The Frege-Geach Problem 60 Years Later:
A Tribute to an Enduring Semantic Puzzle

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In his 1965 article titled "Assertion", Peter Geach attributes to Frege the view that a proposition contains the same content, whether it is asserted or not. By proposition, Geach specifies that he is referring to the "form in which something is…put forward for consideration," wherein the content of that which is considered is not affected by the fact of its being asserted (449). For example, although the hypothetical nature of the proposition "if it looks red, then . . ." does not serve to assert that anything is actually red, it nevertheless puts forward for consideration the same content as the asserted proposition "it looks red." As such, the antecedent "if" clause of a conditional sentence contains the same content as that of the asserted form of the clause, even though it does not assert anything to be the case (451, 462).

Given Geach's proposal that propositions in asserted and unasserted contexts contain the same content, his analysis poses problems for emotivist non-cognitivist ethical theories. For A.J. Ayer's non-cognitivist emotivism, moral assertions have the exclamatory purpose of expressing one's own emotions in addition to extending commands or suggestions (Ayer 42–3; Cf. Shroeder 703–4). Notably, unlike beliefs which may be judged to be

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either true or false, Ayer holds that there is no fact of the matter of whether an emotion is true or false (Miller 24). Accordingly, ethical claims such as "lying is wrong" are used to express one's feeling of disapproval for lying, while not serving to assert anything factual. Instead, they express one's sentiments and aim to evoke a certain emotional response in those with whom one interacts (Ayer 42, 45). Ayer's emotivism provides a kind of template that exemplifies the specific challenge of embedded moral terms in conditional sentences for non-cognitivist moral theory. If emotivism holds that assertions such as "lying is wrong" really mean something to the effect of "Boo lying!", then how could it make sense of the same phrase within the conditional "If lying is wrong, then..." wherein lying is wrong is not being asserted? Beyond the obvious problem of how this interpretation coincides with the regular usage of moral assertions in quotidian contexts, this bifurcation of the meaning of the moral assertion "lying is wrong" has dire consequences for making sense of the validity of moral arguments in which moral assertions are embedded in conditional sentences.

Ayer's emotivism is a paragon of non-cognitivism because it gainsays the notion that moral assertions express beliefs, opting instead for a construal of moral assertion on an emotive model. In order to comprehend the sting of the Frege-Geach problem for Ayer's particular non-cognitivist stance, consider emotivism's alleged inability to make sense of the semantic function of propositions such as "lying is wrong", when "lying is wrong" is not being asserted as in the following modus ponens argument:

(1) Lying is wrong.
(2) If lying is wrong, then you ought not lie.
(3) You ought not lie.

If the moral assertion "lying is wrong" is not deemed either true or false in (1), but is rather only a projection of one's emotions, it will not have the same meaning when it goes unasserted in (2). Since the same logical proposition "lying is wrong" appears in both premises in an equivocal manner, Ayer's emotivism seems committed to the implication that valid forms of inference, such as modus ponens, do not hold for arguments which incorporate moral judgements (Miller 39). Similarly problematic for Ayer's theory, Frege's view about the identical content of propositions in asserted and unasserted contexts seems to imply that valid modus ponens arguments require a cognitivist interpretation. In order to avoid equivocation in such arguments, asserted contexts as well as unasserted contexts of "lying is wrong" have to contain the same meaning. Ultimately, Ayer's emotivist account of moral judgment is plagued by the

fact that it implies that the content of moral terms differs between asserted and unasserted contexts and therefore fails to account for the validity of inferences involving moral terms. By contrast, in the cognitivist model of the moral modus ponens argument, the moral term in both asserted and unasserted premises corresponds to the same truth-apt belief, which in turn makes sense of the validity of the inference. The fundamental difficulty of Ayer's emotivism to account for the meaning of moral terms in unasserted contexts thereby renders moral cognitivism a more plausible candidate for making sense of the validity of moral arguments (Miller 57).

I. Blackburn's Quasi-Realism and the Frege-Geach Problem

Simon Blackburn's expressivist account of moral language is meant to address the particular faults of emotivism as it pertains to the Frege-Geach problem. Like all non-cognitivists, Blackburn maintains that the evaluative properties that are employed in moral discourse are really projections of one's own sentiments. However, Blackburn's non-cognitivist account differs importantly from accounts such as Ayer's because it endorses quasi-realism which "seeks to explain, and justify, the realistic-seeming nature of our talk of evaluations" (Miller 48). Unlike emotivism, quasi-realism accommodates the thought that evaluative propositions express facts about the world without conceding that such usage denotes specifically moral belief.

Blackburn provides an account of the semantic function of moral judgements that are embedded in conditional sentences. Given the problems that are attached to these conditional contexts, he suggests looking at the "and" operator as another possible way of joining together different commitments (Blackburn 91–92). At first glance, the "and" operator seems to be a poor candidate for achieving the quasi-realist goal because it is frequently employed in its propositional form wherein the proposition is true just in case both conjuncts are true and false otherwise. This kind of truth-functional use of the "and" operator is clearly problematic for quasi-realism, given that the theory was initially posited to make sense of the commonsense notion of moral evaluation without making reference to the truth-conditions of moral predicates. Nevertheless, Blackburn attempts to show that provided that the way in which "and" is conceived is expanded to cover commands as well as beliefs, the apparent problem disappears. In this regard, imperative sentences such as "tidy up the kitchen and clean up your room" are examples in which the "and" operator is used to connect commands rather than beliefs. He notes that, unlike the hypothetical operator "if... then", the "and" operator can group

terms of commitment together to form an overall commitment which rests on the approval of each of the conjunct commitments. Consequently, when such commitments are placed in conditionals, the quasi-realist claims to be merely drawing out the implications of these sentences without making any reference to a moral belief of any kind.

Moral sensibilities play an important role in Blackburn's account of the implications of conjoined commitments. He defines a moral sensibility as a "function from input to output of attitude" (Blackburn 92). As it pertains to one's sensibilities, what is important in ascertaining their desirability is not merely the attitudes which they contain, but additionally, the interaction of consistency that obtains between such attitudes. Correspondingly, a moral sensibility is deemed defective when the interaction between the set of attitudes of which it is comprised is inconsistent. Blackburn employs the example of a defective sensibility that couples an attitude of disapproval towards telling lies and an attitude of approval towards getting one's younger brother to tell lies. In this scenario, one would not endorse this sensibility because the person would be demonstrating a fundamental inconsistency in rejecting the first anti-lying attitude and in approving the second pro-lying attitude. In that case, the interactions between the owner's attitudes would exemplify inconsistency and therefore be undesirable from the standpoint of the kind of society in which people would want to live (Blackburn 92).

Furthermore, Blackburn supplements the use of the conditional form of propositions with a semantic theory that draws a contrast between a surface form of language and deep form of language (Miller 55). He proposes that one imagine a language dissimilar from English in the fact that it contains no evaluative predicates such as "right", "wrong", "good", or "bad". This language which he calls "E_{ex}"contains "hooray" (H!) and "boo" (B!) operators that attach to descriptions which form expressive attitudes. In this notation, lH! (x)l refers to the approval of (x) and its joining by a semi-colon refers to the coupling of this attitude with another attitude. Thus, the previous example of lying can then be modelled in the following way (Blackburn 94):

H! (lB! (lying)l: lB! (getting little brother to lie)l)

According to Blackburn, this expression holds that one only endorses sensibilities which, provided that they also reject lying, are also committed to the rejection of getting one's little brother to lie. This is what is exclaimed in the surface form of language when it is asserted that "if lying is wrong, then getting your little brother to lie is wrong." In so far as one is vulnerable to the charge that they hold inconsistent pairs of attitudes,

one opens oneself up to criticism. The reason for this inconsistency is that in expressing the pair of attitudes of disapproval of getting one's little brother to lie which follows from one's general disapproval of lying, then one is committed to the disapproval of getting one's little brother to lie. Consequently, the failure to disapprove of getting one's little brother to lie is a result of an unacceptable clash in one's attitudes (Blackburn 94–95). Blackburn argues that the fractured sensibility that results from a clash in attitudes cannot be an object of approval, not because it fails to accurately describe the moral facts of the situation; but instead, because it marks a failure to maintain a consistent set of attitudes that are consonant with the purposes for which they were initially proposed.

One objection to Blackburn's quasi-realist solution to the Frege-Geach problem hinges on its explanatory superfluousness. For instance, the quasi-realist solution gives the appearance of providing an objectionably ad hoc explanation of the meaning of moral propositions due to the fact that people who reason morally do not take themselves at bottom to be measuring the consistency among their respective attitudes, but rather to have provided valid arguments for their respective positions which track the moral truth. Blackburn himself implicitly engages with this objection when he concedes that the commonsense view appears to be that moral predicates are not different from non-moral ones, so when we use moral language, we really believe that we are talking about beliefs (Blackburn 95). As such, it appears that Blackburn's theory posits more contentious assumptions than are required to account for the use of moral language, casting doubt on the plausibility of such an account's veracity. However, Blackburn notes that a view like his own should only be discarded if there is a better way of explaining moral evaluation. This in turn places a demand on the moral cognitivist to assume the burden of proof in demonstrating that moral evaluations correspond to actual beliefs about the world. In the absence of a cogent defense of moral cognitivism, Blackburn sees no reason to abandon his quasi-realist non-cognitivism which he asserts to be a "plausible moral philosophy" (Blackburn 95–96).

On the face of it, Blackburn's response to the charge of explanatory superfluousness seems to be compelling in as much as our common intuitions about the meaning of our own moral utterances are not decisive indicators of whether or not such utterances actually correspond to truth-functional beliefs. For it is precisely the commonsense intuition about the nature of the meaning of moral propositions that the quasi-realist claims is false. Therefore, any appeal to these common sense notions of moral language against quasi-realism may give the appearance of begging the question. However, the cognitivist objection to the superfluousness of the quasi-realist proposal does not circularly assume that quasi-realism is false,

but instead challenges how such a view could be coherently advanced at all.

To see why this is the case, remember that Blackburn attempts to defend quasi-realism from the charge of being explanatorily superfluous by insisting that cognitivism and noncognitivism are at a stalemate, all things considered. Without a better cognitivist theory, he believes that we are justified in accepting the quasi-realist account of moral judgments for the reasons which he provides in his arguments on the topic. However, this assertion by Blackburn is false due to the fact that it misallocates the burden of proof when it comes to the veracity of moral judgements. Blackburn concedes that our moral assertions conform to our surface-form common sense notions about beliefs, but does so only by maintaining that a deeper form of language fundamentally operates in terms of a logic of attitudes. Since quasi-realism denies the possibility of forming moral beliefs and reasoning on the basis of those beliefs, despite the fact that common sense dictates otherwise, it is the quasi-realist who owes an account that can defeat the commonsense cognitivist stance that moral language expresses beliefs and not the other way around. To this point, Alexander Miller notes of one of Crispin Wright's arguments that the quasi-realist who endorses the premises and does not accept the conclusion of a valid moral argument form is guilty of a moral failing, and not a logical one (Miller 57–8). According to Wright, this is only an evasion of the Frege-Geach problem. Indeed, the whole purpose of devising a logic of attitudes was to show why a person is positively *irrational* in that scenario and not merely to show that one endorses an inconsistent set of attitudes. Quasi-realism was supposed to provide an advantage over emotivism by leaving the surface form of moral reasoning intact whilst still holding that the perceived validity of such reasoning is actually a function of consistency obtaining among one's various attitudes. The cognitivist objection shows that quasi-realism merely pushes the problem of the rational use of moral language to another level (measuring the logical consistency of moral attitudes) without actually settling the dispute of the irrationality of one who fails to affirm the conclusion of a valid moral argument. Without showing how to make sense of the validity of a moral argument that does not invoke the notion that moral propositions have truth-values, the supposed quasi-realist solution appears to be a merely ad hoc way of avoiding cognitivism. Far from begging the question against quasi-realism then, the cognitivist objection from explanatory superfluousness merely teases out out the fact that quasi-realism cannot purport to have advanced a way to countenance the validity of arguments with moral terms embedded in conditional sentences without also offering some coherent alternative that does not merely change the topic.

The other point worth noting is that quasi-realism is self-defeating in so far as to coherently reject that anyone ever really forms specifically moral beliefs and then to proceed to make moral judgments on account of such beliefs presupposes that one has a clear understanding of what it would be to do such a thing (Feser 2013, 18). Thus, to deny that one does in fact reason about morality on the basis of moral beliefs, but that one only acts and thinks in such a way, requires that one have a clear and unambiguous understanding of what it would be to form such beliefs and then to proceed to deny that one ever really does grasp such things, which is absurd. Notice that it will not suffice in this case for Blackburn to refute this charge of incoherence by issuing a promissory note to the effect that some future account of a logic of attitudes will be capable of sustaining quasi-realism by reducing truth-functional moral judgments into assertions of feeling or attitudes (Miller 57–58). Such a response would only beg the question against the view of Frege and others, who hold that the meaning of an expression is determinate and precise, as opposed to the indeterminate physical processes of sensation, attitudes, or other physical states to which Blackburn would reduce specifically moral beliefs. For Frege, even the formation of perceptual belief requires the grasp of concepts, that are themselves, universal and fixed in their content (Burge 636).[1] Moreover, on the Aristelico-Thomistic view, meaning is grasped at the intellectual level of abstracting a thing's essence—which is itself universal and determinate—in order to form a concept. Rational thought further involves joining these concepts together to form propositions—which feature as premises in arguments—and reasoning from one to another in conformity with the laws of logic (rational thought processes themselves being immaterial operations of an immaterial intellect) (Feser 2006, 144; Cf. Oderberg 213). What these non-reductionist accounts of meaning demonstrate is that the quasi-realist cannot merely assume that an intellectual grasp of the concepts of "wrongness" or "rightness" is detachable from the meaning of these terms as they are commonly understood by cognitivism. Getting quasi-realism off the ground required that Blackburn insist upon a dichotomy between the commonsense surface form of our language as corresponding to beliefs and a deeper form of moral language that is reducible to our possessing certain mental attitudinal states, sentiments and the like. Faced with the objection that quasi-realism is internally self-undermining, it will not suffice for Blackburn to appeal to some future account of a logic of

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[1] Keep in mind that rejecting reductionism about conceptual truths does not commit one to accepting Frege's version of Platonism about concepts.

attitudes that will render the respective surface and deep forms of moral language intelligible without also begging the question against alternative non-reductionist accounts of the nature of meaning. For such non reductionist accounts deny in principle that the meaning of a proposition could be coherently reduced into physical or attitudinal states of any kind, given these entities' inherent semantic indeterminacy; Rather, for the Aristelico-Thomist, essences—which just are their meanings—have a universal and determinate character and exist as instantiated in the concrete members of a species, or else, as abstracted in the form of concepts by an immaterial intellect (Feser 2013, 16). Somewhat differently, though germane to the present point, according to Frege, essences also have a determinate, immaterial and universal status in a Platonic third realm (Burge 635–636; Nagel 42; Ricketts 131–132; Feser 2006, 80). Whatever else one has to say about either of these essentialist views about the nature of meaning, there is nothing inherently incoherent about them. This, of course, creates a problem for Blackburn's claim to have produced a stalemate with cognitivism. For, either of the aforementioned essentialist theories would automatically constitute superior explanations of the validity of moral argument forms than quasi-realism, since the latter theory's view of the nature of meaning is self-defeating. Barring further argument by Blackburn that quasi-realism is not itself self-defeating, these considerations only cast further doubt on the quasi-realist account of moral judgment, which implicitly requires that one accept a tenuous physical reductionist view of meaning that reduces moral beliefs to attitudinal states (Goldfarb 95). The lack of explanatory need on the one hand and the self-defeating nature of quasi-realism on the other, places the cognitivist within their right to claim that quasi-realism fails to produce the stalemate that it requires to safeguard its claim to have provided a plausible explanation of the validity of moral arguments.

II. The Enduring Importance of the Frege-Geach Problem for Contemporary Ethical Theory

Sixty years later, the Frege-Geach problem remains pertinent to meta-ethical discussions on the meaning of moral assertions.[2] "What

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[2] For a useful treatment of the status of the Frege-Geach Problem in Contemporary Metaethical theory, see Russ Shafer-Landau and Terrence Cuneo. "Semantic Puzzles: Introduction". In *Foundations of Ethics* by Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo, 457–460. Hong Kong: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

can be gleaned from an assessment and comparison of both Ayer's and Blackburn's respective non-cognitivist views is the inherent problem of incoherence facing semantic accounts of moral argumentation which do not posit the reality of moral beliefs (Zangwill 178, 183). In this regard, Ayer's emotivism provides a template of the inherent problems facing non-cognitivist accounts of moral judgement that reduce the content of moral assertions to emotive states. Moreover, Blackburn's attempt to elucidate a logic of attitudes in place of a truth functional logic as it pertains to our moral beliefs fails to reach a stalemate with the cognitivist position, due to its explanatorily tenuous and self-defeating character. As such, one would be justified in rejecting Blackburn's quasi-realist theory of the validity of moral argumentation as corresponding to internally consistent sets of attitudes. In order to attempt a coherent response to the commonsense cognitivist view about the validity of moral argumentation, quasi-realism implicitly presupposes the determinacy of the very moral beliefs whose character it was designed to expose as illusory.[3]

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