Reid on Moral Sentimentalism

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Abstract: In the *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* V. 7, Thomas Reid seeks to show "[t]hat moral approbation implies a real judgment," contrasting this thesis with the view that moral approbation is no more than a feeling. Unfortunately, his criticism of moral sentimentalism systematically conflates two different metaethical views: non-cognitivism about moral thought and subjectivism about moral properties. However, if we properly disentangle the various parts of Reid's discussion, we can isolate pertinent arguments against each of these views. Some of these arguments, such as the argument from disagreement and the argument from implausible counterfactuals against subjectivism, or the transparency argument against non-cognitivism, still have important roles to play in contemporary metaethics.

1. Introduction

In the *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, Thomas Reid seeks to show "[t]hat moral Approbation implies a real Judgment" (*EAP* V. 7, 344),[1] contrasting this thesis with the view that "moral approbation and disapprobation are not judgments, which must be true or false, but (...) agreeable and uneasy feelings or sensations" (*EAP* V. 7, 345). Given this statement of intentions, we might expect Reid to make a case for what we would now call *moral cognitivism*—the view that moral judgments are truth-apt, representational mental states—and argue against something

[1] Citations to the *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Reid 1787 [2010]) are to "EAP," followed by Essay, Section, and page number in the Edinburgh University Press edition.

resembling *moral non-cognitivism*, i.e., the view that the mental states expressed by moral claims are non-cognitive attitudes, which cannot be true or false.[2]

However, Reid begins his discussion by suggesting that the question whether moral approbation involves a real judgment only arose because of the ascent of the theory of ideas: the view that in the moral domain we are dealing with real, truth-apt judgments was the default one, he says, before Locke and others introduced the theory of secondary qualities with respect to properties such as color, sound and heat. As Reid tells the story, once it became accepted that such properties are mere feelings or sensations in our minds, the theory of secondary qualities was naturally extended to matters of taste and then to morality, as the view that moral approbation and disapprobation are mere feelings.

This association of moral non-cognitivism with the idea of secondary qualities is puzzling. If by *moral approbation/disapprobation* we understand the mental state expressed by a sincere utterance of a moral claim such as "Genocide is wrong," then it does not follow from a secondary quality theory of morality that moral approbation and disapprobation are mere feelings or non-cognitive in nature.[3] Indeed, *cognitivism* is a natural fit for a secondary quality theory about any domain of discourse. For instance, if someone claims that colors are mere sensations in the mind, or capacities in external objects to produce certain sensations in our minds, then she will naturally embrace the view that color judgments are truth-apt beliefs *about* such subjective

[2] To be sure, Reid never uses the terms *cognitivism* and *non-cognitivism*, which were introduced into philosophical usage in the 20th century, but he seems to have in mind the views denoted by these terms. I should also note that many contemporary non-cognitivists will appeal to a minimalist account of truth in order to say that, even though moral claims express non-cognitive mental states, they *can* be true or false. See, e.g., Blackburn (1984, 1993) and Gibbard (2003). More on the version of non-cognitivism targeted by Reid and its relevance for contemporary metaethics, in section 3.

[3] Stecker (1987) proposes a different understanding of *moral approbation*, on which it refers to the mental state expressed by an utterance of "I approve of *x*," which is related to moral thinking but is not the mental state expressed by moral claims. I will examine his argument for this reading in section 2.

or sensation-dependent properties. Similarly, someone who accepts a secondary quality theory of morality will normally hold that moral claims express real, truth-apt judgments about moral properties understood as subjective properties—i.e., as properties dependent on our feelings or attitudes. (Let us call such a view *moral subjectivism*, following contemporary usage.) Conversely, those who hold that moral claims do not express truth-apt judgments, but feelings or some other kind of non-cognitive attitudes, will typically deny that there are such things as moral properties, no matter how such properties are to be understood.

In other words, Reid seems to be conflating two different questions about moral claims: whether they express truth-apt judgments or mere feelings; and whether they concern objective, mind-independent moral properties or subjective properties, dependent on our affective responses to non-moral features of the world.[4] And as a result of this conflation, he seems to treat as one view—labeled as the thesis that moral approbation includes no more than a feeling—what should be seen as two distinct sentimentalist conceptions of moral discourse: non-cognitivism and subjectivism. Or, at least, he seems to assume that non-cognitivism entails subjectivism or viceversa, a claim that would nowadays be rejected by many metaethicists, and in any case would need substantial argument.[5]

This conflation of non-cognitivism and subjectivism is perhaps understandable in Reid's historical context, and especially given that his explicit target in *EAP* V. 7 is David Hume, whose

[4] Reid does take morality to be *mind-dependent* in a certain sense: the primary bearers of moral properties are mental features of the relevant agents, such as intentions or characters. But he denies that moral properties depend on any observer's feelings or attitudes toward those mental qualities. This is what I mean by *mind-independent* here, following standard usage in metaethics.

An anonymous reviewer suggests that Reid might have a different complaint against secondary quality views of morality: we cannot reduce moral judgments to judgments about our feelings, because moral judgments have normative content, while judgments about feelings do not. However, the question of how we can account for the normative content of moral judgments is independent of whether moral claims express truth-apt or "real" judgments, and Reid is only concerned with the latter question in *EAP* V. 7.

[5] Again, Reid never uses the terms *non-cognitivism* and *subjectivism*. But he does talk about the *ideas* to which these contemporary terms refer, and this is enough to allow us to critically examine his treatment of these views.

sentimentalist conception of morality notoriously includes both non-cognitivist and subjectivist elements. Indeed, earlier in the *EAP* we find textual evidence that Reid did take Hume to endorse both subjectivism and non-cognitivism. Here is how he reconstructs Hume's view on moral approbation:

> Moral approbation or disapprobation is not an act of the judgment, which, like all acts of judgment, must be true or false, it is only a certain feeling, which, from the constitution of human nature, arises upon contemplating certain characters or qualities of mind coolly or impartially. This feeling, when agreeable, is moral approbation; when disagreeable, disapprobation. The qualities of mind which produce this agreeable feeling are the moral virtues, and those that produce the disagreeable, the vices. (*EAP* V. 5, 301-302)

Note the seamless transition from non-cognitivism to subjectivism in this passage: Reid seems to treat the non-cognitivist idea that moral approbation and disapprobation consist in certain agreeable or disagreeable feelings as equivalent, or at least intimately tied, to the subjectivist thought that moral properties consist in those qualities of mind which produce such feelings. And this conflation permeates the entire discussion of sentimentalism in *EAP* V. 7. Again, Hume may well have accepted both of these ideas, or close versions thereof. But even this is true, Reid's critical discussion of sentimentalism will still confuse present-day readers, because it treats non-cognitivism and subjectivism as two sides of the same sentimentalist thesis, rather than distinguishing these elements of Hume's thought as independent targets for criticism.

I suspect that Reid's failure to distinguish between non-cognitivism and subjectivism explains, at least in part, why *EAP* V. 7 has received little attention from Reid scholars. While there has been much discussion of Reid's positive view on the role of feelings and affections in

moral thought in recent decades,[6] his criticism of moral sentimentalism has been largely ignored so far.[7] This might seem wholly appropriate: it is easy to read this section of the *EAP* and dismiss Reid's arguments as a case against non-cognitivism that is largely misguided, because based on a confusion about the relation between non-cognitivism and subjectivism.

However, I believe a more fertile approach to this section of the *EAP* is to set aside Reid's conflation of the two forms of sentimentalism and disentangle the arguments that might work against non-cognitivism from those that apply to subjectivism. Once we do this, we can appreciate the strength and in some cases the originality of his arguments against each of these sentimentalist views. Some of these arguments, such as the argument from disagreement and the argument from counter-intuitive counterfactuals against subjectivism, or the transparency argument against non-cognitivism, still have important roles to play in contemporary metaethics. Thus, my aim in this paper is to identify and articulate these arguments in terms allowed by the progress made in metaethics since Reid's time.

In section 2, I will discuss those of Reid's arguments that apply to subjectivism, but would be misguided if directed at non-cognitivism. This will also be a good place to argue against Stecker's (1987) reading of what goes on in Reid's critique of sentimentalism.

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[6] See Cuneo (2006, 2008), Roeser (2009), Broadie (2010), Lehrer (2010), Kroeker (2011, 2018), Folescu (2018). Commentators agree that, for Reid, moral judgment is not sentimental in nature, but is nevertheless accompanied by feelings or affections as a matter of natural necessity: we are constituted in such a way that, whenever we form moral judgments, we also form appropriate affective states in an immediate and unreflective manner. In other words, for Reid, moral evaluation as a complex mental state is constituted *in part* by an affective state. (What he rejects is a *pure* sentimentalist view on which moral approbation amounts to no more than a feeling.) Broadie argues that, on Reid's view, the function of feelings is to motivate us to act in accordance with moral judgments, while Kroeker argues that affections are part of moral *evaluations* but need not be involved in moral *motives*. Roeser suggests that affective states also play a role in the acquisition of moral knowledge on Reid's view, and Folescu further explores this epistemological idea.

[7] Only Stecker (1987) and Cuneo (2004) have discussed in detail Reid's arguments in *EAP* V. 7, which they see as targeting only non-cognitivism. Cuneo (2011) also suggests that Reid's arguments in this section of the *EAP* are directed at Hume's sentimentalism understood as a version of non-cognitivism.

In section 3, I will discuss those arguments given by Reid that apply to non-cognitivism, but not to subjectivism. I will argue that Reid works with an overly narrow notion of feeling, thus targeting a particularly implausible version of non-cognitivism, but one of his arguments can be extended to the more interesting non-cognitivist views that are prominent today.

2. Arguments against Subjectivism

We find in Reid arguments that are standardly offered against subjectivism in contemporary metaethics: the argument from implausible counterfactuals, the *same meaning* argument, and the argument from disagreement. But it would be easy to dismiss these as failed arguments against non-cognitivism, given that Reid's formulation of sentimentalism has a distinct non-cognitivist flavor and that he does not seem to distinguish between this view and subjectivism. Again, I believe a more fruitful approach is to focus on what Reid's text might have to tell us about subjectivism and its problems.

The Argument from Implausible Counterfactuals

Let us start with the argument from implausible counterfactuals, found in the following passage:

> If what we call *moral judgment* be no real judgment, but merely a feeling, it follows that the principles of morals (…) have no other foundation than an arbitrary structure and fabric in the constitution of the human mind: so that, by a change in our structure, what is immoral might become moral, virtue might be turned into vice, and vice into virtue. (*EAP* V. 7, 361-362)

As Stecker (1987, 461) notes, this argument seems to be explicitly directed against what we would now call emotivism, or non-cognitivism more generally, and thus read it is a bad

argument.[8] The idea that moral claims express non-cognitive attitudes does *not* entail that moral facts or properties are contingent on our attitudes, so non-cognitivists need not claim that, if our subjective makeup were substantially different, what is morally right or wrong would be different. Emotivists in A.J. Ayer's tradition will typically refuse to engage in any talk of moral truths, facts or properties, while more refined non-cognitivists will treat questions about what the moral facts would be in counterfactual circumstances as normative issues, internal to moral discourse, and will reject the contingency of moral truths on our feelings or attitudes as morally abhorrent—taking this verdict to express one of their actual feelings or attitudes.[9]

In this passage, we find then a clear instance of Reid's failure to distinguish between non-cognitivism and subjectivism about morality: Reid mistakenly thought he was targeting one sentimentalist position, according to which moral claims express mere feelings and moral facts depend on those feelings. But these are independent theses, and problems that arise for one of them, such as the problem of implausible counterfactuals, need not apply to the other.

However, let us set aside this conflation of the two sentimentalist views and point out that Reid anticipates here one of the most important arguments against moral subjectivism, which is still routinely invoked in contemporary metaethical debates. On most subjectivist views, moral truths are contingent on subjective psychological facts, and would be different if the subjective facts were substantially different. If we cannot accept such counterfactual consequences, then we should reject the subjectivist views that lead to them.

Now, this need not be the end of the debate. Subjectivists might respond by denying that their view has these implausible consequences, or they might bite the bullet and try to explain

[8] Cuneo (2004) offers a reading similar to Stecker's.
[9] See, e.g., Blackburn (1993), Essay 8, or Gibbard (2003), Ch. 9.

away our intuitions about the relevant counterfactuals.[10] But whether or not Reid's objection to subjectivism is decisive, it deserves to be acknowledged as such, rather than simply being dismissed as a confused argument against non-cognitivism.

The Same Meaning *Argument*

Following Cuneo (2004), I will call the second argument that I want to discuss the *same meaning* argument: if moral approbation were nothing more than a feeling, Reid argues, then a claim such as "*x* is good" would either have the same meaning as "*x* gives me an agreeable feeling," or it would mean nothing at all. But "*x* is good" does mean something, and it means something different from "*x* gives me an agreeable feeling": "The first [statement] expresses plainly an opinion or judgment of the conduct of the man, but says nothing of the speaker. The second only testifies a fact concerning the speaker, to wit, that he had such a feeling." (*EAP* V. 7, 350) Therefore, Reid concludes, it is not the case that moral approbation is a mere feeling.

First, let us try to reconstruct this as an argument against non-cognitivism: if non-cognitivism is true, then "*x* is good" either has the same meaning as "*x* gives me an agreeable feeling" or it means nothing, but none of these options is true.

Thus stated, this argument *could* be given a reading on which it would be valid, but quite odd. If by *meaning nothing* Reid understood having no propositional or representational content, then it would indeed follow from the truth of non-cognitivism that "*x* is good" means nothing *or*

[10] Some subjectivists (e.g., Wiggins 1998) try to accommodate these worries about the counterfactual variation of moral facts by *rigidifying* moral terms, i.e., by tying their extension in every possible world to our *actual* feelings or attitudes. This allows them to say, e.g., that murder would be wrong in any possible world, given that "wrong" as used by them refers to a property involving their actual attitudes, which do not condone murder. But even such subjectivists will have to accept that someone with substantially different feelings or attitudes could speak truthfully in uttering "Murder is not wrong".

it has the same meaning as "*x* gives me an agreeable feeling," but the second disjunct would be completely idle in the argument. I find this reading implausible.

A more plausible interpretation, offered by Cuneo, is that Reid claims that, if it were true that moral approbation was nothing more than an agreeable feeling, then "*x* is good" would have the same meaning as "*x* gives me an agreeable feeling," and he uses the *other* disjunct (that "*x* is good" has no meaning) rhetorically rather than as a live possibility.

However, on this more plausible reading, we are dealing with a bad argument: non-cognitivism does not entail that moral claims are synonymous with reports of subjective facts. Indeed, a standard way of introducing non-cognitivism as a distinct metaethical view is to distinguish between *expressing* an attitude and *describing* that attitude or attributing it to oneself. Once again, Reid seems to be conflating non-cognitivism and subjectivism.

Let us put aside, though, this new instance of Reid's failure to separate the two sentimentalist views, and focus on the fact that Reid provides here a potentially powerful argument against subjectivism: if subjectivism were true, then "*x* is good" would mean the same as "*x* gives me an agreeable feeling"; but this does not cohere with our semantic intuitions and our use of these expressions; therefore, subjectivism is false.

To be sure, this is not a knock-out argument either: subjectivists who do accept the equivalence in meaning between moral claims and reports of subjective attitudes might respond to this objection by ascribing semantic blindness to ordinary speakers, or by presenting their proposal as a *revisionary* semantics for moral discourse. Other subjectivists will claim that subjectivism is only a thesis about the *truth conditions* of moral claims, not about their semantic

content.[11] But we are dealing here with a respectable argument that people still use against subjectivism to this day.

Stecker (1987) has a different take on this argument, and more generally on what goes on in Reid's rejection of sentimentalism. When Reid is considering the hypothesis that moral approbation is a mere feeling, he is not examining a metaethical view about the content of moral claims, says Stecker, but the independent thesis that "an approval of an object is an introspectively discernible feeling or sensation" (457). From this supposition, however, it does not follow that a moral claim such as "*x* is good" means nothing, nor that it means the same as "*x* gives me an agreeable feeling."

On this reading, therefore, the argument is blatantly invalid, illegitimately deriving conclusions about the content of moral claims from an irrelevant supposition about what it is to approve of something. Despite these costs, Stecker takes this to be the only plausible reading of Reid's argument. He acknowledges that an alternative reading could be given, on which Reid uses *moral approbation* to refer to the mental state of judging someone's conduct to be good—that is, the mental state expressed by a sincere utterance of "*x* is good." Furthermore, Stecker concedes that, on this reading, the argument would make more sense, given that the antecedent and the consequent of the conditional premise would concern the same thing: what is expressed by moral claims such as "*x* is good." But he dismisses this alternative reading with the following argument: in offering a *reductio* of moral sentimentalism, Reid cannot ascribe to the sentimentalist the thesis that moral approbation, understood as *judging* someone's conduct to be good, is a mere feeling, given that Reid takes sentimentalism to be precisely the view that moral approbation is not a judgment.

[11] See, for instance, the relativist theories defended by Kölbel (2007) or MacFarlane (2014).

I find Stecker's argument unconvincing. First of all, we need not even use the term *judge* in offering the alternative reading rejected by Stecker. As I have already suggested, we can formulate the antecedent of the *same meaning* argument as follows: "if the mental state expressed by a sincere utterance of '*x* is good' is a mere feeling…". The sentimentalist can say these words without contradicting his claim that moral approbation does not include a real judgment. Indeed, these ideas are two sides of the same coin: the non-cognitivist view that moral approbation—the mental state expressed by a sincere utterance of "*x* is good"—is a mere feeling and does not include a real judgment.

Secondly, even if we employed Stecker's terms, it is true that, if Reid understood by *moral approbation* the mental state of judging someone's conduct to be good, then he would be ascribing to the sentimentalist the position that judging someone's conduct to be good is not a judgment. But this claim is not a contradiction if *judge/judgment* is used here in two different senses: first, in the weak sense of whatever mental state is expressed by a sincere utterance of "*x* is good," and then in the strong sense of *real* judgment—that is, a belief-like mental state with representational content. Or, we could attribute to the sentimentalist a *vicarious* use of the term *judge* in its first occurrence, so that what he is claiming is: *what people usually call judging someone's conduct to be good* is not a (real) judgment. This is not an incoherent claim, so Reid could legitimately use it as a statement of sentimentalism in the *same meaning* argument.[12]

The Argument from Disagreement

Closely related to the *same meaning* argument is Reid's argument from disagreement: if "*x* is good" and "*x* gives me an agreeable feeling" had the same meaning, then in disagreeing with

[12] Indeed, Reid explicitly renders the sentimentalist position in these terms in the argument from implausible counterfactuals, quoted above: "If what we call moral judgment be no real judgment, but merely a feeling...".

someone uttering "*x* is good" we would be *offending* them, by accusing them of insincerity with respect to their own feelings: "[A]s every man must know his own feelings, to deny that a man had a feeling which he affirms he had, is to charge him with falsehood." (*EAP* V. 7, 350) But we do not offend anyone in this manner when we reject moral claims, given that in that case we are dealing with "a difference of opinion, which, to a reasonable man, gives no offence" (350). Therefore, Reid concludes, "*x* is good" means something else than "*x* gives me an agreeable feeling."

This is not quite the same argument from disagreement against subjectivism that would later be offered by Moore (1912) and Ayer (1936), and which one often hears presented as the most important reason not to be a subjectivist: if subjectivism were true, then utterances of "*x* is good" and "*x* is not good" made by different speakers could not be in disagreement, given that they would report independent subjective facts about the two speakers. But the core idea is the same, and Reid puts his finger here on one of the most important vulnerabilities of subjectivism, long before debate about these issues took off in the 20th century.

This argument from disagreement, like the other arguments discussed above, applies to subjectivism, but would be misguided if directed at non-cognitivism: if moral claims have no cognitive content and no truth value, then we would not be offending anyone in rejecting such claims, at least not by questioning the sincerity of the speaker or her epistemic authority with regard to her own feelings.[13] So, given that the argument comes as a further *reductio* of the supposition that moral approbation is a mere feeling, it would be easy to see Reid as trying and failing to argue here against non-cognitivism. However, I believe we should once again set aside

[13] Stecker (1987) claims that the argument from disagreement applies to both subjectivism and emotivism, but it is hard to see how the argument as stated by Reid could apply to emotivism, for the reason I give here.

Reid's failure to distinguish the different forms of sentimentalism, and give him credit for having identified a major weakness of subjectivism.

3. Arguments against Non-cognitivism

Let us turn our attention now to those of Reid's arguments that do not apply to subjectivism but might have teeth against non-cognitivism.

These arguments have not stood the test of time as well as Reid's arguments against subjectivism. They seem to target a particularly implausible version of non-cognitivism, which involves an overly narrow notion of feeling: on this view, moral claims express affective states that (1) are non-intentional, and (2) cannot be expressed through propositions, where by *proposition* Reid means a sentence that includes a verb in the indicative mood. Indeed, such a non-cognitivist view seems to be trivially inadequate as an account of moral discourse, given that most moral claims do have a propositional form.[14] Another way of putting what is wrong with Reid's characterization of feelings is that, by claiming that that the affective states that non-cognitivism ascribes as the content of moral claims cannot be expressed in a propositional form, he begs the questions against this sentimentalist conception of moral discourse.

However, if we examine Reid's reasoning against non-cognitivism more closely, we will find a more interesting objection, which has some force even against the more refined versions of non-cognitivism that we find in contemporary metaethics. I will start by briefly discussing Reid's less powerful arguments, and then move on to the interesting one.

[14] From among the kinds of sentences involved in moral discourse, very few (e.g., imperatives) would not qualify as propositions in Reid's sense.

The Argument from the Non-intentionality of Feeling

In setting up the discussion about the content of moral approbation, Reid offers the following explication of the difference between feeling and judgment: “In judgment, we can distinguish the object about which we judge, from the act of the mind in judging of that object. In mere feeling there is no such distinction.” (*EAP* V. 7, 347) In other words, we cannot distinguish between the object of a feeling and the feeling itself, while we can distinguish the object of judgment from judgment as a mental state. This is meant to support Reid's claim that moral approbation involves a real judgment, given that, in the case of the mental state expressed by moral claims, we are able to distinguish between the object of the mental state and the mental state itself. Let us call this *the argument from the non-intentionality of feeling*.

First, we should note the obvious: this argument would be irrelevant in a discussion about subjectivism; in the case of a judgment about one's feelings, we can distinguish between the object of the belief—the subject's feelings—and the belief itself. So this argument can only target non-cognitivism.

Now, this argument from non-intentionality would work against a non-cognitivist view that took the content of moral claims to be feelings understood as simple, non-intentional affective states. But this is not the only kind of affective states that non-cognitivists can appeal to: they can take the contents of moral claims to be *structured* conative attitudes, which take as objects persons, actions or states of affairs. For instance, a non-cognitivist might claim that “Lying is wrong” expresses one's disapproval of lying, or one's plan to refrain from lying and discourage others from lying, or some similar attitude that concerns lying. Moreover, Reid should be well aware of this: in discussing the motivational states associated with moral

judgment, he distinguishes between *affections*—which are intentional affective states—and *feelings*, which are simple and non-intentional (*EAP* V. 7, 349).

Therefore, even if Reid is right in saying that feelings cannot be the content of moral claims, due to their stipulated non-intentional character, this leaves open the possibility that moral claims express affections, and no real judgments. Given that this is precisely the type of view defended by non-cognitivists nowadays,[15] Reid's argument from the non-intentionality of feeling has little relevance for contemporary metaethics.

The Argument from Non-propositionality

Reid offers a second characterization of feelings, which is also meant to undermine the view that moral approbation is a mere feeling. Unlike judgments, he says, feelings cannot be expressed in a propositional form:

> A feeling (...) is expressed in language either by a single word, or by such a contexture of words as may be the subject or predicate of a proposition, but such as cannot by themselves make a proposition. For it implies neither affirmation nor negation; and therefore cannot have the qualities of true or false, which distinguish propositions from all other forms of speech, and judgments from all other acts of mind. (*EAP* V. 7, 346)

We can call this *the argument from non-propositionality*.

Again, let us first note that this argument does not concern subjectivism in any way. Indeed, Reid distinguishes in this very context between the expression of a feeling, which he says cannot have a propositional form, and the report that one has a certain feeling, which is

[15] See, e.g., Gibbard's (2003) plan-based expressivist semantics.

obviously propositional: "*That I have such a feeling*, is indeed an affirmative proposition, and expresses testimony grounded upon an intuitive judgment." (*EAP* V. 7, 346) Thus, Reid himself puts subjectivism on the logical map here, and acknowledges that it would be immune to the argument from non-propositionality, which makes it even more puzzling why Reid conflates non-cognitivism and subjectivism throughout the rest of this section of the *EAP*.

Now, this argument does not do much damage against non-cognitivism either: to argue that the mental states ascribed by non-cognitivists as the contents of moral claims cannot be expressed in assertoric form is simply to beg the question against non-cognitivism. The central thesis of non-cognitivism is that, although moral claims *look like* ordinary assertions, they do not have genuine representational content, but express some other kind of mental states. One is free, of course, to insist that grammatical assertions can only have representational content, but this is no argument against non-cognitivists. It is just a rejection of their view.

Note, moreover, that the weakness of this argument is independent of the question of what kind of affective state is involved in the non-cognitivist semantics: the argument from non-propositionality is dialectically ineffective not only against the more refined versions of non-cognitivism that take structured, intentional attitudes as the content of moral claims, but also against the implausible emotivism explicitly targeted by Reid, according to which moral claims express simple, non-intentional mental states.

The Transparency Argument

Reid does offer a more interesting and, to my knowledge, original argument against non-cognitivism, which may be called the *transparency argument*. Non-cognitivists typically concede that assertoric language usually conveys representational contents, and that moral discourse is an

exception to this rule. Thus, they claim that a set of linguistic devices (grammatical assertions, predicates, etc.) that are typically used to convey representational contents is used, in the moral case, for the very different purpose of expressing non-cognitive attitudes. Reid finds it inexplicable that this unnatural use of superficially descriptive linguistic items would be found in all human languages:

> A particular language may have some oddity, or even absurdity, introduced by some man of eminence, from caprice or wrong judgment, and followed, by servile imitators, for a time, and, of consequences, discountenanced and dropt; but that the same absurdity should pervade all languages, through all ages, and that, after being detected and exposed, it should still keep its countenance and its place in language as much as before, this can never be while men have understanding. (*EAP* V. 7, 351)

In other words, non-cognitivists seem to owe us an explanation of the universal lack of transparency that they attribute to moral discourse: it cannot be a mere coincidence that, in all languages, non-representational moral contents are expressed through improper means, instead of being expressed solely through imperatives, interjections and other linguistic devices that seem more appropriate for conveying feelings and affections.[16]

Given how Reid defines the notion of feeling, this argument explicitly targets the uninteresting version of non-cognitivism on which moral claims express simple, unintentional mental states. But it can be extended to more refined versions of non-cognitivism as well. Non-cognitivist views according to which moral claims express structured, intentional affective states are not immune to this transparency challenge.

[16] Cuneo (2004) offers a similar reconstruction of this argument.

Now, this might not be an insurmountable problem for non-cognitivism either. For instance, non-cognitivists might respond by offering a general account of the function of assertoric linguistic devices, which applies across the board to both representational and non-representational regions of discourse.[17] But this is not the place to place to explore possible non-cognitivist solutions to this problem. My purpose here, as in the previous section, has been to identify those arguments in the *EAP V. 7* that metaethicists might still find useful today.

We may be frustrated at first with the fundamental confusion about non-cognitivism and subjectivism that plagues Reid's discussion of moral sentimentalism. But once we disentangle and reconstruct his various arguments and direct them at their proper targets, we can appreciate that most of these arguments are still relevant to figuring out whether moral claims express representational beliefs or non-cognitive attitudes, and whether they capture an objective moral reality or our subjective attitudes toward the non-moral world. In other words, they can still be used to assess the prospects of non-cognitivism and subjectivism about morality.

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[17] See, e.g., Brandom (1984) for a pragmatist account of the social function of assertion, or Price (2003) on the function of the concept of truth.

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