate attitudinal expression:

the special element that makes normative thought and language normative . . . involves a kind of endorsement – an endorsement that any descriptivistic analysis treats inadequately. The problem is . . . that *a single loophole remains unpluggable by descriptivistic analysis*. In a community of stable, widely accepted norms, this element of endorsement might be carried by properties – the properties that, in everyone’s mind, qualify a thing for this kind of endorsement. . . . No one, though, has found such a property, and so we still need a language fit for fundamental normative inquiry.⁷

Blackburn similarly presents the case against descriptivism as resting wholly upon its failure to accommodate the motivational internalism of moral judgement:

The reason expressivism in ethics has to be correct is that if we suppose that belief, denial, and so on were simply discussions of the way the world is, we would still face the open question . . . [of] what importance to give it, what to do, etc.⁸

Descriptivism construes value judgements as asserting facts, but, as Blackburn continues, “we have no conception of a “truth condition” or fact of which mere apprehension by itself determines practical issues.” Our cognitive or belief-forming faculties have no intrinsic connection with our desires, so any belief can occasion either favourable or unfavourable conative reactions, or none at all, depending upon our motivational dispositions.⁹ Hence, if the judgement “*T* is good” expresses only a *belief* concerning some fact, then there is no intrinsic connection between judging that *T* is good, and approval or motivation towards it. We could make such judgements without the corresponding motivational attitude (either as condition or consequence). This, however, violates the practicality requirement, which (Blackburn and Gibbard conclude) can be met only by a nondescriptivist analysis on which the essential semantic function of moral judgements is to express speakers’ conative attitudes.

Descriptivists naturally challenge the practicality requirement. It is a matter of legitimate dispute whether motivational internalism and

⁷ Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, pp. 32–34. Emphasis provided.

⁸ Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, p. 70. Emphasis provided.

⁹ This “Separation Thesis” dividing cognition and conation is rejected by a number of philosophers who claim there are some beliefs that cannot be had without certain conative states [see John McDowell, “Non-Descriptivism and Rule-Following,” in Steven Holtzman and Christopher Leich (eds.), *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 143]. In this paper I show that descriptivists need not employ this defense, and I do not believe they should.

attitudinal expression are necessary characteristics of genuine moral judgements (and it is generally conceded that motivational efficacy is not). The practicality requirement presented above is almost certainly too strong. Motivational internalism faces a significant opposition maintaining that the presence of appropriate motivational attitude is not a necessary condition for uttering a value judgement (“motivational externalism”).¹⁰ Attitudinal expression is similarly doubtful, since describing something as “good” does not always express approval, and sometimes even expresses disapproval.

Evidence for externalism is provided by the “amoralist,” who accepts that there are moral facts and can competently predicate moral goodness, but is unmoved by his judgements (or may even despise moral goodness and admire evil, like Milton’s Satan: “Evil, be thou my good!”). It is not that he fails to see the practical significance of moral judgement; he recognizes that goodness is something he should promote and evil is something he should prevent, and he understands why others are moved by these considerations and why they condemn his amorality. The amoralist, it appears, makes moral judgements without moral motivational attitudes.

As it is very difficult to *prove* the absence of relevant motivation (given that it can be outweighed) the internalist can stubbornly insist that the amoralist is in fact impossible: all predications of moral goodness are accompanied by some degree of appropriate motivation, all protestations notwithstanding. But this is not very plausible, and internalists prefer to deny that the amoralist’s utterances are genuine moral judgements. The strategy favoured by nondescriptivists is to claim that the amoralist uses moral terms in “inverted commas”:¹¹ a different, often ironic use meaning approximately “what society calls “good.” While this diagnosis is arguable, it is subject to reasonable doubt, and therefore has no force against externalism and descriptivism. The amoralist *appears* to be asserting the same thing as the rest of us when ascribing moral goodness, and the nondescriptivist’s only reason for denying this seems to be that it is incompatible with nondescriptivism. Without independent evidence to defeat the

¹⁰ E.g., Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 209; Peter Railton, “Moral Realism,” *The Philosophical Review* 95 (1986), pp. 168–170; David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 37–80; Michael Smith, “Internalism’s Wheel,” in Brad Hooker (ed.), *Truth in Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 72. Smith holds “internalism” to be an adequacy constraint on theories of moral judgement, but means by the term the claim that one *should* (or would if fully rational) be so motivated.

¹¹ E.g., R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. 124–126.

externalist challenge, the nondescriptivist's argument against descriptivism is threatened with circularity and hence failure.

May the descriptivist then reject the practicality requirement altogether? The nondescriptivist's challenge, I shall now argue, cannot be discounted so easily, as full-blown externalism is an over-reaction that fails to accommodate the evidence for internalism. The problem, in Michael Smith's words, is "to explain how deliberation on the basis of our values can be practical in its issue *to just the extent that it is*."¹² Descriptivists have commonly sought to find a connection of the requisite closeness between moral judgement and motivation in contingent psychological facts, based on human nature or culture. Moral value is a property for which people have a contingent but sufficiently universal disposition of approval¹³ (such as being commanded by God or conducive to general welfare). This would directly provide moral judgements with motivational internalism and efficacy, and attitudinal expression would then be easily accommodated as a feature of the pragmatics, rather than the semantics, of moral judgement, as illustrated by Blackburn's treatment of "thick" moral terms.

Thick moral terms¹⁴ such as "brave," "cowardly," and "cruel" are clearly descriptive, as their application is substantially world-guided. But their use characteristically expresses favour and disfavour just like that of "thin" moral terms like "good," and therefore they have been taken as evidence, against nondescriptivism, of language that is at once both descriptive and normative. Blackburn thus writes that "Like Gibbard, I am . . . as an expressivist, harassed . . . by the place people accord to thickness in ethical theory."¹⁵ To preserve the dichotomy between descriptive and normative language, he downplays the phenomenon of "thickness":

I think thickness is overrated. I do not think there are any thick concepts, as these have been understood. There may be concepts that are encrusted with the thickest of cultural deposits, but I shall urge that this is a different matter. . . . I shall argue that attitude

¹² Michael Smith, "Valuing: Desiring or Believing?," in David Charles and Kathleen Lennon (eds.), *Reduction, Explanation, and Realism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 330.

¹³ Richard Boyd, "How to Be a Moral Realist," in Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton (eds.), *Moral Discourse and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 131; Railton, "Moral Realism," pp. 169–170; Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, pp. 49–50; David Wiggins, "A Sensible Subjectivism?," in Darwall, Gibbard and Railton, *Moral Discourse and Practice*, pp. 236–238.

¹⁴ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 129.

¹⁵ Simon Blackburn, "Morality and Thick Concepts," *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 66 (1992), p. 285.

is much more typically, and flexibly, carried by other aspects of utterance than lexical ones.¹⁶

“Thick” terms, on this view, are simply descriptive terms with denotations that are characteristic objects of approval (e.g., bravery) or disapproval.¹⁷ Speakers can thus use them without possessing that attitude, or even with an opposing attitude: we can view favourably that which we judge to be lewd or sinful.¹⁸ The attitudinal associations are not built into the semantics of the terms, but language has sufficient resources to allow us to communicate things in many different ways. A sentence can be put to various uses, and can communicate many different things depending on context, intonation, etc. – without variation in semantic content:

Of course, we may normally expect someone who talks of a person’s discretion, caution, etc. to be (somehow) implying or inviting a favourable attitude to them. But this is left to the “passing theory” or theory of what a particular speaker is doing on an occasion by a particular utterance, rather than forged in steel by a prior theory or convention governing the terms.¹⁹

We can express attitudes with terms that have no such semantic function (Blackburn’s example is “contains south-facing windows.”²⁰) But does this treatment of thick terms undermine the nondescriptivist argument against descriptivism? The attitudinally expressive function of moral judgements is primary evidence for the nondescriptive semantic status of thin moral terms like “good”; might this likewise be a matter not of what is *said*, but rather of what we *read into* what is said?²¹

There are important differences between thick and thin moral terms, which nondescriptivists believe make it implausible in the case of the latter that their practicality is provided pragmatically by a contingent psychological connection. (Moral) “good” is ineliminably practical, unlike thick terms. While the possibility of the amoralist may prove the *defeasibility* of the practicality requirement, it does not provide evidence against normativity being essential to “good”: the amoralist appears parasitically

¹⁶ Blackburn, “Morality and Thick Concepts,” p. 285.

¹⁷ In the case of pejoratives the attitudinal associations seem more conventional. For an account of moral practicality on this model, see David Copp, “Realist-Expressivism: A Neglected Option for Moral Realism,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18 (2001), pp. 1–43.

¹⁸ Blackburn, “Morality and Thick Concepts,” p. 295; David Copp, *Morality, Normativity, and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 13.

¹⁹ Blackburn, “Morality and Thick Concepts,” p. 287.

²⁰ Blackburn, “Morality and Thick Concepts,” p. 287. See also Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, p. 139.

²¹ Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, pp. 209–210; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981), p. 13.

perverse (“Evil, be thou my *good*” paradoxically preserves the normative role of “good”), and even he must admit that if he judges *T* to be morally good then he morally *ought* to favour it.

This essential practicality of “good” is manifested in its normative extension outstripping convergence in moral attitudes. Even supposing (as seems implausible) that there is substantive agreement in human moral attitudes, it seems that the practical role of the moral term “good” in principle transcends such merely contingent universality. This linguistic intuition is the basis for a family of thought experiments offered in support of motivational internalism and/or nondescriptivism,²² which go roughly as follows. Suppose we were to encounter a group of people whose attitudes were radically different from our own – the substantive objects of their favour are for us objects of disfavour, and vice versa. In our interactions with them, we would “still need a language fit for fundamental normative inquiry,” that is, a vocabulary with which to pursue a “basic inquiry into how to live,”²³ performing the functions of “expressing attitude,” “endorsing prescriptions,” and “putting pressure on choice and action.”²⁴ It seems we already have such a vocabulary, in our thin moral terms such as “good” – hence the practicality of “good” cannot be limited by contingent psychological facts. This simply elucidates that the practical function of “good” seems integral to the conventions governing its use in a way that its association with particular substantive properties or objects – or anything else – does not.

Contingent psychological connections fail to accommodate the practicality of moral judgement, therefore, because there is something *like* an intrinsic, semantic or conceptual connection between moral judgement and motivation, even if it is defeasible. Asking, “what does value matter?” is in some manner *absurd*, not merely atypical: value is not something that we merely happen to like. Psychological explanations fail to accommodate this one crucial thing: *that a speaker calls something “good” is (defeasibly) enough by itself and independently of any further information for us to infer that she is favourably disposed towards it.*²⁵ We therefore ought to accept the practicality requirement, with the proviso that its elements are defeasible (which certainly calls for explanation). The argu-

²² Hare, *The Language of Morals*, pp. 148–149; Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, pp. 33–34; Mark Timmons, *Morality without Foundations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 61–69; James Dreier, “Internalism and Speaker Relativism,” *Ethics* 101 (1990), p. 13.

²³ Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, p. 34.

²⁴ Blackburn, *Essays on Quasi-Realism*, p. 3.

²⁵ See also Dreier, “Internalism and Speaker Relativism,” p. 14.

ment against descriptivism retains its force: properties of objects can only be contingently connected with motivational attitudes whereas “good” is intrinsically practical, therefore no descriptivistic analysis of “good” could possibly succeed. This last claim, however, poses a challenge that I believe can be met.

II

My solution accounts for the practicality of moral judgements as a pragmatic, conversational feature of *general* evaluative speech acts (practicality, after all, is a characteristic feature also of aesthetic and hedonic value judgements, at least). Moral valuation, I shall suggest, is but one (particularly interesting) species of value judgement *per se*. The difficulty to be overcome, in accommodating practicality pragmatically, lies in explaining how the connection to motivational attitude can depend upon the context and manner of the use of value judgement, but independently of facts about people’s motivational attitudes. Since the pragmatics of speech acts depend upon their semantic content, it is the semantics of value that we should first examine. It is thought that there can be no thin moral properties because objective properties cannot be intrinsically connected with motivational attitudes. *Monadic* properties indeed cannot, but according to a classic view, value (moral and nonmoral) consists in a *relational* property, the relation subsisting between objects (that “have” value) and motivational states like desire.²⁶ Using “interest” as a term of art denoting all forms of end-directed conation including but not limited to desire, I propose examining the prospects of an *interest-relational theory of value* as a form of descriptivism that can satisfy the practicality require-

²⁶ Ralph Barton Perry, *General Theory of Value* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1926), pp. 115–116: “Any object, whatever it be, acquires value when any interest, whatever it be, is taken in it.” Perry, however, focuses on the relation *being actually desired*, rather than *being a satisfier of a desire-type*. Closer views are found in Paul Ziff, *Semantic Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), pp. 212–218, and (concerning at least the nonmoral case) J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 55–56: Mackie defines “good” as “such as to satisfy *requirements* (etc.) of the kind in question” (my emphasis), but goes on to say, “By ‘requirements’ I do not mean simply ‘criteria’ or even ‘standards of evaluation.’ . . . ‘Good’, I think, always imports some reference to something like interests or wants, and I intend ‘requirements’ to be read in this sense, not so colourlessly as to be almost equivalent to ‘criteria’”). Railton comes close [Railton, “Moral Realism,” pp. 175–178], but denies his relational view is an account of meaning. Copp opts for a norm-relational rather than an interest-relational account of moral propositions [Copp, *Morality, Normativity, and Society*, pp. 218–219].

ment. It is not, however, my aim here to prove this theory a correct analysis of moral judgement (although I believe that it is, in broad outline), and so I will not seek to defend it against some standard and obvious objections.

Value, on this view, is the relational property of *satisfying a (somehow specified) interest*. This formula lends itself to numerous misunderstandings. First, “satisfaction” is ambiguous. It can denote a pleasurable *psychological state*, as in the sentence “Humiliating John brought Arthur much satisfaction,” and it can denote the *event* of attaining some object of desire – e.g., “The satisfaction of Arthur’s desire for revenge brought him no pleasure.” Here, however, by “satisfying an interest” I rather mean satisfying a (full) *description of the content* of an interest. An object thus “satisfies” an interest in the sense in which states of affairs satisfy propositions, and the expressions “corresponds to” or “answers to”²⁷ could be substituted. Objects can satisfy interests in this sense even if never attained, and their doing so is what explains why their attainment would constitute a satisfaction-event. The interest-relational theory is therefore not a form of desire-satisfaction theory in the ordinary (psychological) sense.

Second, by “interest” I refer not to *tokens* of motivational states, but to *types* of motivational states. Types of interest are abstractions from concrete motivational states. There is only one type of the desire for world peace (supposing “world peace” to designate just one state of affairs) however many tokens of this desire exist. We refer to desire-types in everyday conversation whenever we talk about persons *sharing* a desire. This theory does not construe value judgement as making reference to particular persons or describing their motivational sets, and so is not a (semantically) subjectivist analysis. Value is objective in being independent of the constitution of anyone’s motivational set, although conceptually dependent upon the concepts of such motivational attitudes.²⁸

Blackburn and Gibbard claim there are no facts intrinsically relevant to ethics and action, but they are mistaken. There are relational facts concerning which objects, actions, and states of affairs satisfy which interests, a domain of facts with an internal connection with motivational states, the practical relevance of which is easily recognizable. It is with these relations to interests that evaluative thought and judgement are concerned. This hypothesis captures the appearances that nondescriptivists seek to explain away. Value judgement does describe the way things are,

²⁷ Ziff, *Semantic Analysis*, p. 218.

²⁸ Mark Johnston, “Dispositional Theories of Value,” *Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 73 (1989), p. 141. Compare truth on a correspondence theory, as a relational property possessed by propositions as abstract belief-types, consisting in their matching facts.

and ascribes properties to objects. We do with good reason argue over these judgements, and consider them true or false.

I claim that the interest-relational theory accommodates the (defeasible) practicality requirement. It remains to demonstrate how. For while interest-relational facts have an intrinsic connection with motivational states, their connection with the motivational states of *speakers* is merely contingent – and the practicality requirement demands an intrinsic connection between value judgement and *having* certain motivational attitudes. To say that something is good is to say that it satisfies a *somehow specified* interest, I suggested. There was no requirement that this be the speaker's interest, hence the practicality of value judgement seems dependent upon external contingent facts about the speaker's motivations.

Nondescriptivists are therefore contemptuous about the potential of anything resembling the interest-relational theory. Such accounts are considered unfeasible because they cast their nets too wide, appearing to claim that something has value *if it is an object of some conceivable desire*. Every object satisfies that criterion, but not every object is valuable. Even being an object of somebody's actual desire does not qualify something as good: many people desire cocaine, bloodshed, or child pornography, but we are not therefore disposed to judge these things good. As it stands, the theory not only fails to accommodate the practicality requirement, it also flouts elementary principles of semantic analysis. To perform a value judgement is paradigmatically to *express* an attitude – which is something quite distinct from ascribing interest-relational properties.

The membership of the relevant set of interests must be restricted somehow. To assert "*T* is good" is not simply to assert that there exists some type of interest *N* that *T* satisfies. Every value judgement is *indexed* to some particular set of interests. Three familiar proposals here are the subjectivist, conventionalist, and rational desire theories. According to the subjectivist theory, utterance of "*T* is good" is indexed to the speaker's set of desires, so we can translate the value judgement into a sentence such as "*T* satisfies my desires." The conventionalist theory substitutes "we" for "I," where "we" refers to some group, society, culture, etc., so that the value judgement translates as something like "*T* satisfies our desires." These theories have serious and well-known failings: they have trouble accommodating the practice of disagreement about value, and they implausibly present the truth conditions of value judgements as consisting in facts about what particular people desire. Rational desire theory avoids these problems by translating "*T* is good" as (roughly) "*T* satisfies the desires we would have if fully rational," but nondescriptivists are unimpressed by this attempt to fix descriptive content. What does "rational" mean?

Gibbard, adopting a *nondescriptivist* rational attitude theory, persuasively argues that “rational,” being itself a normative term, is as resistant to descriptivistic analysis as “good.”²⁹ The (descriptivist) rational desire theory relocates the problem without resolving it. Gibbard therefore claims that any purely descriptive strategy for restricting the set of interests fails to satisfy the practicality requirement, and must be supplemented by an expressivistic act of endorsement.

Judgement of value, on the interest-relational view, is always indexed to some set of interests or other – and *any* set of interests can figure in this role. With many judgements this index is clear, as “good” is explicitly qualified in some manner. I distinguish four different kinds of qualification. (1) Some attributions of goodness are *purpose-relative*: e.g., “Pencils are good *for cleaning out earwax*.” (2) Some are subject-relative – to an individual, group, or even a species – e.g., “The loss of their starting quarterback was good *for Illinois*, but not *for Michigan*.” (3) Some value judgements are *class-relative*: these are the cases utilized by Aristotle’s “ergon argument.” For example, “This is a good *car*”; “This is good *qua poison*”; “This is good *as an example*.” (4) Some ascriptions of goodness are *taste-relative*: e.g., “‘The City of Lost Children’ is good *if you like gothic movies*.” These different kinds of qualification usually receive very different treatments, but on this view they all function by indicating particular sets of interests – those that motivate the endeavours in class (1), characterize the subjects that figure in class (2),³⁰ are typically served by the use of the objects in class (3), and that are directly reported in class (4). These judgements are all of the form “*T* is good_{*y*}”, where “good” is indexed to a specific set of interests represented by the subscript *y*.

But what about cases where the value judgement is not so qualified, such as the utterance “*T* is good”? Moral judgements are paradigmatic here, and it is only *these* judgements of “good” *simpliciter*, uttered without index, that exhibit the features of practicality. While asserting “Debauchery is good” seems both to express approval and entail speaker motivation, asserting “Debauchery is good for ruining your health” does neither. Indexed or qualified value judgements merely state an interest-relational proposition, which (given the Separation Thesis) can be believed and asserted by anyone, whatever their motivational attitudes – hence such an utterance is neither a sign nor an expression of pro-attitude. The interest-relational theory, it may seem, does not accommodate the philosophically interesting class of *unindexed* value judgements.

²⁹ Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, pp. 6–8.

³⁰ There are two distinct senses of goodness for persons – one indexed to *subjective* interests, the other to *objective* interests (see Railton, “Moral Realism,” pp. 174–175).

This problem is solved by turning to contextual analysis. Seldom in everyday discourse is every semantic component of a speech act explicitly articulated. Important elements of content are frequently unstated, because their presence is assumed and implicitly understood by speaker and audience. Every value judgement occurs in a specific communicative context, and I maintain that all judgements of goodness *simpliciter* occur in contexts where some particular sets of interests or concerns are contextually implicit (or treated as such). In these situations, *context indexes the value predicate*.³¹ Contextual analysis fixes the descriptive content of an utterance of “*T* is good,” which always consists in representing an object as standing in a certain relation to an interest.

This role of context, I shall now argue, enables this theory to explain the attitudinal expression, motivational internalism, and motivational efficacy of value judgement, and also to explain satisfactorily – as nondescriptivists cannot – the defeasibility of these features. Where the semantic content of a value judgement is fully explicit and its index to a particular interest is articulated, the practicality requirement is defeated, as I observed. Asserting “Leaving a hot iron on a shirt is good for burning down a house” neither expresses nor entails motivational attitude in favour of leaving hot irons on shirts. It merely describes a fact. “Practicality” only appears when the desire-index becomes contextually implicit. If someone asserts, “Leaving a hot iron on a shirt is good,” now we consider them to express approval of such action and possess some motivation toward it. Why is this? There is something about the *omission* of the index that explains the practicality.

We are conversationally licensed to omit constituents of our assertions precisely when their presence and identity can be presupposed by our audience. Nonexplicitly indexed value judgements are thus conversationally appropriate just when the audience can be relied upon to presuppose or identify the desire-index without verbal directives. There are many kinds of such circumstances, but the following are among the most common:

- M1: We frequently enter into evaluative discourse as participants in a shared endeavour. Here it is already understood that we are motivated by a set of shared interests, which thereby become contextually implicit in our conversation. Suppose Jim and Mary are discussing how to burn their house down for the insurance money. Jim says, “Leaving a hot iron on a shirt would be good.”

³¹ “Good” is like “hot,” “big,” and “fast” [see P. T. Geach, “Good and Evil,” *Analysis* 17 (1956), pp. 33–42; Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 52]. The context-relativity of the truth conditions for “hot” ascriptions does not tempt us towards nondescriptivism there.

The context is framed by their shared desire (to burn their house down in a seemingly unintentional way), which Mary readily comprehends.

- M2: Some motivations are usual enough in particular contexts that they can uncontroversially be assumed – for example, in the context of an argument over corporal punishment, the desire of a parent for the best interest of his child; in the context of a burglary, the desire of the burglar that she not be caught. Here the interests need not be shared – value judgement is indexed to the speaker’s own personal interests, which being already evident need not be articulated.
- M3: Sometimes a speaker need not explicitly index a value judgement to a set of interests, as his operative motivations have already been professed or otherwise made evident; for example, “I wanted the Springboks to win. This game was *bad*” (it can be enough that the audience recognizes the speaker is correspondingly motivated, even if the desire is not identified). These desires need not be shared by the audience as in M1 and need not be typical in such situations as in M2.

A common characteristic of M1–M3 is that the relevant interests are part of the speaker’s own motivational set (if she is sincere). With such paradigm utterances of “*T* is good” the unarticulated index will correspond to that motivational set. Hence the speaker is saying, of a desire she has, that *T* satisfies that desire. Since all desires aim at their own satisfaction, the speaker already possesses a desire that counts as a motive towards *T* (whether or not it is counteracted). Motivational internalism is thereby accommodated, by drawing a conversational connection between contextually indexed value judgements and possession of relevant motivational attitude. This is not quite sufficient to explain how value judgement can have a communicative function of expressing that attitude, as it remains a descriptive assertion that an object possesses a relational property. But here we must recall that semantic content is only one of many vehicles by which speech acts can be expressive. The attitudinal expression of value judgement is not asserted, but is *conveyed conversationally* (as conversational implicature).³²

³² For the concept of conversational implicature, see Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 26. This suggestion has been made previously by Copp [Copp, *Morality, Normativity, and Society*, p. 35] who gives the only other account of its mechanics of which I am aware in Copp, “Realist-Expressivism,” pp. 31–32: he explains it by “standard processes of moral teaching” which tend to cause “moral convictions rather than ‘bare’ moral beliefs.” *Conventional* implicature

Speech acts commonly communicate much more than they assert. Information is often conveyed by the combination of semantic content, context, and rules of conversational etiquette (encompassed by the *principle of cooperation*: “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.”³³ If I say, “There are two or three species of tiger,” I also communicate a number of other propositions, such as that I believe there are two or three species of tiger (in virtue of the conversational maxim of nondeception), and that I am unsure whether the number of tiger species is two or if it is three (in virtue of the conversational maxim of relevance). Neither piece of information is logically contained in or entailed by what I actually *said* – but in most contexts, my audience would be conversationally justified in taking me to have communicated them. In some paradigm contexts (M1–M3) of value judgement, when speakers neglect to specify the relevant interests, their audiences are conversationally justified in assuming them to be motivated by the interests their speech acts presuppose (hence the insincerity, in many contexts, of unindexed value judgements in the absence of the relevant interests). They therefore express pragmatically that they are relevantly motivated, hence that they approve of *T*, which they judge to satisfy those interests.³⁴ This explains attitudinal expression.

We can also now account for the motivational efficacy of value judgement. Nondescriptivists construe this as a form of *psychosocial influence*, akin to the phenomenon of peer pressure. It is a psychological fact about our species that we are (at least when properly socialized) attitudinally impressionable by the attitudinal expressions of others independently of our antecedent motivations. Therein, they suggest, lies the source of the normativity of value judgement. This, however, is a scandalous account of normativity that simultaneously undermines its authority and denies our status as rational agents. The interest-relational theory provides a more satisfactory explanation. In at least one paradigm kind of context (M1),

accounts are offered in Stephen J. Barker, “Is Value Content a Component of Conventional Implicature?” *Analysis* 60 (2000), pp. 268–279; and Copp, “Realist-Expressivism,” pp. 34–37. I find these unsatisfactory because (a) there are grounds for skepticism about the existence of “conventional implicature” (implicature content carried by linguistic conventions): see Kent Bach, “The Myth of Conventional Implicature,” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 22 (1999), pp. 327–366; and (b) the defeasibility of attitudinal expression suggests it is conversational rather than conventional.

³³ Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, p. 26.

³⁴ While we may not approve of the satisfiers of the desires we reflectively disown, adopting a motivated perspective as contextually implicit normally signifies that a speaker does not reflectively disown it.

the relevant sets of interests are implicit *because shared* by the audience. Just as the speakers typically already possess requisite motivation, so too do the audience. The third-personal motivational influence of value judgement derives primarily from its function of describing facts that an agent so situated would recognize as justificatory. As common sense suggests, evaluative speech acts typically motivate others by indicating to them the existence of reasons for their acting or feeling in certain ways.

Nondescriptivists may point out that moral judgement is not abandoned in the absence of shared desires, but engaged in with greater vigour – hence Charles L. Stevenson’s analysis: “I approve of this: do so as well!” But the interest-relational theory has the resources to explain this more coercive type of influence. In many contexts, speakers’ neglect to specify the motivational indices of their judgements signifies that they conversationally presuppose the relevant sets of interests are indeed shared and uncontroversial. Where this presupposition is evidently false, such behaviour expresses an expectation or demand that it be true, a refusal to tolerate divergent attitudes, thereby exerting psychological pressure through a *rhetorical objectivity effect*³⁵ – in fact, just as nondescriptivists suggest.

I have demonstrated that the interest-relational theory is one descriptivist account that can accommodate all elements of the practicality requirement – at least in certain paradigmatic contexts. Can it also explain satisfactorily the defeasibility of the requirement? Note that as paradigmatic as situation-types M1–M3 may be, they are not the only legitimate contexts of evaluative utterance – which also include the following:

- N1: Sometimes we enter into conversations framed by a shared endeavour, as in M1, in which the interests behind the endeavour are similarly contextually implicit, *but we do not ourselves* share those interests. In these circumstances, we borrow others’ motivated point of view, and adopt their interests as conversational presuppositions. A detective interrogating Jim about his plans for arson may say, “Leaving a hot iron on a shirt was good, but placing a space heater by a curtain would have been better.” The detective has no desire for the destruction of Jim’s and Mary’s house, but neither is she deceptively pretending to share this desire. She is adopting, for conversational purposes, a perspective of desire not her own.
- N2: The nature of the object being evaluated is often sufficient to indicate particular sets of interests, due to their close association

³⁵ Barker, “Is Value Content a Component of Conventional Implicature?,” pp. 268–279.

with such objects. This is particularly the case with “functional objects” such as tools and artifacts, but also with parts and functions of living things (e.g., “good roots,” “good eyesight”). The conventional cues for identifying the relevant interests are here so strong that there is no requirement that speakers share them.

It is therefore often legitimate to make nonexplicitly indexed value judgements without oneself possessing the relevant interests. We can easily see how the practicality requirement is defeated in such cases. Value judgements made from the perspective of motivational attitudes that the speaker does not share lack any accompanying or resultant motivation – the requirement of motivational internalism is defeated. The failure of attitudinal expression is similarly easy to account for. Nonexplicitly indexed value judgements express attitudes just because, and just in case, the failure to specify the relevant interests conversationally indicates that these motivate the speaker. In contexts of type N1–N2, however, this is not indicated, and so the value judgement does not presuppose speaker’s attitude and does not conversationally express such attitude. Consider Gibbard’s analysis of a moral judgement as *both* expressing acceptance of a norm, and “expressing a thought”³⁶ that the object of judgement is either prescribed, proscribed, or permitted by that norm – i.e., it *describes this fact*. This is very similar to the interest-relational analysis, except for his claim that expression of norm-acceptance is an essential element of semantic content.³⁷ He is mistaken because attitudinal expression is defeasible. Value judgement readily and frequently diverges from this paradigm.

We can now explain the troublesome amoralist, by proposing a cursory sketch of the nature of “moral” judgement. Moral judgement, on this view, is judgement of value from the perspective of what can broadly be called “moral concerns.” This story is complicated by a certain ambiguity in the term “moral,” which has both a broad or formal, and a narrow or substantive sense. In the broad sense, what makes a set of concerns “moral” is the place accorded to those concerns by a society or social subset (at the limit, the individual): “moral concerns” are those which it demands and requires that others in that society (or, at the limit, all persons) possess – or, at least, act in accordance with – as fundamental and overriding motivations. For this reason, moral judgements are distinctive in that they almost

³⁶ Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, p. 102.

³⁷ Blackburn similarly objects that such speech acts may *presuppose* such norms, but do not *say* them (Blackburn, “Morality and Thick Concepts,” pp. 291–292).

never need the relevant set of desires articulated.³⁸ The substantive sense of “moral” invokes the particular set of concerns that occupies this position in our own society – whether this be “general benevolence” *per* David Hume, “rational interest” *per* Immanuel Kant, or some more heterogeneous set of concerns. In any case, moral judgement involves determining whether these concerns are satisfied.

This account can be supplemented, therefore, with scenario N3: sometimes a certain set of interests needs no specification because it is a set that society expects and requires everyone to adhere to as fundamental and overriding. A speaker can conversationally adopt this perspective without sharing this set of interests, and make value judgements indexed to it. The amoralist is someone familiar with these concerns and their social status, who can survey the world from such a point of view, and make accurate judgements about the moral goodness or badness of characters, motivations, and actions. He is not merely judging what *we* would judge to be “good,” he genuinely judges the moral value of these things.³⁹ But obviously he can be unmoved by his judgements, and this analysis allows that he can make them without expressing approval or endorsement: he engages in discourse framed by concerns he does not share.

How, it may be asked, is this account of the defeasible practicality of moral judgement superior to other naturalists’ accounts postulating a contingent psychological connection, which also can invoke pragmatics? The weakness of these strategies, I agreed with nondescriptivists, lies in the fact that a speaker’s uttering “*T* is good” is a sign *by itself*, independent of extra-linguistic information about social values, human motivational nature, etc., that she possesses (and expresses) corresponding motivational attitude. On this theory, the tell-tale sign is indeed a fact about *language-use*: that to use “good” without explicit index is to appeal to context in a way that paradigmatically indicates the relevant desire to be among the speaker’s motivations. The supposedly *semantic* intuition of nondescriptivists, then, is contaminated by some covert but natural assumptions about conversation and context. Clues as to speakers’ states of mind may derive from conversational, rather than semantic features of their utterances (not what we say, but how we say it) – and the proof that this is here the

³⁸ Moral judgements abruptly interjected into conversations with different implicit motivation express outrage partly by the disregard for conversational etiquette expressed in sharply switching to different contexts of concern.

³⁹ If by “moral judgement,” however, we mean a speech act in which the speaker himself takes the morally demanding rhetorical stance, then the amoralist indeed cannot make moral judgements in this sense.

case is furnished by the defeasibility of practicality, here explained as practicality's contingency upon the context of utterance.

If I am correct, then both descriptivism and motivational externalism are true: moral value judgement is a descriptive speech act, there are properties of moral value, and being in certain motivational or attitudinal states is not a necessary condition for making genuine moral judgements. Nondescriptivism is therefore a false doctrine. However, nondescriptivism is right about many things. Moral value judgements do characteristically express motivational attitudes, and do so not by describing such attitudes but by nondescriptively conveying them. The principal function of moral value judgement is practical, not theoretical – value is significant precisely in connection with decision and action. And I am in complete agreement with nondescriptivism that all practical and ethical matters ultimately reduce to a matter of desires, concerns, or conative stances toward the world. We can say all this and still be true to the descriptive appearances of the practice of value judgement.

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