The Semantics & Pragmatics of Value Judgments

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0. Introduction

This chapter surveys the contemporary debate in philosophy of language and linguistics about value judgments. Under this label we find different kinds of judgments such as 'Torture is unethical', 'Roller coasters are fun' or '*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is a marvelous film'.

According to a widely accepted model of communication, speakers use declarative sentences with verbs in the indicative mood, such as 'It is raining' or '*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is an American film', in order to communicate information. However, a number of linguistic phenomena challenge this model. Among them, evaluative language and value judgments are especially pervasive and challenging. At first sight, judgments of value are no different from judgments of fact, given that we typically make them by uttering declarative sentence with verbs in the indicative mood; syntactically, judgments of value and judgments of fact are on an equal footing. However, they appear to be importantly different. Most importantly, value judgments do not convey factual information in the way in which sentences like 'It is raining' do. If Lenù says '*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is an American film' she informs her audience about a state of affairs which is in fact the case. By contrast, if she says '*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is a marvelous film', she is still talking about the film, but this time the attributed property—being marvelous—is not a property that the film possesses in and of itself, so to speak. The film may be marvelous *to Lenù*, and at the same time awful to her audience. To call a film 'American' is to give information about it; whereas to call it 'marvelous' is to voice an appreciation about the movie.

One could even say that, when Lenù says '*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is a marvelous film', she is providing her audience with as much information about the film as *about herself*, since she is letting her audience know something about her aesthetic values, about the things that she likes. And indeed, her audience might not share those values. A further feature that sets judgments of value apart from judgments of fact is that the former give rise to disagreements where no part in the dispute seems to be at fault. This is the case when Lenù says '*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is a marvelous film' and Lila answers 'No, it isn't!': there is no clear sense in which either of them is wrong in their judgment. Consider the contrast if we substitute 'American' for 'marvelous' in the former dialogue: then it seems clear that at least one of the speakers must have gotten the facts wrong.[1]

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[1] For discussion, see, inter alia, Glanzberg 2007, Kölbel 2004, Lasersohn 2005, MacFarlane 2014, Stephenson 2007, Stojanovic 2007; as well as the papers in García-Carpintero and Kölbel 2008. For experimental work on the phenomenon, see e.g. Goodwin and Darley 2008, Solt 2018, or Soria Ruiz 2019: Chapter 5. For a survey of the debate as concerns semantics and philosophy of language, see e.g. Karczewska 2019, Stojanovic 2017a, or Zeman 2019.

Finally, another sense in which judgments of fact and judgments of value differ is that only the latter reveal a close connection to action. If Lenù says ‘This dish is Italian’, there is no obvious way in which saying that commits her to adopting one course of action or other. By contrast, by saying ‘This dish is delicious’, she seems to be incurring some sort of practical commitment. In particular, if she says this and at the same time rejects the dish with disgust, we may challenge her sincerity. This appears to hold of evaluative claims across the board, but not of factual claims. Ascribing a positive value to things, describing them as ‘good’ or ‘marvelous’ commits one to orientating action towards the promotion or obtainment of those things. And similarly, ascribing a negative value to something, and describing it as ‘bad’ or ‘disgusting’, commits one to avoiding it. Evaluative and factual language appear to be connected to action in different ways (see e.g. Björklund et al. 2012; Blackburn 1998; Dreier 1990, 2009; Finlay 2004; Gibbard 1990; Hare 1952, Soria Ruiz and Stojanovic 2019, *a.m.o*).

Given that judgments of value and judgments of fact are structurally and superficially similar, an immediate question in the debate on evaluative language is what makes an utterance an instance of a judgment of value rather than fact. One may think that judgments of value require using certain expressions of natural language; let us call them *evaluative terms*. In Section 1, we discuss the semantic features of evaluative terms by focusing on the most relevant issues connected to their linguistic meaning (such as their gradability, multidimensionality and thickness). In Section 2, we discuss the notion of value judgment. We look at the main proposals about value judgments and evaluative sentences in recent metanormative theory and philosophy of language. We present non-cognitivist approaches such as emotivism, prescriptivism, expressivism and quasi-realism; and cognitivist approaches such as moral realism, error theory and contemporary semantic relativism. By illustrating the linguistic characteristics of evaluative terms and presenting the main theories of value judgment, we aim to provide an overview of what value judgments are and how they get communicated.

1. Evaluative terms

Evaluative terms do not constitute a natural linguistic category or a well-defined class, nor is there much consensus about how to define them. In this section, we will proceed by presenting and discussing some of the properties of these terms. However, they are not to be taken as a set of necessary and sufficient features of all evaluative terms. Rather, by focusing on the properties which tend to be associated with value discourse, we will illuminate the main issues that they raise in philosophy of language. Evaluative terms include various lexical categories: adjectives (‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘beautiful’), adverbs ('beautifully', 'unfortunately’), nouns ('wisdom', ‘genius’, 'jerk'),[2] verbs (‘(to) matter’), and even determiners ('many': see Egré and Cova 2015). In this chapter, we will focus on evaluative adjectives.

[2] Among evaluative nouns, racial epithets and slurs may be seen as a special category. See Hess (this volume).

1.1 'Evaluativity' in philosophy and linguistics

Before we discuss the semantics of evaluative terms, we should stress that 'evaluativity' means different things in philosophy and linguistics. Philosophical talk of evaluativity is most often associated with metanormative inquiry about the good, the bad or the ugly, or else with the contrast between the realms of the descriptive and the normative. That is the way in which we will use the term: 'evaluative' applies strictly speaking to those pieces of language which encode *values*. In linguistics however, 'evaluativity' has a prominent different usage. This notion of 'evaluativity' originates in Bierwisch (1989), who called it 'normbezug' ("norm-relatedness"), and has been more recently studied by Rett (2007, 2014). In this sense of evaluativity, a sentence containing a gradable adjective is evaluative just in case it makes reference to a contextually determined threshold on the relevant scale. Since the positive form of a gradable adjective is the form that lexically makes a reference to such a threshold (Kennedy 2007), evaluativity is attested by considering whether a sentence containing any form of a gradable adjective invites an inference to the positive form of that adjective. For example, 'Ann is as short as Bill' implies that Ann is short; hence, that sentence is evaluative. By contrast, 'Ann is richer than Bill' does not imply that Ann or Bill are rich; therefore, that sentence is not evaluative (Rett 2007; Bierwisch 1989; see also Brasoveanu & Rett 2018). Note that, under this interpretation, evaluativity is not a property of certain adjectives, but of certain forms of *any* gradable adjective.

Before we move on, let us mention two other uses of 'evaluative' in linguistics, both of them applied to gradable adjectives, but—again—neither involving *values*. First, for some authors an evaluative adjective is what is sometimes called 'subjective' or 'perspectival': an adjective (or more appropriately an adjectival *form*) whose meaning depends on a judge, standard or perspective. This is sometimes attested by the felicity of embedding the relevant adjective, both in positive and comparative form, under subjective attitude verbs such as 'find', and their propensity to give rise to faultless disagreements (Kennedy 2013 p. 264; Umbach 2016; Bylinina 2017, §5; Égré & Zehr 2018, p. 35; Stojanovic 2019, pp. 32-35). In this sense of 'evaluative', 'difficult' and 'interesting' are evaluative, but not in our sense, because those adjectives do not involve values. Secondly, Bierwisch (1989) uses 'evaluative' as equivalent to what more recent authors like Sassoon (2013) call 'multidimensional', that is, adjectives whose lexical meanings combine different dimensions or aspects. In this sense of evaluative, 'healthy' or 'similar' would be evaluative, but not in our sense because those adjectives do not involve values. We briefly return to the topic of multidimensionality in §1.3.

1.2 Gradability

Evaluative adjectives are typically gradable.[3] This means that in order to give a semantics for

[3] There may be exceptions. For one, adjectives such as '(im)permissible', 'right' and 'wrong', are not gradable, but they are considered to be deontic adjectives and, as such, are contrasted with evaluative adjectives (see Tappolet 2013; deontic adjectives are thus assimilable to deontic modals: see e.g. Carr 2017). For another, certain so-called extreme adjectives, such as 'fantastic' and 'terrific', are evaluative but not gradable (at least, not in the standard sense; see Morzycki 2012 on modification of extreme adjectives).

evaluatives we need to employ concepts such as scales and order. Gradability is attested by the admissibility of certain adjectival modifiers, in particular, certain adverbs ('very', 'slightly') and comparative morphology.

Consider the following pair of sentences:

(1) a. # My new desk is very / slightly / more wooden than my old one.

b. My new desk is very / slightly / nicer than my old one.

An adjective like 'wooden' does not admit of degrees; objects are either wooden or they are not. This is why to say that something is 'more wooden' than something else sounds odd. By contrast, an adjective like 'nice' does admit of degrees: things can be *very* nice, nic*er than* others, etc.

Gradability is connected to much-discussed topics in philosophy, such as the nature of properties and vagueness (see Sorensen 2018 for survey) and has been a topic of much interest both in philosophical and linguistic research (Klein 1980, Graff Fara 2000, Kennedy 2013, Burnett 2017, *a.m.o.*; for survey, see Odrowąż-Sypniewska, this volume). Gradable predicates challenge a simple view of semantics according to which predicates denote sets of objects. Since objects often do not fall neatly within (or outside) the extension of gradable predicates (is a person who is 176cm 'tall'?), it is often assumed that gradable predicates denote functions from individuals to *degrees*. Calling someone 'tall', however, is more than just naming their height. It is saying that their height has a certain feature: tall people are people whose heights are above average, stand out or are exceptional in some other way. So the idea that gradable predicates denote degrees of the relevant property has to be complemented with the idea that those degrees have to surpass a certain threshold or standard.

All this applies to evaluative adjectives in general: classifying individuals as *generous*, for example, involves two operations: first, it involves figuring out an ordering of individuals with respect to their level of generosity; secondly, it involves determining a standard of generosity such that any individual who possesses a degree of generosity above this standard counts as generous. Making comparisons with a gradable adjective (e.g., '*x* is more generous than *y*') requires the former operation; predicating the *positive* form of an individual ('*x* is generous') involves both.[4]

Another interesting issue is how the specific value of the standard gets determined (see i.e., Glanzberg 2007, Stojanovic 2012, Bylinina 2014, 2017). The standard for something to count as 'delicious' changes from context to context: a delicious dish in your university canteen might not be delicious by your favorite restaurant's standards. But what is the standard sensitive to? A possible answer is: to a comparison class. That is, whether a gradable adjective can be predicated of an object depends on what we compare that object with. Take the canteen's ratatouille: compared to other meals in the canteen, it is delicious, but compared to what they cook in your

[4] It is debated which of these operations is conceptually prior. Kennedy (2007) and others argue that establishing an ordering is prior to determining a threshold value for the positive form; Klein (1980), van Benthem (1982) and Barker (2002) hold that an ordering is a generalization from attributions of the positive form, which are more basic. See also Soria Ruiz (2019, esp. Ch.2).

favorite restaurant, it might be really dull. Thus, one possible answer is that, before determining a value for the standard relevant for assessing the positive form of an adjective, we need to take into account a class of objects that will serve as its comparison class (Klein 1980). Comparison classes are denoted by prepositional phrases headed by 'for' that modify the relevant adjective: 'delicious *for* a canteen'; 'delicious *for* this restaurant', etc.[5]

1.3 Multidimensionality

A further question is whether evaluative adjectives are *multidimensional* (Sassoon 2013, 2016). Multidimensional adjectives are those associated with a number of different scales, which correspond to different dimensions. 'Healthy' is a paradigmatic case: one can be healthy *with respect* to blood pressure, cholesterol, weight, etc; one can be healthy *in every respect* or *only in some*. Sassoon (2013, 2016) takes the acceptability of constructions like these, where an adjective is modified by a prepositional phrase denoting a *respect*, to show that the adjective in question is multidimensional. Consider the following contrast:

(2) a. Kendrick Lamar's new album is fantastic in every / some respect / with respect to lyrics, but not with respect to music.

b. # Kendrick Lamar's new album is expensive in every / some respect / with respect to its price, but not with respect to…?.

The fact that we cannot distinguish different respects that play a role in determining whether Kendrick Lamar's album is expensive (as all that matters is its price), shows that 'expensive' is not multidimensional. On the other hand, 'fantastic' is multidimensional, since different 'respects' can be considered and mentioned.

Speakers can take different dimensions into account and weigh them differently. In turn, this allows for different speakers determining different *orderings* of individuals as the extension of the relevant multidimensional adjective. Suppose that we take a set of rap albums and we tell people to order them by how good they are. Someone who gives more weight to lyrics than to beats will order them in one way, and someone who gives more weight to beats than to lyrics will order them in a different way (see McNally & Stojanovic 2017; Stojanovic 2016). Note that this type of ordering divergence would be impossible with a dimensional adjective like 'tall'.

Multidimensionality is characterized by Sassoon *via* the 'respect'-tests. But there are evaluative adjectives that do not pass these tests, even though we can *conceptually* distinguish dimensions that determine their extension. This is arguably the case for 'tasty': even though we can differentiate dimensions of tastiness (e.g., saltiness, texture, sweetness, crunchiness, etc.) it is slightly odd to say things like 'the pizza was tasty with respect to texture, but not with respect to saltiness'. This opens up the possibility that some evaluative adjectives are multidimensional

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[5] There has been some discussion about how certain evaluative adjectives, in particular aesthetic and moral, behave *vis-à-vis* comparison classes. In particular, it has been argued that these adjectives are not sensitive to comparison classes; see Liao et al. 2016 and Faroldi & Soria 2017.

only in this latter, “conceptual” sense and not in Sassoon’s “lexical” sense (see Solt 2018).

1.4 Thickness

A further relevant feature is so-called *thickness*. On the one side of the thickness spectrum, we have *thin* terms, which include all-purpose evaluative terms like ‘good’ and ‘bad’. On the other side, we have prototypical *thick* terms like 'cruel', 'brave’, ‘dumpy’ or ‘elegant’. The idea is that thick terms like ‘cruel’ have an evaluative and a descriptive meaning at the same time, while thin terms like ‘good’ have an evaluative meaning only (Williams 1987). The intuitive contrast lies in the fact that to call someone *cruel*, for example, is to convey something negative about that person: it is to communicate that they are *bad*. But not all bad things are cruel. To say that someone is cruel is to say something more specific, something along the lines of ‘inflicts unnecessary suffering’, and this more specific content is, arguably, not evaluative. Moreover, the evaluative component is general, while the descriptive component is more specific, thereby *thickening* the meaning of the term.

Here is a schematic characterization of the meaning of an utterance featuring a thick term:

(3) Lila is cruel.

(*D*) Lila inflicts unnecessary suffering.

(*E*) Things or people that inflict unnecessary suffering are bad in virtue of doing so.

The descriptive element (*D*) is a value-neutral description. The evaluative component (*E*) can be expressed by means of *thin* terms as the claim that whatever falls under the descriptive component is good/bad in virtue of it.

The debate on thick terms largely focuses on what Väyrynen (2013) calls the ‘location of evaluation’, i.e., the question of how thick terms encode evaluative content.[6] While most scholars agree on the idea that the descriptive component (*D*) contributes to the truth-conditions of sentences like (3), the question of how the evaluative component (*E*) is communicated is disputed. In this chapter we do not aim at providing an exhaustive survey of all the possible answers to this question, but we mention several proposals in this debate: the truth-conditional account (Kyle 2013), the presuppositional account (Cepollaro and Stojanovic 2016; Cepollaro 2017) and the pragmatic implication view (Väyrynen 2013).

Truth-conditional views (Kyle 2013) hold that the truth-conditions of (3) entail both descriptive and evaluative contents: they entail that Lila inflicts unnecessary suffering and that Lila is bad because of that. Thus, the evaluative content is an entailment of (3). The main flaw of the truth-conditional account of thick terms is that the evaluations conveyed by thick terms survive semantic embedding in a way which seems incompatible with the claim that they are semantic

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[6] The debate on thick terms raises further interesting issues, such as: whether the evaluative and descriptive components are separable to begin with or irreducibly entangled (Foot 1958, McDowell 1981); whether to apply a thick term is to partake in the evaluation that it involves; whether thin and thick terms can be distinguished or whether they stand on a *continuum*. For survey, see Väyrynen (2017).

entailments of these terms. If Lenù says 'Lila is *not* cruel', she still conveys a negative evaluation about cruel people, even though she does not predicate this property of Lila. The same happens when (3) is embedded in the antecedent of a conditional, an epistemic modal verb or a question: 'If Lila is cruel, then Lenù is too', 'Lila might be cruel', 'Is Lila cruel?'.

This data suggests that (*E*) is not, after all, an entailment of (3), since entailments vanish in all these contexts (see Kyle 2013 for an attempt to explain the embedding data in terms of conversational mechanisms).

The presuppositional view of thick terms holds that (*E*) is *presupposed* by utterances featuring thick terms (Cepollaro & Stojanovic 2016; readers unfamiliar with the notion of presupposition may consult Colonna Dahlman, this volume). This approach can easily account for those projection data that the truth-conditional view could not explain, given that presuppositions typically survive semantic embedding under negation, the antecedent of a conditional, epistemic modals, questions and so on. What is more, the presuppositional view accounts for the intuition that conversational participants typically have to share certain values in order to felicitously employ thick terms. When speakers do not endorse the evaluative content associated with a thick term, they will tend to avoid using it altogether: if a speaker does not believe that being sexually explicit beyond conventional boundaries is bad as such, she is likely to avoid using the term 'lewd'. This is consistent with a distinction discussed in the literature on thick terms, according to which for each speaker, some thick terms are *objectionable*, in the sense that the speaker does not endorse the evaluative content associated with such terms, and therefore avoids using the term altogether, while others are *non-objectionable*.

Finally, Väyrynen (2013)'s proposal is that the evaluations associated with thick terms are pragmatic implications and, as such, are not part of the asserted content, nor of the main point of the utterance. There need not be a single pragmatic mechanism at play, but different mechanisms may determine evaluative contents each time. The main challenge for this proposal is to flesh out how exactly pragmatic implications work and why they are so systematically associated with thick terms if they are not lexicalized (see Cepollaro 2017, p. 152 for discussion).

2. Theories of value judgment

Having discussed some of the semantic features of evaluative terms—that is, particular words in natural language that are conventionally taken to carry evaluative meaning—we now turn to the question of what we communicate when we express a judgment of value. Thus, we take a step back and consider how evaluative terms contribute to the meaning of the sentences in which they appear, as well as to the type of speech acts that speakers perform when using those sentences.

The various approaches that we are about to survey have focused traditionally on moral language, and we will stick to the moral case for simplicity. But much of what we say applies straightforwardly to judgments of aesthetic, epistemic or practical value. In fact, most (if not all) of the positions to be discussed have popped up in the philosophical and linguistic literature under different guises, applied to expressions beyond moral terms, such as predicates of personal

taste, modal auxiliaries, or verbs like 'know'.

The literature is notoriously difficult to compartmentalize. But to follow a minimal classification, we divide the positions to be discussed along their answer to the question of whether moral sentences express propositions. Moral *cognitivists* answer it positively, while moral non-cognitivists answer it negatively.

2.1 Non-cognitivist views

Recall that evaluative sentences appear to behave differently from ordinary descriptive sentences. Non-cognitivists attempt to cash out this difference as a difference in the function, or role, served by each type of sentence. They hold, roughly, that moral sentences such as (4a) a fundamentally different role in thought and communication from ordinary descriptive sentences such as (4b). While the latter aim at describing the way the world is, the former do not.

(4)

a. It is ethical to take action against climate change.

b. It is uncommon to take action against climate change.

Theoretically, non-cognitivists cash this intuition out by claiming that, while the latter denote propositions that are truth-apt and are the objects of cognitive attitudes such as belief and knowledge, the former do not denote propositions, are not truth-apt and are the objects of *non-cognitive* attitudes, such as desires, hopes or practical intentions.

Moral non-cognitivism was developed throughout the XXth century and includes proposals like *emotivism*, *prescriptivism*, *expressivism*, *quasi-realism and hermeneutical moral fictionalism*. The general strategy for non-cognitivists has been to assimilate moral language to different species of non-descriptive uses of language. Thus, early emotivists (Ayer 1946; Stevenson 1937) argued that moral judgments were similar to emotive interjections such as 'boo!' or 'hurray!'. Prescriptivists (Hare 1952; Carnap 1935; Stevenson 1963) emphasized the similarities between moral language and different forms of prescriptive language, such as imperatives. More recently, the most prominent strategy for distinguishing moral from non-moral language has been to argue that the characteristic sentences of each realm *express* different kinds of mental states: while non-moral sentences express *doxastic*, or *representational* mental states (like belief and knowledge) moral sentences express *non-doxastic*, or *practical* mental states (such as desires, hopes or plans). This position is called *expressivism* (Gibbard 1990, 2003, 2008; Schroeder 2008b). In particular, Gibbard's *norm-* and subsequent *plan-expressivism* connects deontic and moral language to talk of plans and practical intentions. Finally, authors vary in how many of the seemingly descriptive or representational properties of moral language they are willing to concede. Blackburn's *quasi-realism* (1984, 1993, 1998) is an attempt to reconcile the realist-like properties of moral thought and language with the basic non-cognitivist tenet that moral claims are not truth-apt and do not express beliefs about the world. On the other hand, Kalderon's hermeneutical fictionalism (2005) holds that even though we are under the impression that our moral talk is cognitive and that we believe and assert moral claims, this is mistaken, since moral discourse works in the same way as fictional discourse. According to Kalderon, just as we do not

assert but, rather, quasi-assert fictional contents - that is, we do *as if* we were asserting fictional contents -, what we do in moral talk is similarly non-cognitive, even though the content of what we quasi-assert turns out to be propositional. A drawback of this approach is that it postulates that when we discuss moral issues, we are systematically and unwittingly involved in a pretense.

Besides moral and normative language, it bears mentioning that non-cognitivist proposals have been offered in various parcels of language, including different types of evaluative terms. There are non-cognitivists about epistemic modals (Yalcin 2007, 2012), the *a priori* (Field 2000), higher-order concepts (Frápolli and Villanueva 2012), conditionals (Gibbard 1981), knowledge attributions (Chrisman 2007; Field 2009, 2018), predicates of personal taste (Bordonaba Plou 2017; Gutzmann 2016), aesthetic predicates (Marques 2016), and evaluative expressions across the board (Soria Ruiz 2019).[7]

Non-cognitivist positions claim that there exists a strong contrast between moral and non-moral discourse. One of the main problem, however, that these positions face is that there does not seem to be much *linguistic* evidence for that contrast: generally speaking, moral and non-moral terms behave in a linguistically uniform way both in atomic and complex sentences (see Schroeder 2008a p. 704 and ff; 2008b p. 5). This is related to what has come to be known as the Frege-Geach problem (Geach 1965). It can be stated as a problem that affects the embedding of moral claims (or any type of claim for which a non-cognitivist account is put forward). Note that a moral sentence like (4a) can be embedded in the antecedent of a conditional, as in (5):

(5) If it is ethical to take action against climate change, then everyone should do that.

Conditionals take as antecedents expressions that are themselves capable of being true or false. If moral claims are not truth-apt, they should not be embeddable in an indicative conditional, or any truth-functional operator whatsoever. However, they are perfectly embeddable, as (5) shows. Therefore, non-cognitivists about moral discourse have a problem (see Schroeder 2008a for discussion and Woods 2017 for an up-to-date survey of possible solutions).[8] The Frege-Geach problem has led many scholars to opt for a *hybrid* version of non-cognitivism and cognitivism. According to these hybrid proposals, moral and other evaluative claims express both a cognitive attitude towards some propositional content, and a non-cognitive attitude. Adopting a hybrid view allows theorists to solve the Frege-Geach problem by holding that moral claims do after all express regular propositions that can be embedded in truth-functional constructions, such as conditionals. We refer the reader to Schroeder (2009) and the articles in Fletcher & Ridge (2014) for a comprehensive survey of hybrid views. Others, in the wake of Gibbard (2003) and Yalcin (2007, 2012), have insisted that expressivists can adopt extant modeling tools in contemporary semantics in order to account for the full range of semantic properties of moral sentences without

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[7] Note that some of these expressions do not count as evaluative *per* our previous criterion, as they do not involve value (i.e., epistemic or probability modals and conditionals). However, theorists who defend non-cognitivist views for these expressions are moved by some of the same arguments in favor of moral non-cognitivism.

[8] It bears pointing out that, for Schroeder, the problem is more general than truth-aptness; it is to account for both atomic *and* complex moral sentences (Schroeder 2008a, p. 716).

resorting to a hybrid view. Silk (2015), Charlow (2014, 2015) and Willer (2017) follow this strategy.

2.2 Cognitivist views

Moral cognitivists hold that moral terms refer to properties, or sets of properties, that can be studied by the natural and social sciences, even if moral and non-moral concepts are different. There are different theoretical proposals that roughly fall under the moral cognitivism banner, including moral realism, Mackie's error theory, revolutionary moral fictionalism, and metaethical relativism and contextualism. Again, many of these positions have been defended for various other types of evaluative expressions; we will mention them when pertinent.

Moral realists hold that moral sentences are truth-apt sentences that report moral facts, and that moral predicates denote moral properties. That is, they take moral discourse *at face value*. It follows that, unlike non-cognitivists, for moral realists there is no fundamental difference between (4a) and (4b):

(4)

a. It is ethical to take action against climate change.

b. It is uncommon to take action against climate change.

So for example, just as the descriptive sentence (4b) reports that an action, that of taking action against climate change, has a certain worldly property, that of *being uncommon*, a moral realist holds that the same should be said of (4a): it reports that that action has a different, worldly property, that of *being ethical*. Both sentences express propositions that are true or false, and can be objects of beliefs and other doxastic attitudes.

Beyond this general idea, some moral realists argue that their view secures or involves further desirable commitments, such as the independence of moral truth from human thought, or the objectivity of morality. Realists also debate over whether moral facts are contingent or necessary, and how they come to be known. These are fraught issues that we lack space to discuss, but we refer the reader to Sayre-McCord's (2005) for further references.

Error theorists, on the other hand, following Mackie (1977), agree with moral realists on the idea that moral discourse aims at describing reality and expresses propositions that are the objects of cognitive attitudes such as belief and knowledge. However, unlike realists, they claim that moral properties do not exist. They attribute a general *error* to speakers, who talk *as though* morality were objectively true and knowable, without this being the case. One difficulty for this position is to explain why moral discourse functions roughly in similar ways across cultures and times and how is it possible that so many people are radically misguided about such a basic aspect of their lives.

In the same spirit, revolutionary moral fictionalists (see i. a. Joyce 2001) hold that moral discourse aims at describing (moral) facts and are anti-realist with respect to moral properties; they do not advocate for a revision of our moral talk, but rather for a revision of our *attitudes*

with respect of our moral discourse: since there are practical reasons to talk *as if* there were moral facts, then we should do so, keeping in mind that it is in fact fictional.

To sum up, realists, error theorists and revolutionary fictionalists hold that moral discourse aims at describing objective moral facts, but only the former hold that moral discourse actually *succeeds* at that, since error theory and revolutionary factionalism deny the existence of moral properties.

Moral realism is frequently contrasted with moral relativism, which is, roughly, the view that what is morally good or bad is relative. However, as we will shortly see, relativism is not a unitary view but, rather, a family of positions, some of which are nowadays preferably called contextualist.

One of the issues over which relativists disagree is: to what exactly is morality relative? Possible answers include: moral codes, rules, standards, values, practices, sets of beliefs (individual or shared), and so on. The choice of the parameter to which morality is relativized, however, is tangential to our present concerns, and we shall leave the question open.

A second issue of disagreement is whether *all* moral claims are relative, or only *some* of them are. This is an important issue and it is not without dispute whether for a position to count as relative it is necessary to hold the stronger view (that all moral claims are relative) or only the weaker view (that only some of them are). Now, even if we assume all moral claims are relative, does it follow from this position that all possible moral codes (or standards, values, or whatever else morality is relative to) are on a par, and are equally good? A negative answer suggests the possibility that there can be higher order constraints on moral codes. For instance, even if we think that a claim such as 'genocide is morally permissible' is true relative to some moral code, we may also think that such a moral code is corrupted and inferior to other moral codes that ban deliberate killings.

Traditionally, moral relativism is associated with the thesis that, there is no single, universally valid morality; or, in the words of Velleman (2013, p. 1), that 'there is no universally valid morality, only moralities plural, each having merely local validity'. Understood as a primarily negative thesis, moral relativism, in this sense, is compatible with most of non-cognitivist views that we have seen in section 2.1. While relativism goes back in time as far as fifth century B.C., with the teachings of Protagoras, in this and the last century, it has been prominently defended by Harman (1975, 2000), Rovane (2013), Velleman (2013) and Wong (1984). These authors, however, are hardly concerned with moral *discourse.* When it comes to language, moral relativism is better understood as the thesis that moral claims do not have their truth value fixed once for all, but rather, their truth value is relative (to a moral code, or a set of moral standards, or whichever suitable parameter).[9] Different versions of relativism in this sense have appeared in

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[9] Stojanovic (2017b) distinguishes two construals of moral relativism: a 'metaphysical' construal, which corresponds to the thesis that there is no single, universally valid morality, and a 'semantic' construal, which corresponds to the thesis that the truth values of moral claims are not absolute but variable. Although most relativist views endorse both theses, the two are, in fact, independent; see Stojanovic (2017b, p. 126) for details.

the last two or three decades; besides moral discourse, there are relativist views about predicates of personal taste, verbs of knowledge, future contingents and various types of modals and conditionals. Again, we will take relativism about moral discourse as our case study, but most of our discussion applies to other types of natural language expressions.

Relativism endorses the idea that moral codes are features of the contexts in which moral discourse is produced or evaluated, and that such contexts in some way or other affect the truth value of a moral claim. For example: relative to a context in which the morality parameter is a moral code that promotes action against climate change, (4a) is true; relative to a context in which the morality parameter is a moral code that does not promote but discourages action against climate change, (4a) is false. This suggests, again, two important questions of clarification, which correspond to two independent axes along which there are various views that deserve the label 'relativist': (i) the *content question*: do different moral codes determine the content expressed by moral claims or not? and (ii) the *context question*: is the relevant context for evaluating the truth of a moral claim the context of use or the context of assessment?

There are two main approaches to Question (i). The first approach defines a family of views that is more appropriately called 'contextualist' (Dreier 1990; Silk 2016, 2017), which hold that different moral codes result in different *contents* expressed by sentence such as (4a). Contextualists hold that moral expressions work just like other context-dependent expressions, such as demonstratives or indexicals. When Lenù says 'I am smart', her utterance expresses the proposition that Lenù is smart; when Lila says so, the expressed proposition is that Lila is smart. Similarly, a contextualist would say that if the moral code relevant in the context of (4a) promotes taking action against climate change (call this moral code *M*), then (4a) expresses the proposition that taking action against climate change is ethical *according to M*, which is true; while if the relevant moral code does not promote but discourages taking action against climate change (call this moral code *N*), then (4a) expresses the proposition that taking action against climate change is ethical *according to N*, which is false. Beyond moral discourse, contextualism has been defended for knowledge claims (DeRose 1992, Lewis 1996, Stine 1976), epistemic modals (von Fintel & Gillies 2011), and predicates of personal taste (Glanzberg 2007, Sæbø 2009, Silk 2016).

The main challenge to moral contextualism is to explain the possibility of moral disagreement: if speakers who express what look like conflicting moral claims are really only expressing something about their respective moral codes, then their claims are compatible, hence there is no ground for disagreement . But this is counterintuitive—most people share the intuition that moral disagreement across contexts is perfectly possible. *Prima facie*, this is a big drawback for these positions. Let us briefly mention two ways out of this problem that have become popular in recent years: first, some have defended the view that, whenever there is a disagreement between subjects with different moral codes (or any evaluative perspective), there exists the presupposition that a code is shared by them. This is sometimes called a 'presupposition of commonality' (see López de Sa 2015; see also Blome-Tillmann 2009 and DeRose 2004 for this strategy as applied to disagreement about knowledge attributions). If it is understood that both

participants in a disagreement about whether something is ethical share a moral code, then it is easy to see what the disagreement is about: it is a disagreement about whether the action under discussion meets the *common* moral code.

A different kind of reaction to the disagreement problem for contextualists is to bite the bullet and accept that disagreeing speakers are, strictly speaking, expressing their own perspectives—and therefore making compatible statements—but nevertheless claim that they are engaging in a *metalinguistic* dispute; that is, a dispute about how to use the relevant evaluative terms (Barker 2002, 2013; Plunkett and Sundell 2013; Sundell 2016; a.m.o.).

The second approach to the Question (i) is to hold that the moral code relevant in the context in which a sentence such as (4a) is uttered has no impact on the content expressed, but only has an impact on the truth value. Following Kaplan (1977), one and the same content can receive different truth values at different circumstances of evaluation. Consider non-evaluative sentences: a sentence such as (4b)—–'It's uncommon to take action against climate change'—expresses one and the same proposition in every context; however, we can consider the different truth values that it would receive if evaluated at different possible worlds. In the actual world, where taking action against climate change is unfortunately still uncommon, that proposition is true. But in a counterfactual world in which everyone takes action against climate, that same proposition is false. Importantly, the fact that we can evaluate one and the same sentence at different circumstances does not mean that (4b) has a different content at each different circumstance, but only that it has a different truth value. Authors who adopt this approach hold that the truth value of moral sentences such as (4a) is relative to moral codes in a similar way: (4a) always has as its content the proposition that it is ethical to take action against climate change, *simpliciter*. But that proposition can be true or false depending on the moral code of the context in which we evaluate that proposition. In this framework, evaluating (4a) at contexts with different moral codes does not change the *content* of (4a), which is always the same (it is the proposition *that taking action against climate change is ethical*); but it does change its truth value. This position about moral discourse has been defended by Brogaard (2008, 2012) Kölbel (2002) or Egan (2012). But it has been arguably more popular as applied to other types of expressions, such as predicates of personal taste or modals (Egan et al 2005; Lasersohn 2005; Stephenson 2007; MacFarlane 2014; Coppock 2018).

Let us now turn to Question (ii): what is the appropriate context at which one ought to evaluate a given moral claim for its truth value? A straightforward answer is that the appropriate context is the context in which the sentence is uttered, that is, the *context of use*. If moral relativism is so defined, then in this respect the context-sensitivity of moral terms remains similar to other types of context-sensitivity attested in natural language, such as that of indexicals and demonstratives.

However, from the work of MacFarlane (2014) and others stems another possibility: rather than hold that the appropriate context at which to evaluate a sentence such as (4a) is the context in which it is uttered, we can consider the possibility that the appropriate context is the context from which an utterance of that sentence is *assessed*. This proposal has been dubbed *assessment relativism*, and it works in the following way. Suppose that (4a)—'It is ethical to take action

against climate change'—is uttered by Marcello, who is professing moral code *N* (which discourages action against climate change). Suppose further that Lila holds moral code *M* (promoting action against climate change). Assessment-relativism holds that, if Lila is the person who is assessing (4a) for truth, it is *her* moral code that counts, not Marcello's. Since her moral code is *M*, she ought to say that (4a) is true. (4a) has different truth values at different contexts, and the appropriate context from which to evaluate its truth is always the assessor's (which, when the sentence is uttered, coincides with the speaker's).

3. Conclusion

This entry has surveyed a number of contemporary debates in philosophy of language and linguistics surrounding the nature of evaluative judgment. In Section 1, we considered some of the most semantically interesting features of evaluative adjectives, such as the notions of evaluativity, gradability, multidimensionality, and thickness. After focusing on these linguistic aspects, we turned our attention to the theories of value judgment. In Section 2, we illustrated traditional views in metaethics regarding moral discourse, with an eye on the semantic theories that can accommodate those positions. We discussed non-cognitivist approaches such as emotivism, prescriptivism, expressivism and quasi-realism, as well as cognitivist approaches such as moral realism, error theory and contemporary metaethical relativism and contextualism. We hope that this brief survey succeeds in providing a satisfactory bird's-eye view of the current debate about evaluative language and evaluative judgment.

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