Disagreement and normativity

Disagreement and normativity are two central themes in philosophy. In the contemporary debate, there are numerous accounts available purporting to explain disagreement. By contrast, there are relatively few explicit accounts purporting to explain normativity. The purpose of this paper is to advance an expressivist inspired way of thinking about normativity by drawing on the nature of moral disagreement.

The point of departure is that different kinds of disagreement intuitively have different features. Consider, for example, a disagreement about whether Stockholm is the capital of Sweden and a disagreement about whether stealing is wrong. On the one hand, it seems that either party of such a disagreement is at fault. On the other hand, it seems that the former is easily resolvable whereas the latter isn't. In fact, seems as if the latter disagreement can persist despite the disagreeing parties agreeing on all factual matters. One explanation of this is that moral disagreements are best thought of as disagreement in attitude rather than disagreement in belief (Stevenson 1944, 1963).

Of course, the connection to attitudes is the hallmark of expressivist approaches to normativity and part of what makes such views attractive. As Gibbard maintains, normative thought and talk "involves a kind of endorsement – an endorsement that any descriptivist analysis treats inadequately" (Gibbard 1990: 33). However, not just any attitudinal or nondescriptivist explanation of thought and talk adequacy explains normativity. For example, disagreements about taste (if such there be) don't seem to be factual, but if they are attitudinal, they seem to involve a quite different kind of endorsement not suitable to explain moral normativity. Consider, for example, Mackie's (1977), characterization of normativity as something that has (not)-to-be-doneness built into it or is categorically prescriptive. It is something along these lines that needs to be explained. This requires a more thorough investigation of the moral attitude.

Considering Stevenson's view about moral disagreement holds the key. Stevenson offered at least two different characterizations of disagreement. The standard view is that disagreement in attitude "involves an opposition between attitudes, both of which cannot be satisfied" (Stevenson 1963: 2). Even if this explains a modest kind of disagreement, it doesn't adequately explain either moral disagreement or moral normativity. The solution is to consider Stevenson's (less popular) characterization of disagreement: disagreement in attitude occurs when two parties have opposed attitudes, "and when neither is content to let the other's attitude remain unchanged" (Stevenson1963: 1; cf., 1944: 3) (the "do so as well" part from Stevenson's first pattern of analysis will also be important).

In the light of various problems, Stevenson's characterization of disagreement is refined. This takes us to the following rough analysis of the moral-wrongness attitude: To think that something S is wrong is to be disposed to shun S and to be disposed to call opposed attitudes into question. The disposition to call opposed attitudes into question is important, in part, to explain why moral disagreements are more robust than e.g., disagreements in other domains (e.g., taste). It also functions to explain why we are inclined to think that opposed attitudes are mistaken (Eriksson 2016).

A potential problem with expressivist analyses generally is that they risk giving an undifferentiated treatment of normativity. In this paper, focus is both on understanding normativity and on how

to explain the difference between denotic and evaluative judgments and concepts (see e.g., Tappolet 2014 for reasons to distinguish the deontic and the evaluative). Consider the following hypothesis: To think, e.g., that stealing is wrong is to be disposed to shun stealing and to be disposed to challenge opposed attitudes. It is, as Gibbard writes, "to be in some way against doing it" (Gibbard 2003: 4). To think that pain is bad, by contrast, is not to be against *doing* something. Rather, it is to be disposed to disapprove of pain and to be disposed to challenge opposed attitudes.

This promises to shed light on how to think of both normativity and the difference between the deontic and the evaluative. Here is the rough picture. To think that stealing is wrong or that pain is bad is for stealing and pain respectively to have acquired the function to regulate certain attitudes in our psyche. More generally, to think that something is wrong or bad will function as somatic markers (Damasio 1995). Certain objects and events will thus present themselves as significant for an agent. By virtue of classifying stealing as wrong, stealing will, by virtue of the attitudes it functions to regulate, be experienced as something that binds us in a particular way. By virtue of classifying pain as bad, pain will, by virtue of the attitudes it functions to regulate, be experienced as having negative value. By virtue of the disposition to challenge opposed attitudes, both the deontic and the evaluative will be experienced as categorically demanding reactions (action or attitudes). This explains why we tend to experience a world that binds us and is imbued with value.

Finally, this promises to shed light on how to think about normative concepts. "Right," "wrong," "good" and "bad" are concepts that function to regulate actions and attitudes. To understand "stealing is wrong" is to understand that "stealing" makes a particular demand on action, e.g., that certain actions are ruled out. Importantly, this is something one can understand without endorsing the classification. Similar considerations apply to evaluative terms.

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