

## Semantic Contents of Moral Judgments and Moral Motivation

This paper argues that the semantic contents of moral judgments are not intrinsically motivating. In addition, the properties of motivational states possessed by agents when they act are required for moral motivation. When an agent is said to be motivated to act in accordance with what some statement of a moral judgment says, what motivates her in a typical case is a motivational state with a representational content. The object of that motivational state may either contain the semantic content of a moral judgment or be completely independent of it.<sup>1</sup> If the object of the motivational state contains the semantic content of an apparent proposition that is identified with a moral judgment, then the state may be said to be motivating either in virtue of including that content in its object or in virtue of some property of the state that it would have independently of including that content in its object. If the object of the motivational state does not include the semantic content of the apparent proposition identified with a moral judgment, the state may be said to be motivating in accordance with the judgment either in virtue of the relation its object bears to the semantic content of the apparently propositional moral judgment statement or in virtue of some property that state would have independently of having a particular object. The paper argues that in every case where agents are actually motivated to act, the properties that underlie their motivation are non-identical to properties of the semantic contents of moral judgment statements.

This argument responds to various views in metaethical theory that concern what judgment contents, which are apparently propositional, express. Particular views on this question seem to commit those who hold them to the claim that the semantic contents of apparently propositional statements are intrinsically motivating, or, in other words, that apprehending such statements is sufficient for being motivated to act in accordance with them in virtue of properties of their semantic contents. However, there is good reason to think either that such views about the semantic contents of moral judgment statements do not imply that these contents are the sole basis for moral motivation or that such views are otherwise not seamlessly integrated with views about how agents' awareness of moral reasons gives rise to motivation in characteristic cases where they act in accordance with statements of moral judgments. In the contemporary parlance, then, the argument of this paper is an argument against a certain kind of motivational internalism: the kind that would take motivation to be 'internal' to the semantic content of a judgment.<sup>2</sup>

The first section considers abstractly why people would hold that it is important to think of properties of the contents of apparently propositional statements of moral judgments as being the primary basis for moral motivation. The second section gives background on the debate between motivational internalists and motivational externalists, as this debate is one context in which

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<sup>1</sup> I realize that it might strike some as pseudoscientific to speak of motivational states with propositional contents. However, this is commonplace in the discourse about intentions in action theory and in the assumption of many in metaethics that desires are paradigmatic motivational states (as desires are considered by most to be propositional attitudes).

<sup>2</sup> Milevski 2016 (p. 1) takes the claim that motivation is 'internal' to the semantic content of a judgment to be characteristic of a strong form of the motivational internalism thesis that he calls "the unconditional version of motivational internalism."

thinkers have discussed whether properties of judgments considered as apparent propositions or properties of candidate motivational states serve as the primary basis for moral motivation. The third section considers three actual accounts of moral motivation that have taken a stance in the debate over motivational internalism based on considerations about whether the semantic contents of moral judgments can be said to motivate in their own right. The rest of the paper responds to accounts like those considered in the third section and argues that for reasons having to do with the structure of motivational states, it makes sense to think that something in addition to awareness of features of the semantic contents of apparent propositions is required for the production of moral motivation.

## Section I

The first section of the paper is spent taking seriously the thesis that the semantic contents of moral judgments themselves, and not properties of mental states of judging, are the primary basis for moral motivation. I reconstruct the main reasons why some thinkers in metaethics hold that an account of moral motivation should accommodate this intuition about how judgments motivate agents to act morally in characteristic cases.

To illustrate the following points with an example, suppose that Lauren judges that she should not cancel her scheduled phone call with a friend because she wants to maintain the friendship and believes the friend will dump her if she is perpetually flaky (suppose she has been somewhat flaky previously). The relevant intuition, in terms of this concrete example, is that if Lauren is a rational agent, it seems natural to think that when she has a state that motivates her to make the call, the content of what she judges makes a difference to her possession of the relevant motivation.

We might call the first reason why we should respect this intuition about the close link between judgment contents and motivation the state arbitrariness concern. One reason it is natural to think the content of Lauren's judgment makes a difference to the motivational state she has when she acts is that we think that if Lauren had made a judgment with a different content, such as the judgment that she should not make the call due to her being busy and not caring a great deal about maintaining her friendship with the person on the other line, she would not have formed the same motivational state she did in the case where she made the judgment with the content that she should make the call. We want to say her action and the corresponding motivation were based on the content of her judgment about why that action was right, and not, if she is rational, that she would have been motivated to perform the same action regardless of the content of what she judged.

Additionally, if it matters to the rationality of her action that Lauren acted on the basis of the judgment that she made rather than on the basis of some other judgment, we do not want to say a different judgment than the one she made could have given rise to an identical motivational state. If we did, this would leave us no easy way of distinguishing rational motivation from irrational motivation based on a comparison of motivational states alone. Accommodating these points about Lauren's motivational state when she acts being non-arbitrary given the content of the judgment she made seems to require holding that the content of the motivational state Lauren

has when she performs the action on the basis of her judgment is related in an intimate way to the content of the judgment itself.

We might call the second reason to hold the intuition that the content of Lauren's judgment should make a difference to the motivation she possesses the prescriptivity of moral propositions. This reason for accommodating the intuition about the link between judgment contents and motivation concerns motivation that is distinctively moral and is the point that on some views, moral judgments are supposed to derive their normative authority from a special source. That is, the propositional contents of moral judgments themselves are supposed to be different from other kinds of propositional contents in having the capacity to give rise to a distinctively moral sort of motivation. Moreover, it is supposed to be something about the truth of the propositions themselves and the reference relations involved that make judgments with those contents capable of producing moral motivation. Notably, not everyone takes this position.

## Section II

Because the issue of how the semantic contents of moral judgments may be thought to motivate often comes up in connection with the distinction between motivational internalism and motivational externalism, the second section provides background on that distinction.

The thesis of motivational internalism, roughly, says that genuine reasons are necessarily motivating. Some have distinguished a belief version of the view, which says that an agent's belief that she has a reason is necessarily motivating, from an ontological version of the view, which says that an agent's possession of a reason (with or without a corresponding belief that she has the reason) is necessarily motivating. The thesis of motivational externalism can be stated as the negation of the motivational internalism thesis.

It seems worth noting that some recent writers have used the term "motivational internalism" to refer to a view that explicitly incorporates the commitment that the semantic contents of moral judgments are intrinsically motivating. However, motivational internalism as a historical view has not always incorporated such a commitment. Figures such as Williams and Korsgaard, for example, discuss motivational internalism as a view that posits a necessary connection between agents' recognition of reasons and their possession of corresponding motivation without making any explicit commitment to the claim that this necessary connection holds in virtue of properties of the semantic contents of moral judgments.

There are further questions about what is meant, in the oft-cited definition, by the statement that reasons are "necessarily motivating." First, there is a question of the degree of motivation involved. Most agree that *pro tanto* reasons may be involved in practical reasoning, where these are reasons that contribute to reaching an overall verdict about what to do by counting in favor of one option or another but do not themselves imply an all-things considered judgment about which option is best.

To give an example, consider Beatrice, a woman who must decide between taking a spontaneous trip to visit her love interest and staying at home to fulfill a number of work-related

obligations. That her love interest claims to be deeply depressed is a *pro tanto* reason in favor of going to visit him, given that she desires his happiness. That she agreed to complete several tasks due at work during the week she would be away is a *pro tanto* reason for her to stay at home, given that she desires to be promoted and viewed as generally reliable.

On the standard picture, the woman will choose whether to go for the visit or not by weighing all of her *pro tanto* reasons for and against each option, and then by considering the relative strengths of the all-things-considered reasons attached to those options. If we suppose that she chooses to make the trip, then what is left after she weighs the *pro tanto* reasons in favor of going and not going is an all-things-considered reason in favor of going to visit her lover and a relatively weak all-things-considered reason to remain at home to complete her work-related tasks. Whether the latter all-things-considered reason should properly be called an all-things-considered reason against remaining at home is an unsettled question.

Those who endorse the thesis of motivational internalism are often assumed to endorse the thesis in an unrestricted way, so that it applies to *pro tanto* reasons in addition to all-things-considered ones. When someone holds that *pro tanto* reasons are “necessarily motivating,” they surely do not mean that *pro tanto* reasons necessarily move agents to act in all cases where agents possess them. What is meant by the claim that a *pro tanto* reason is necessarily motivating is usually that an agent’s possession of a *pro tanto* reason necessarily carries some degree of motivation, which may be overridden by a degree of motivation of comparatively greater strength that would move her to act in some way other than that in which the *pro tanto* reason in question motivationally inclines her. In other words, being a motivational internalist need not amount to taking the view that possession of particular reasons or beliefs about them necessarily moves an agent in accordance with those particular reasons.

That being said, one further point to consider in connection with distinctively moral motivation is that moral judgments are usually all-things-considered judgments. Thus, motivational internalism about moral judgments is generally taken to concern motivation on the basis of all-things-considered reasons for action rather than *pro tanto* ones. To be an internalist about moral motivation usually amounts to endorsing the claim that if one has an all-things-considered moral reason to perform a particular action, then, necessarily, one is motivated to act in accordance with one’s reason.

There is also a question of what is meant by the term “necessarily” in the statement of the thesis of motivational internalism. Whatever modality is picked out by “necessarily,” there, would make the thesis imply that it is always the case that when one has a reason of any kind, it carries some degree of motivation. However, it often is not made clear in virtue of what being motivationally inclined toward some course of action is intrinsic to the possession of the reason for acting in that way, or even that the motivational force associated with reasons, on a motivational internalist view, must be intrinsic to reasons at all. Along these lines, some seem to take it as sufficient for establishing the truth of motivational internalism that an agent’s possession of reasons or judgments about them always actually does motivationally incline her toward the actions that correspond to the reasons she possesses. If evidence to this effect were sufficient for showing motivational internalism, the modality involved in the statement of a “necessary” connection between reasons and motivation would be very weak.

There is still the question of the relevance of the distinction between motivational internalism and externalism to the issue of the capacity of moral judgment contents to motivate. The connection claimed by a number of people is that motivational internalism, as a view, supports the point that moral judgments motivate in virtue of their contents, which are apparently propositional.<sup>3</sup> That is, people argue that motivational internalism pairs naturally with the view that the content of an apparently propositional moral judgment statement is the primary basis for an agent's motivation to act in the way the judgment with that content recommends. To illustrate this more concretely, I go on to highlight three internalist accounts that are introduced with reference to this point.

### Section III

The last section ended by introducing the idea that respecting the intuition that moral judgments are supposed to motivate in virtue of their contents has been cited as a rationale for accepting motivational internalism: the view that an agent's possession of a genuine reason necessarily motivates her in accordance with the reason. This section discusses the details of three accounts that claim to account well for this intuition, two of which are internalist. The discussion of these accounts demonstrates that I am not attacking a strawman when I later argue that it is misleading to think of properties of apparent propositions as the primary basis for moral motivation.

To this end, I turn to the discussion of three specific views, those of Michael Pendlebury, David Copp, and Jonathan Dancy. Pendlebury and Dancy explicitly defend a version of internalism whose rationale is the prescriptivity of moral propositions. Copp claims that he is not an internalist but seems to hold that an account of the semantic content of a moral judgment should offer an adequate response to the state arbitrariness concern and purports to advance his externalist account with this in mind. These three accounts are reconstructed to highlight that considerations about the semantic contents of moral judgments are invoked by contemporary writers as points in favor of and against specific views on the motivational internalism debate. In other words, the view that the semantic contents of moral judgments serve as the primary basis for moral motivation is a live view that has been discussed by all three of these authors.

Pendlebury's account is not restricted to moral judgment contents and is also supposed to apply to the contents of practical judgments more generally. He begins his inquiry about the semantic contents of moral judgments by considering the merits and explanatory deficits of views in metaethics about "judgments" viewed as statements rather than mental states of judging. Such views include cognitivism and noncognitivism, which differ in their positions about what moral judgments, considered as statements of apparent propositions, express. He takes the notion of "commitment" to a judgment, conceived as a statement of an apparent proposition, to be central to the main claims he argues in the paper,<sup>4</sup> and his account assumes internalism in the

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<sup>3</sup> Pendlebury 2002 (p. 183).

<sup>4</sup> Pendlebury 2002 (p. 185).

sense that an agent's commitment to a moral judgment necessarily involves a motivational inclination toward whatever the judgment content prescribes.<sup>5</sup> In the sense in which Pendlebury says it necessarily involves a motivational inclination, a "commitment" to a judgment, considered as an occurrence of a statement of an apparent proposition, seems to involve both occurrent consideration of the statement and affirmation of its truth. It is not clear based on what he says whether Pendlebury is a cognitivist or a noncognitivist in the sense that would imply a view on the kind of attitude that a statement of a moral judgment expresses, but he holds that regardless of which of these views one takes, it is "appropriate to count...[moral judgments] as (at least) *minimally truth apt*," a view which he calls minimal cognitivism.<sup>6</sup>

Specifically, Pendlebury structures his account around "simple practical moral judgments in the first person and present tense" because these statements have "the most obvious claim to determinate motivational force." His main claim is the following:

*"the distinctive motivational force of [simple practical moral judgments in the first person and present tense]... has nothing whatever to do with the assumption that they have been advanced from the moral point of view. That they have this motivational force is to be explained, rather, in terms of two factors (in addition to their connections to the first person and the present tense): first, the meanings of the relevant modal auxiliaries (primarily "ought" and "must") and, second, the fact that these judgments are practical rather than theoretical."*<sup>7</sup>

Consistent with a theory-building principle called "Ockham's eraser," which says not to posit linguistic senses beyond necessity, Pendlebury takes the meanings of the modal auxiliaries "ought" and "must" to be the same across different contexts.<sup>8</sup> That is, the term "ought" as it appears in the statement of an epistemic obligation or a legal obligation has the same meaning as it does when it appears in the statement of a moral or prudential obligation. He seems to hold that what determines whether the statement of some judgment carries determinate motivational force is whether or not what follows the modal auxiliary has descriptive or prescriptive meaning. This is what he means when he says that the determinate motivational force of simple, first-person, present-tense ought judgments is "fixed by the contents of those judgments." On his account, when what follows the modal auxiliary is a term that refers to an action, the linguistic item

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<sup>5</sup> Pendlebury 2002 (p. 186).

<sup>6</sup> Pendlebury 2002 (p. 184).

<sup>7</sup> Pendlebury 2002 (p. 186).

<sup>8</sup> Pendlebury 2002 (p. 187).



expressed by the entire statement is prescriptive, whereas when it is a term that refers to some other attitude like a belief, the linguistic item expressed by the full statement is descriptive.<sup>9</sup> Whether the content of the statement of the relevant kind of judgment is descriptive or prescriptive determines whether commitment to it carries any degree of motivational inclination.

By taking the view that the content of whatever follows the modal auxiliary in a statement of the relevant kind determines whether commitment to the full statement involves a degree of motivational inclination, Pendlebury apparently takes the view that certain judgment contents, which he claims can be at least minimally considered truth-apt propositions, are inherently prescriptive. The meanings of such prescriptive propositions are supposed to differ from the meanings of propositions with descriptive contents in such a way that commitment to prescriptive propositions involves a motivational component. On an externalist account of propositional contents, taking propositions to be inherently prescriptive would imply that there are objectively prescriptive properties and relations in the world, as externalists about propositional contents hold that these are structured out of objective properties and relations.

Thus, Pendlebury's account respects the constraint I have called the prescriptivity of moral propositions. The general point is that there is something either mind-dependent or mind independent about the contents of practical judgments that distinguishes them from the contents of theoretical judgments, and that whatever serves as the basis for the distinction also provides a basis for being a motivational internalist about the states involved in affirming practical judgment contents. It is not possible to occurrently consider and affirm a judgment statement of the practical kind without being moved in the way prescribed by the judgment, and this is a feature of what is involved semantically in affirming the at least minimal truth of the judgment content. "What is involved semantically" could be spelled out with more precision given a particular account of what propositions are and a particular account of what their contents consist in.

Dancy makes the related suggestion that taking an internalist, cognitivist view of how moral judgments motivate could imply that the agent being motivated is cognitively responding to intrinsically prescriptive properties in the world in being so motivated. According to cognitivism, moral judgments express beliefs, whereas according to noncognitivism, moral judgments express desires. Dancy treats possible, candidate motivational states as being exhausted by different varieties of belief and desire, following Hume, who held that a complete motivational state contains both elements.<sup>10</sup> Hume held that only desires are capable of motivating in their own right. Beliefs, on Hume's picture, derive whatever motivational force they have, in the cases where they are said to motivate, from their relation to an agent's desires.

In discussing what is at stake theoretically in adopting either a cognitivist or noncognitivist view, Dancy gives an overview of the distinction between the two candidate motivational states, beliefs and desires, in terms of their directions of fit. Many regard desires as having a mind to

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<sup>9</sup> Pendlebury 2002 (p. 186).

<sup>10</sup> Dancy 1993 (p. 13).

world direction of fit, in the sense that an agent's having a desire with a certain content is thought, in ideal cases, to explanatorily and causally precede that content's becoming true. In contrast, beliefs are supposed to have a world to mind direction of fit; the truth of some belief's propositional content, in ideal cases, is supposed to explanatorily and causally precede an agent's coming to hold a belief with that content.

Having offered this discussion as background, Dancy raises the issue of its implications for cognitivist internalism. Once again, this is the view that moral judgments express beliefs and that affirming the contents of such judgments necessarily involves a degree of motivational inclination. Dancy argues that if affirming the content of a belief necessarily involves being motivated to some degree, then given the world to mind direction of fit that beliefs have, the motivational inclination that necessarily accompanies beliefs with certain contents must be a cognitive representation of the objective prescriptivity of whatever is referred to by those contents. That only beliefs with certain contents, and not all beliefs, motivate is supposed to support the point that on a cognitivist internalist view, "what motivates is the matter of fact believed, not the believing of it."<sup>11</sup> Notably, he does not commit himself to this position in developing his own "pure theory" of moral motivation.

Dancy's discussion of cognitivist internalism is highlighted, here, because it emphasizes that for reasons involving the kinds of attitudes beliefs fundamentally are, cognitivist internalism seems to better accommodate the intuition that moral judgments motivate in virtue of their semantic contents than other views on the same conceptual landscape. Because the propositional contents of moral judgments are distinguished in kind from ordinary, descriptive propositional contents, the cognition of these is supposed to involve an additional motivational component. Dancy further proposes, consistent with the direction of fit of beliefs as propositional attitudes, that the motivational component that is necessarily involved in the cognition of moral propositions according to cognitivist internalism tracks something objective about the properties and relations with which moral propositions are concerned.

Copp is a third figure who discusses in detail the idea that moral judgments motivate in virtue of their contents. He says that when others claim that moral judgments motivate in virtue of their contents, they usually do so to accommodate the idea that moral judgments are normative, or potentially motivating, in virtue of their contents. He claims that one "important truth...that internalism is attempting to capture...is the fact that moral judgments are intrinsically 'normative' or 'choice guiding,' that they are, very roughly, relevant to action or choice because of their content."<sup>12</sup> While Copp agrees with internalists that moral judgments are normative in virtue of their contents, he rejects the idea that locating the basis of the normativity of a moral

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<sup>11</sup> Dancy 1993 (p. 32).

<sup>12</sup> Copp 1995 (p. 187).



judgment in its semantic content implies locating the basis of an agent's motivation to act in accordance with the judgment in its semantic content when she is actually moved to do so.

Copp's defense of an externalist position that resembles constructivism relies on this attempt to detach the explanation for why statements of moral judgments are potentially motivating from the explanation of how such judgments actually motivate when they do. For Copp, moral judgments are potentially motivating because their contents nontrivially entail the existence of a justified standard that prescribes action in accordance with those judgments.<sup>13</sup> However, that some justified standard is associated with every moral judgment does not guarantee that agents are motivated to act in accordance with all moral judgments. Something further is required for motivation in accordance with a standard-backed judgment, which Copp identifies as subscription to the associated standard.<sup>14</sup> "Subscription" amounts to an intention to conform to the standard and to support conformity to the standard.

It is unclear on the basis of what Copp thinks a moral judgment actually motivates when it does, but the relevant agent's subscription to the standard associated with the judgment content is assumed to play an important role. By definition, an agent's subscription to a standard associated with a propositional judgment content implies that she has a motivational profile that coincides with some element that is nontrivially entailed by, but not identical to, or part of, that judgment content. It is fair to assume that moral judgment contents are propositional on Copp's standard-based view, as he says that he assumes this.<sup>15</sup> Although he is not an internalist, Copp's account is interesting to examine because of his point that internalists are often led to allege a necessary connection between the making of moral judgments and being motivated to act in accordance with them by the consideration that moral judgment contents play a substantive role in the production of moral motivation. As mentioned before, Copp claims that internalists are driven to take this consideration about the link between judgment contents and actual motivation into account by a desire to explain how it is that moral judgments are potentially motivating.

One final point Copp makes that is relevant to the discussion of why others hold we should take seriously the idea that propositional contents play an important role in explaining agents' motivation in particular cases is that taking the alternative view that those contents do not play an important role in explaining particular instances of agents' being motivated would seem to diminish the authority of those agents' judgments about what should be done in causing them to do what they do. This point comes across strongly in Copp's summary of the motivational internalist's critique of the externalist's position, where the notion of an external sanction is introduced.

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<sup>13</sup> Copp 1995 (p. 195).

<sup>14</sup> Copp 1995 (p. 203).

<sup>15</sup> Copp 1995 (p. 195).

The internalist's critique, as summarized by Copp, is that if judgments do not motivate in virtue of their propositional contents, they require an "external sanction" to do so.<sup>16</sup> I understand an external sanction to be "an action taken to enforce a law or rule"<sup>17</sup> that is external, or imposed from outside of the agent. The point Copp makes explicitly is that some agent's being motivated in accordance with a judgment by an external sanction is neutral with respect to the content of that judgment, as an agent might be motivated by an external sanction to act in accordance with any judgment whatsoever, regardless of its content. Moreover, some version of the state arbitrariness concern comes across in Copp's reconstruction of the internalist's critique. An agent's being motivated to perform a particular action in accordance with an external sanction also would not require her to make a judgment with any particular content, as she could make a judgment with any content whatsoever and still be moved by some external sanction to act as she did in the relevant case. The internalist's complaint is that by failing to clarify the sense in which moral motivation is distinct from motivation in accordance with an external sanction, externalism is not enlightening with respect to how the content of what an agent judges in some circumstance is relevant to motivating her to do what she does.

#### **Section IV**

Having now discussed several others' views about how the semantic contents of judgments themselves motivate agents to act in accordance with those judgments, the paper turns to the first part of the argument for the claim that it is more intuitive to understand moral motivation as originating in properties of the contents of motivational states possessed by agents when they act than it is to understand it as originating in properties of the contents of apparently propositional judgments. So far, the paper has used the language of "moral judgments" and "moral judgment contents" to discuss the issue of how the contents of apparent propositions themselves are thought to provide the primary basis for motivation. This makes sense because cognitivism and noncognitivism are most often construed as metaethical views and not, more generally, as views about what is expressed by all practical judgments. Also, the primary concern of this paper is with moral judgments and moral motivation. However, the discussion of how judgment contents motivate in this section will use the language of "practical judgment contents" as this is appropriate, as some other discussions of how judgments, or all-things-considered reasons, motivate have been neutral with respect to the kind of judgment content under consideration.

When agents act in general, they are thought to be driven to action by a motivational state with a content. Following Hume, many have supposed that the motivational state that provides the causal basis for an agent's action must be a desire. In the Humean tradition, even if the

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<sup>16</sup> Copp 1995 (p. 187).

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sanction>

relevant state is not a desire, it is a noncognitive state, as the main thesis of Hume's famous argument is that "reason alone can never be a motive to the action of the will." To paraphrase him, an agent must have an internal, noncognitive representation for her to knowingly give rise to a new motion of her body.

The idea that the motivational states that agents have are at least partly noncognitive has echoes throughout contemporary philosophy. Intentions, which are thought to be candidate motivational states by action theorists, standardly contain both a cognitive and noncognitive component. Those who model reasons as states that are capable of motivating also tend to have them consist in a pair that contains a cognitive state (a belief) and a noncognitive state (a desire). Finally, all of the recent accounts that have sought to naturalize desires, including those of Russell, Millikan, Morillo, and Schroeder have taken desires to be the motivational states that are central to the production of action. For the purposes of the following discussion, I assume with the contemporary crowd that desires are the paradigmatic motivational states.

At this point, I introduce the distinction between the content of a mental state, sometimes called an "attitude," and the content of its object. Recognizing this distinction and where it applies will be crucial to making the argument that we should locate the primary basis of moral motivation in properties of desires as states rather than in properties of their objects, which, as objects, may include the propositional or non-propositional contents of moral judgments. The thrust of the distinction at hand is that a state or attitude as a whole may have a content that is different in kind than that of its proper object. Two easy examples of this phenomenon can be found in discussions of two types of states: desires and perceptual states.

Take desires as the first example of how the distinction between the content of a mental state and the content of its object plays out. Desires are thought to be noncognitive attitudes, and thus desires are states that have noncognitive contents. However, desires are also thought to be propositional attitudes, which means that the objects of desires have propositional contents. Thus, while the objects of desires express declaratives, or propositions, whose typical mode of presentation is via a cognitive representation, desires as states have noncognitive contents.

Perceptual states are a second kind of state that naturally illustrate the distinction between state contents and the contents of their objects in philosophical writing. Perceptual states are thought to be cognitive attitudes, and thus perceptual states are states that have cognitive contents. However, some have argued that the objects of perceptual states are non-conceptual or non-propositional. The characteristic mode of presentation of a non-conceptual content is via a noncognitive state. However, on some views, while the objects of perceptual states may be non-conceptual or non-propositional, perceptual states themselves have cognitive contents.

This distinction between state contents and state object contents applies to the present issue about motivation by allowing us to distinguish the content of a motivational state from the content of its object. With this thought in the background, we may jump into the main argument.

To begin, recall the truism stated in the introduction of the paper that the object of a motivational state either contains the semantic content of a moral judgment or does not contain

it. The argument will proceed by considering a range of possibilities that crop up along this general framing of the issue and then by showing that each has features that must lead us to conclude that motivation is not intrinsic to the contents of moral judgments that may be objects of motivational states, but to properties of those states independent of the relevant judgment contents.

First, suppose that the object of a motivational state does not contain the semantic content of a moral judgment. Then, regardless of whether a cognitivist or noncognitivist view of judgment contents is assumed, we have supposed that the state that motivates an agent to act in accordance with a moral judgment has a different content entirely than the one that allows her to make a judgment (or the noncognitivist equivalent) whose object is the semantic content of the moral judgment conceived as an apparent proposition.

Moreover, if motivational states, on such a view, are assumed to be distinct in kind from states that affirm the semantic contents of apparently propositional judgment statements, it seems like the only rationale for this could be to allow for the metaphysical possibility that an agent may have the state of judging a content without having the state of being motivated in accordance with it or vice versa. It follows from the possibility of some agent's judging a content without being motivated by it that the properties of an agent's motivational state, on this view, are more central to actually moving her to act in accordance with the content of some judgment statement than the content of the statement considered by itself or the content of the state of affirming it.

This point may underscore the basis of Korsgaard's insight that externalist views about moral motivation are those on which a motivational state content is not identical to a moral judgment content. If the only explanation for detaching the state identified with affirming a moral judgment from the state identified with the agent's motivational state when she acts in accordance with it is to allow that an agent may have one such state without the other, then the motivation cannot be intrinsic to the content of the judgment statement, which an agent may, as a content, affirm via a state of judging (or the noncognitivist equivalent) without being motivated to any degree. Notably, Korsgaard suggests that a view is a motivational internalist view iff the objects of motivational states are identical to the contents of practical judgments.

Second, suppose that the object of a motivational state includes the semantic content of a moral judgment. Then, the semantic content that the motivational state's object includes is propositional or non-propositional depending on whether one takes a cognitivist or noncognitivist view of moral judgment contents. To see this, consider the point that moral judgments, regardless of one's view, are thought to be statements of apparent propositions with a content. Depending on one's view, the content of a moral judgment may express a cognitive state or a noncognitive state. The kind of state that an apparently propositional statement of a moral judgment expresses depends on whether the apparent proposition expresses a belief (a cognitive attitude) or a desire or emotion (a noncognitive attitude). On standard forms of cognitivism, according to which moral judgments express beliefs, the contents of moral judgments are propositional. On standard forms of non-cognitivism, according to which moral judgments express non-cognitive states of various kinds, moral judgments have non-propositional contents.

If one holds that the object of a motivational state includes the content of a cognitive moral judgment and does not hold that there is distinctively cognitive motivation, it does not make sense to think of the motive force attaching to the state as being intrinsic to the propositional part of its object. To see this, consider the point that the contents of motivational states, since Hume, have been thought to be partly noncognitive. This suggests that, unless there can be noncognitive belief, the content of the motivational state as a whole is distinct from the content of the propositional part of its object, which expresses a state that is purely cognitive. Moreover, there are reasons for thinking that there cannot be noncognitive belief.

If one holds that the object of a motivational state includes the noncognitive semantic content of a moral judgment statement, then it still makes more sense to think of the motive force attaching to the motivational state as being owed to some other property of the state's content than one of those possessed by the non-propositional part of its object. This conclusion is somewhat trivial if the motivational state's content as a whole is distinct from the content of the non-propositional part of its object, as it seems like the only good explanation for the content of the state being distinct from the content of the non-propositional part of its object would be that the motive force associated with the state originates in a property of the state or its object that is not a property of the non-propositional part of its object (like its characteristic mode of presentation).

The conclusion that the motive force associated with a motivational state is intrinsic to part of the state's content that is distinct from the non-propositional judgment content that belongs to its object is less trivial if the content of the motivational state as a whole is taken to be identical to the content of the non-propositional judgment included in its object. Notably, this is not logically impossible, as the contents of motivational states as whole states are thought to be non-propositional, as are the noncognitive contents that moral judgments express on a noncognitivist view. One preliminary reason to think it might be impossible to assume that the content of a noncognitive state is the object of a desire is that desires are typically considered propositional attitudes, or attitudes with propositional objects. However, the inquiry will proceed to rule out this possibility based on more substantive considerations than this.

## **Section V**

This section argues that the content of a motivational state cannot be identical to the non-propositional content of a moral judgment on a noncognitivist view. The section proceeds by assuming noncognitivism and that when agents act, they do so on the basis of motivational states with noncognitive contents. The noncognitive contents of motivational states that operate when agents act are compared to the noncognitive contents of moral judgments according to noncognitivist accounts of the contents expressed by apparently propositional statements of moral judgments. The comparison reveals that most actual noncognitivist accounts of moral judgment contents in metaethics presuppose that the contents expressed when apparently propositional moral judgment statements are encountered and apprehended are not identical to noncognitivist motivational state contents as they are arrived at via practical reasoning on the reconstructed picture of these. The accounts of practical reasoning invoked that are consistent with noncognitivism about moral judgments suggest in their own right that it is the

representational content of motivational states, and not the non-propositional semantic content of the moral judgments these may be thought to include, that move agents to act in characteristic cases.

Noncognitivist views in metaethics hold that apparently propositional moral judgment statements express states that are non-cognitive. According to some forms of noncognitivism, the non-cognitive states that moral judgment statements express are emotional states. Since it is commonly thought that only desires can motivate, it is not challenging to show that on all noncognitivist views on which statements of moral judgments express something other than a desire, the non-propositional content of an apparently propositional judgment statement is not identical to the content of the kind of motivational state that would actually move an agent to action. Because desires have a different representational character than other noncognitive states, including emotions, the content of a desire state that plays a motivational role cannot, strictly speaking, be identical to the content of a non-cognitive state that is not a desire. In other words, if only desires can motivate and moral judgments express a non-cognitive attitude that is not a desire, then it is not possible for the affirmation of the content of a moral judgment statement alone to motivate an agent to act in accordance with the statement.

Expressivism is a specific noncognitivist view that does take apparently propositional moral judgment statements to express desire-like states with representational contents of the kind that could in principle be the contents of motivational states. That is to say that logically, nothing rules out this possibility. However, we have reasons to think that even if the content of a moral judgment statement on an expressivist view belongs to the object of a motivational state that moves some agent to act in accordance with the judgment, there must be more to the content of the motivational state than just the desire-like semantic content expressed by the apparently propositional statement of the moral judgment.

The argument for this proceeds by highlighting that some noncognitivist accounts of moral motivation claim that when agents act, they are motivated to do so in part by a *de re* desire that is not part of what is expressed by an apparently propositional statement of a moral judgment. Since this implies that motivational state contents on such views do not admit of propositional expression, these views present a challenge to the claim that the non-propositional content affirmed when one considers and endorses an apparently propositional moral judgment statement is identical to the content of the state that motivates an agent to act in accordance with the statement, even if we conceive of the moral judgment statement as having some desire-like content.

McDowell makes something like the point that the *de re* desires involved in acting rightly do not admit of expression by statements of apparently propositional moral judgments in the paper "Virtue and Reason." Because the inexpressibility of *de re* moral reasons and their incorporation into motivational state contents would imply that the semantic contents of moral judgments are not identical to the contents of motivational states on even an expressivist view, the truth of this point would support the thesis that it is not the case that the semantic contents of moral judgment statements are intrinsically motivating.



In "Virtue and Reason," McDowell explores the historical thesis, allegedly endorsed by Plato and Aristotle, that virtue is knowledge. He describes a virtue as a sensitivity that an agent has to features of her situation that impose constraints on her behavior. One reason to think that McDowell interprets the historical figures he examines as proponents of the view that *de re* desires involved in practical reasoning do not admit of propositional expression is his point that virtuous people on such views need not be able to apply virtue concepts to virtuous behavior themselves. If this view about what is involved in a virtuous person's practical reasoning is combined with expressivism, and if moral judgment statements involve the application of virtue concepts to virtuous behavior in such a way that those statements express noncognitive semantic contents, then the point that those who act virtuously need not be able to apply virtue concepts to behavior to have the sensitivities relevant to acting virtuously suggests that the content of a virtuous agent's motivational state in the process of acting is not identical to the expressivist content of an apparently propositional moral judgment statement.

The point that the contents of virtuous people's motivational states would not be identical to expressivist semantic contents of moral judgment statements on McDowell's picture is further supported by the statement that virtue concepts, on the historical views under discussion, need not enter into a virtuous person's reasons for the actions that manifest those concepts. On an expressivist view, this would amount to the claim that when a virtuous person acts, she does not do so merely by apprehending the desire-like contents that are expressed by apparently propositional moral judgment statements. Different contents than those are involved in exercising the sensitivity to features of situations that virtue is supposed to consist in.

McDowell's lengthy discussion of Wittgenstein's rule-following paradox is meant to establish that virtuous agents in action should not be thought of as acting on the basis of codifiable principles, even those of a particularist nature. He suggests that on the ancient picture he describes, the way virtuous agents engage in practical reasoning is closely analogous to the way Wittgenstein theorized competent speakers of a language apply concepts they have learned in contexts other than those in which they have learned them: via "shared forms of life" that encompass a "congruence of subjectivities" that do not admit of expression via any rule or formula.

The conclusion of "Virtue and Reason" seems to state that none of the desire-like states involved in formulating the major and minor premises of a practical syllogism on the views McDowell describes have contents that are expressed via the statements of moral judgments that are most commonly encountered and explained by mainstream metaethical theories. The major premise is supposed to specify as the object of the agent's desire an uncodifiable and complete conception of the sort of life a virtuous person should lead. The minor premise marks out an action as a means to achieving the object of the desire in question which is supposed to be contingent on the virtuous person's awareness of particular facts about a situation. That neither of the state contents involved in the virtuous person's practical syllogism corresponds to the

contents of expressivist moral judgments which are thought to be formulable indicates that there is more involved in the content of a motivational state than the content of an expressivist moral judgment on the account of practical reasoning McDowell examines.

## Section VI

In conclusion, the argument in this paper has sought to establish that, strictly speaking, it is not possible on any view for motivation to be “internal” to the semantic content of a moral judgment. In every case where action is produced, there are properties of a motivational state doing the heavy lifting which are not identical to properties of the semantic content of the moral judgment that belongs to the object of that state. This contravenes the assumption of standard motivational internalist views that there is something about the semantic content of a moral judgment itself that is intrinsically tied to moral motivation.

Indirectly, the argument of this paper also has implications for the kind of modality involved in the statement of the motivational internalism thesis. In its standard formulation, this thesis says that an agent who makes a moral judgment is necessarily motivated to act in accordance with that judgment. If it is not actually a property essential to the judgment content that makes the motivational internalism thesis true, then the sense of “necessarily” involved in stating it cannot be metaphysical. If the real origin of moral motivation lies in properties of mental state contents that are not also properties of the semantic contents of moral judgment statements, then there could be a possible world in which an agent judges some content whose judging, in the actual world, always coincides with the production of moral motivation, but whose affirmation in that world is not attended by the properties of the state which, in the actual world, would always move her to act on the basis of that judgment.

A natural, ultra-internalist response to the claim of this paper would be to assert that even if properties of motivational states that do not belong to the semantic contents of moral judgments themselves are ultimately responsible for supplying motive force to the states that motivate agents to act in accordance with those judgments, it could still be that such states are identical to those that are realized when certain moral judgment contents are affirmed. In other words, one could say that the argument of this paper does not rule out that motivation is “intrinsic” to the semantic contents of moral judgment statements in the sense that those statements may still essentially have the dispositional property of tending to produce motivation under the right circumstances.

I am willing to concede this, but mostly want to maintain that we should not understate the importance of the properties of motivational state contents that do not belong to the semantic contents of moral judgments in considering what makes moral motivation possible. There is also the question of whether “dispositional properties” are legitimate posits and whether and how it can be established that a judgment content has a response-dependent dispositional property essentially. If statements of moral judgments and their semantic contents are abstract entities and we suppose a possible world in which there are no agents susceptible of motivation by moral

judgments, it becomes less clear whether we really can or should be saying that it is an essential, dispositional property of moral judgment contents that they tend to produce motivation.

A final interesting feature of this paper is that it clarifies in a somewhat systematic way how the proponents of different metaethical positions are led to take different views on the motivational internalism debate. In particular, the analysis clarifies why proponents of expressivism are often assumed to be the only group of theorists who must be committed to motivational internalism: because views other than expressivism either don't allow that the noncognitivist state expressed by a moral judgment statement is of the right kind to serve as a motivational state content or make the moral judgment content's contribution to the object of a motivational state purely cognitive, which requires them to explain the state's noncognitive motive force in a way that does not appeal to the semantic judgment content that belongs to its object.

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