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Moral Judgment and Emotions

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Cognitivists about moral judgment face the problem of moral motivation. How could it be that by merely taking the world to be a certain way we are inclined to do something? According to the Humean view of human psychology, since an individual can conceive a representation of the world apart from a motivational state, cognitive and motivational states are distinct and independent states of mind. There is no necessary connection between them. Therefore, if moral judgments are to be intrinsically motivating, then it seems that they must be noncognitive. But moral noncognitivists face the problem of moral discourse. The structure of moral discourse suggests that moral judgments are genuine propositions that speakers assert. If moral judgments are genuine propositions, and are not just something else in disguise, then it seems that moral judgments must be cognitive.

Perhaps it is too much to ask of moral judgments that they be both intrinsically motivating and genuine propositions. However, a handful of recent accounts of what emotions are and how such accounts can be used to provide an account of moral judgment suggest a strategy for reconciling the chief noncognitive aspect of moral judgments with their chief cognitive aspect.[1] The best account of the emotions may lend itself to the idea that moral judgments are intrinsically motivating and genuine propositions with truth conditions that are sometimes met. The Humean test that separate conceivability implies independence may be irrelevant to at least some states of mind. They would be if emotions are states of mind that are both cognitive and affective, and there is a sense in which the cognitive aspect of emotions cannot exist independent of the affective aspect.

Such a strategy results in an implausible account of moral judgment. The account is implausible for two reasons. First, it is based on a problematic analysis of what it is to express a conative state of mind. Second, the account would make making a moral judgment unduly difficult. This second criticism highlights an interesting way in which empirical findings can affect the plausibility of a meta-ethical position. In the end, we should consider an alternative strategy for reconciling the motivational pull that moral judgments exert over us with moral cognitivism that does not encounter these two problems.

1. Emotions

The resources for an account of moral judgment that supports both of the intuitions about moral judgments that we have considered are thought to be found in an account of emotions, where emotions are intrinsically motivating cognitive states of mind and the cognitive and affective aspects of an emotion are necessarily commingled. The view of Robert Roberts is that emotions are concern-based construals, which has, for the construer, the appearance of truth: "As a concern-based construal the emotion makes two kinds of claims, first about what we might call the *structure* of the situation that the emotion is about, and second about its *importance* or *bearing*."[2] Roberts takes the claim about the structure of the situation and the claim about its importance to be "inextricable intertwined."[3] As he puts it: "Construals may seem to some to be cognitions. . . . But the construals that I take to be paradigm cases of emotions are concern-based. . . . So an emotion, in my view, is fully as 'conative' as it is 'cognitive', and these two aspects (if one wants to think of the matter this way) are fully synthesized in the emotion."[4]

In the view of Sabine Döring, "an emotion is an occurrent conscious state, with a certain affect, and with a certain kind of intentional content."[5] In what she calls "affective perception," the intentional content of an emotion is evaluative. However, Döring says, "the evaluation implied by an emotion is by no means arbitrary. In order for it to be a possible target of an emotion, the subject must see the object as having a certain property; otherwise the emotion would not be intelligible."[6]

According to Linda Zagzebski, an emotion is a psychic state in which the subject feels a characteristic way about the intentional object of the emotion perceived as falling under a characteristic thick affective concept. Such concepts have both cognitive and affective aspects. If someone sees some behavior as, say, contemptible, he does not merely see it as having certain descriptive features, and he does not merely see that it has caused him to feel the emotion contempt. Instead, he sees "it as the intentional object of the feeling."[7] He may express the emotion and thereby assert that the intentional object of the emotion falls under the thick affective concept. Zagzebski directly implements this account of the emotions into a developed account of moral judgment. It is part, or an implication, of each of these accounts of emotion that emotions are fully cognitive and intrinsically motivating.

2. The Structure of Moral Judgment

Zagzebski provides a set of claims that she calls ground level moral judgments. They are ground-level in the sense that they are made when someone is face to face with the object of the judgment. All such judgments

employ thick affective concepts. Let us consider again the judgment, "That is contemptible." A situation has the descriptive feature of someone acting with disregard for the well being of his or her child. Our becoming aware of this situation, plus the requisite dispositional state, brings about in us the characteristic conative state of feeling contempt for the person. We regard him or her as contemptible. According to Zagzebski, we cannot see the situation as contemptible without being in the conative state of mind, and cannot be in the relevant conative state without seeing the situation as contemptible. We may express this state of mind by issuing the judgment, "That is contemptible." Zagzebski argues that since the judgment expresses the conative state of mind, it is intrinsically motivating. Since we are asserting that the intentional object of the attitude falls under the thick affective concept, the judgment is propositional in form with truth conditions that may be met.

Zagzebski's account of moral judgment is internalist and cognitivist. It seems that people can make judgments affirming that some thick affective concept is instanced, yet not at all be motivated by the judgment. This seems to describe psychopaths. Motivational internalists typically claim that whatever psychopaths are doing when they make such claims, they are not making moral judgments. Michael Smith, for example, suggests that in such cases inverted commas be affixed to the moral term in order to relay the idea that psychopaths must mean something like "That is what people say" when they use the moral term.[8]

Zagzebski's strategy is similar, but she does not make use of inverted commas. When we say, "That is contemptible," and we do not feel contempt, Zagzebski refers to the judgment as a Level 2 judgment. It is a step removed from the ground-level judgment and that judgment has undergone a kind of thinning. As such, the judgment, "That is contemptible" is ambiguous between the ground-level judgment where the speaker sees the object of the judgment as contemptible and the Level 2 judgment where the speaker sees that it is contemptible. The difference, for Zagzebski, is that we cannot see something as contemptible without feeling contempt, but we can see that it is contemptible without feeling contempt.[9] Level 2 judgments use thick affective concepts, like being contemptible, but Zagzebski denies that the judgments express emotion. They merely express the proposition that the object of the judgment is contemptible. This distinction helps Zagzebski make sense of the many cases in which people make moral judgments but either struggle before acting on them, if indeed they do act on them, or fail to be at all motivated by them.

The same is true of what Zagzebski calls Level 3 judgments, an additional step removed from ground-level judgments. Thick affective concepts are no longer employed in Level 3 judgments. They are replaced with terms such as "right," "wrong," "should," and "ought." After being confronted with a

situation that someone sees as falling under a thick affective concept, the person makes the judgment, "This is wrong," "I ought to prevent this," or "It is right for me to prevent this." These are judgments about what to do in response to seeing the situation as falling under the thick affective concept. Like Level 2 judgments, they are not intrinsically motivating. Someone may judge that he ought to prevent something, but find himself struggling to act on that judgment or utterly without any motivation to do so. However, this should not be too much of a surprise if Zagzebski is correct and Level 3 judgments, like Level 2 judgments, are not expressions of emotion. According to Zagzebski, only ground-level judgments, judgments employing thick affective concepts in a certain way, are expressions of emotion and intrinsically motivating.

3. Expressing Conative States of Mind

Zagzebski's idea about what it is to express a mental state like a moral attitude or emotion is not correct. Her mistake affects the distinctions she wants to make among the three levels of moral judgment. The fact that "That is contemptible" can be used to express an attitude of contempt toward the intentional object of the judgment is a feature of the semantics of the sentence. But a person who says in a given context, "That is contemptible" has expressed the attitude. That this is the case is merely a feature of the pragmatics of the sentence. What this means is that "expressed" should be understood in such a way that people can express a mental state, an emotion, or a moral attitude that they do not possess. To express an emotion is simply a speech act in which there need not be reference to a relationship between the speaker and his state of mind. Instead, more typically there may be a reference to a relationship between the speaker and his audience within the context of established linguistic conventions governing the use of the relevant terms.[10] The speaker simply takes advantage of the rules of language in such a way that he engages in the speech act of representing himself as having that conative state of mind.

If this is the correct analysis of what it is to express a mental state, then Zagzebski is wrong to think that her Level 2 and Level 3 judgments do not express conative states of mind. Also, she would be wrong to think that her ground level moral judgments are intrinsically motivating because they do express such states of mind. First, if expressing a conative state of mind is simply a pragmatic feature of moral claims, and the ground-level judgment that, for example, "That is contemptible" expresses an affective attitude, then we should say the same thing about what Zagzebski calls Level 2 and Level 3 judgments. "It is wrong to act with disregard for the well being of one's children" does express a moral attitude. It does so given the conventions

governing the contexts in which a claim like this might be used. Perhaps, as would be the case on one theory, it expresses the appropriateness of feeling guilty for having acted with disregard for the well being of our children.[11] But second, if expressing an attitude is simply a pragmatic feature of moral claims, then someone might utter the ground level moral judgment, "That is contemptible" without feeling contempt toward the object of the judgment. The judgment does, nevertheless, express contempt toward its object. Again, given our linguistic conventions, it expresses that attitude. This does not mean that motivational judgment internalism is inadequate. But if it is adequate, then its adequacy does not depend on the fact that moral judgments express affective states of mind. The thesis that moral judgments are intrinsically motivating seems to have nothing to do with the fact that moral judgments express affective states of mind like attitudes or emotions.

4. What is Essential to Moral Judgment?

The second criticism of the account of moral judgment invokes some empirical data about the developmental moral psychology of young children. On the face of it, it seems odd to claim, as Zagzebski does, that judgments affirming that some thick affective concept is instanced, are more basic than judgments that some action or state of affairs is wrong. Research, which supports this intuition, has found that around their third birthdays children are fairly proficient at distinguishing between moral transgressions and conventional transgressions.[12] Young children generally regard moral transgressions as more serious than conventional transgressions and regard moral transgressions as more universally obligatory. For example, if they are told that some households have no rule against, say, running in the house or eating dessert before dinner, then even if their parents do have rules against these practices, most children will judge that it is not wrong for children who live in the households where the rules do not exist to do these things. However, children will judge that hurting another is wrong, even if they are told that some parents have no rule against hurting others. They make similar claims across different cultures.

Young children, then, seem to have the ability to make moral judgments. However, they do not seem to have the ability to make judgments about whether or not the intentional objects of their judgments fall under thick affective concepts like contempt, guilt, or shame.[13] It is doubtful that young children can even understand these concepts, let alone be able to make normative assessments about whether or not a given state of affairs calls for one of them. The concepts are too complex. However, Zagzebski claims that making a ground-level moral judgment requires this ability. Since young children have the ability to make moral judgments, she must be wrong about this. The ability

to understand and appropriately deploy thick affective concepts is not essential to making moral judgments.

5. An Alternative Account of Moral Judgment

The correct account of moral judgment should make room for human emotions and affective attitudes to play an essential role. However, allowing such a role for them need not motivate motivational judgment internalism. Moreover, the affective attitudes that are thought to play an essential role in moral judgments must not be too complex. Neither of these points rules out the idea that moral cognitivism is compatible with allowing an essential role for affective attitudes in moral judgment.

Moral judgments are assertions. But when people assert their moral beliefs, they thereby express certain moral attitudes. For example, when someone asserts the proposition "Harming another is wrong," he thereby expresses an attitude of endorsement towards a rule or moral standard that proscribes harming others. The person who makes the judgment is not merely reporting on some deliverance of the standard. He is, first, asserting a proposition to the effect that a moral standard that proscribes harming others is justified, and second, expressing his endorsement of it, suggesting that he has appropriated that moral standard for his own practical deliberations. He suggests this because "Harming another is wrong" expresses a con-attitude about harming others. That this is the case is merely a feature of the pragmatics of the sentence. According to established linguistic conventions governing the use of the relevant terms, the speaker represents himself as having the con-attitude, even if he fails to be motivated to act in accordance with his judgment.

This simple account has a number of advantages. It is a cognitivist theory that gives a plausible account of the motivational pull of moral judgments. Because it is a cognitivist theory, the account captures the intuition that when people make a moral judgment, they really mean to assert it. They take themselves with the judgment to be asserting a genuine proposition that possesses robust truth conditions. Harming others is wrong if harming others actually has the property of wrongness. It has this property if a justified moral standard proscribes harming others. The account also captures the intuition that to make the judgment that harming others is wrong expresses disapproval toward causing harm to others, or expresses an endorsement of, or subscription to, a rule or a moral standard that forbids it. People who make this judgment indicate that they are motivated to some degree to avoid harming others. This feature of moral discourse has been thought to be the best evidence in favor of various accounts of moral noncognitivism. However, moral discourse retains this intuitive feature in this cognitivist account.[14]

Notes

1. See Sabine Döring, "Explaining Action by Emotion," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (2003); Robert Roberts, *Emotions*: *An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Linda Zagzebski, "Emotion and Moral Judgment," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66 (2003).
2. Roberts, op. cit., p. 317.
3. Ibid., p. 111.
4. Ibid., p. 178.
5. Döring, op. cit., p. 220.
6. Ibid., pp. 221–222.
7. Zagzebski, op. cit., pp. 111–112.
8. Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 67. See also R.M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 145–146.
9. Zagzebski, op. cit., p. 119.
10. See William Alston, "Expressing" in Max Black, ed., *Philosophy in America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1965) and Richard Joyce, "Expressivism and Motivational Internalism," *Analysis* 62 (2002).
11. See Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).
12. See Shaun Nichols, "Norms with Feeling: Towards a Psychological Account of Moral Judgment," *Cognition* 84 (2002) and J.G. Smetana and J.L. Braeges, "The Development of Toddlers' Moral and Conventional Judgments," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 36 (1990).
13. See Gertrud Nunner-Winkler and Beate Sodian, "Children's Understanding of Moral Emotions," *Child Development* 59 (1988).
14. I want to thank David Copp, Shaun Nichols, Robert Roberts, and Thomas Magnell for very helpful comments.