Why Emotivists Love Inconsistency

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Emotivists hold that moral opinions are wishes and desires, and that the function of moral language is to “express” such states. But if moral opinions were but wishes or desires, why would we see certain opinions as inconsistent with, or following from other opinions? And why should our reasoning include complex opinions such as the opinion that a person ought to be blamed only if he has done something wrong? Indeed, why would we think that anything is conditional on his doing something wrong unless “doing something wrong” signifies a real kind of action?

Many have believed, and seemingly on good grounds, that these questions lack good answers, and that emotivism is doomed for that very reason.\(^1\) What I will argue, however, is that once emotivism is recognized for what it is, namely an empirical theory about the psychological nature of moral opinions, and once we relate it to a general theory of human reasoning, moral reasoning and intuitions of inconsistency and consequence

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are only to be expected. Recent objections to earlier emotivist or "expressivist" accounts can thus be met, and the phenomena of inconsistency and consequence fully embraced by emotivists. But let us start from the beginning.

1. Emotivism

To key to an emotivist solution to the problem of moral reasoning is to take seriously the fact that emotivism—at least as it was formulated by Charles Stevenson—is an empirical theory hoping to tell us how moral opinions and moral utterances causally interact with other psychological states and actions.¹ Emotivism and competing theories try to say something interesting about what happens to people when they come to have opinions to the effect that such and such an act is morally wrong, and what happens when they give it up. The assumption is that there are paradigmatic cases of people having and not having this kind of opinions, and that we can provide interesting theories about the nature of such opinions, theories informed by everyday experience, introspection and scientific psychological inquiry.

What makes a theory about the workings of moral opinions emotivist are certain theoretical identifications of certain kinds of moral opinions and kinds of wishes or desires, or, as I shall put it, moral "optations". More specifically, a form of emotivism that I find both interesting and plausible claims the following:

¹ Our primary focus will be on moral opinions rather than moral language. For Stevenson, the focus was on moral terms, and he proposed that their workings in language could be understood once we saw that they had certain powers to influence the attitudes of an audience when put in the right sentential and conversational context, powers due to dispositions of speakers to issue such terms under certain circumstances and dispositions of hearers to be affected by them under certain circumstances. Especially, he proposed that this provided understanding of some puzzling features of moral disagreement. See “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”, Mind Vol. 46, 1937, pp. 14-31, but especially chapter 2 of Ethics and Language, New Haven: Yale U. P. 1944.
Opinions to the effect that performing an act (of oneself or someone else) is morally wrong are moral optations for the act not to be performed. (This covers opinions to the effect that an act must not be performed, or that it is agent’s moral duty not to perform it.)

Opinions to the effect that not performing an act (of oneself or someone else) is morally wrong are moral optations for the act to be performed. (This covers opinions to the effect that it is the agent’s duty to perform an act, or that it is what the agent—morally speaking—must perform.)

Exactly how to distinguish moral optations from other kinds of wishes and desires is a difficult matter. Elsewhere I argue what will be taken for granted here; namely that moral optations can be distinguished from others by their functional connection to moral emotions such as indignation and guilt. For example, if I have a moral optation for an act not to be performed then its function is (1) to elicit indignation, the function of which is to elicit guilt and keep such acts from being performed, when thinking about others performing the act, and (2) to elicit guilt, the function of which is to keep me from performing it and prepare me to face the indignation of others upon performing it, when thinking about myself performing it. In sum, it is the function of moral optations to affect action through eliciting indignation or guilt to certain representations of action. But details are not needed for the point I will make here.

When I talk about a function of a kind of psychological state or mechanism, I mean some kind of effect which states or mechanisms of that kind have had, and which causally explains their continued existence and replication. Of course, a full explanation of the reproduction of a given item might invoke any number of its effects, and the details of such explanations will differ in some or most respects from case to case. Moreover, many effects might be common to different kinds of item. When I talk about the
function of some item, then, I will have in mind some effect that is relatively constant across explanations, and relatively specific for the kind of item in question.¹ Notice that a psychological state can have a certain function in this sense without performing that function on a given occasion. In particular, optations can fail to produce action or manifest emotional reactions because we fail to find the means — perhaps because there are no means to be found, as is the case when we read a novel and wish that the main character would change her ways — or because we know what will happen regardless, or know that the act in question has already been performed.

There are other ways of understanding functions, and other ways of characterizing optations, but the historical (or evolutionary) approach is well suited to the task at hand: to explain why moral optations would figure in reasoning and would come with intuitions of inconsistency and consequence. However, although our explanations will be concerned with the history of psychological kinds, no reference will be made to detailed historical facts. In part, this is because our theory (like the existing alternatives) is quite schematic and speculative, but also because we can infer plausible evolutionary explanations of our psychological states and mechanisms from what we know about their present-day functioning (through introspection, everyday experience and experiments in cognitive psychology) and some very general facts about the pre-historic, historic and contemporary conditions under which such states would have emerged.

I said that the core of emotivism consists of certain theoretical identifications: other common examples are the identifications of heat and mean molecular kinetic energy, and of being water and being constituted by HOH molecules. Take the latter identification. It is reasonable because the

¹ For thorough definitions of some kinds of evolutionary function, see Ruth Garrett Millikan’s *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, A Bradford Book 1984), chapters 1 & 2.
assumption that samples of water are constituted (almost exclusively) by HOH molecules is central to our best explanations as to how samples of water behave: that they conduct electricity in a certain way, that they freeze and boil at a certain temperature, that they dissolve certain substances but not others, that they refract light in a certain way, and so forth. What I suggest is that the emotivist identifications of moral opinions and moral optations are reasonable on the same ground. Assuming that moral opinions are moral optations lets us explain various “behaviors” of moral opinions, in particular how they affect and are causally influenced by moral emotions and figure in the production and prevention of action but also, as I will argue in this paper, the way they figure in reasoning and the way they give rise to intuitions of inconsistency and consequence.

Conceiving of emotivism this way means that some traditional support for the theory becomes irrelevant. Emotivists generally have the intuition that one cannot have the opinion that a certain kind of act is wrong unless one has a desire to abstain from it. If the emotivist identification is peripheral to explanations of the behavior or moral opinions, that intuition is just mistaken or irrelevant. But the same goes for some arguments against emotivism. Critics of emotivism generally have the intuition that there can be people who believe that an act is wrong without being motivated to refrain from it. That intuition is equally mistaken or irrelevant if our best explanation of how moral opinions behave centrally involve the emotivist identifications. Similarly, the fact that some people are perfectly willing to talk about the water on Putnam’s Twin Earth and how it differs from our water in being constituted by XYZ molecules gives us little reason to deny the theoretical identification of being water and being constituted by HOH molecules.

To say that certain kinds of moral opinions are moral optations, then, is to make a highly theoretical statement about the functional organization of our psyches: evidently, support is needed. As I see it, however, a thorough examination of available evidence suggests that emotivism is better
supported than analyses denying that moral opinions are optations. To be sure, emotivism has a lot of apparent problems. For example, many believe that emotivism is doomed for the simple reason that we can be morally weak, depressed, or just plain bad: in such cases moral opinions and corresponding optations come apart, or so it seems. But I doubt that these phenomena mean real trouble. Upon closer analysis, and paired with a subtle understanding of what it is to have an optation of the relevant kind and what a theoretical identification amounts to, they can be accommodated within an emotivist framework. That issue must be left to the side, however: here we are concerned with an explanation of the fact that we employ much the same kind of “logical” reasoning in moral matters as we do elsewhere.

For clarity, we shall focus on reasoning involving a subclass of our moral opinions (“moral opinions” for short), namely opinions concerned with whether (and under what conditions) certain actions are morally wrong, or whether (and on what conditions) we have a moral obligation to perform them. There will be no explicit discussion of opinions concerning individual character or political institutions, concerning what is lewd, sinful or stupid, what is “intrinsically” valuable or bad, or of other opinions making up a person’s ethics. What I believe, though, is that the analysis of moral opinions can be the paradigm for the analyses of these other opinions.

2. The problem of reasoning

An important fact about our moral thinking is that we give up moral opinions to avoid what we naturally think of as inconsistencies, and we come to have new moral opinions as a result of having other opinions from which the new ones seem to follow. Critics have seen this as undermining emotivism in a decisive way: such a practice would make sense only if moral opinions are beliefs – states capable of truth and falsity and having the function to guide us to our goals.

And indeed, sentences expressing moral opinions – sentences employing predicates such as “is morally wrong” or “is morally permissible”
– translate as easily into predicate logic as do sentences employing “makes me nervous”, “was performed before noon” or similar predicates used in sentences conventionally expressing paradigmatic cases of belief. Our intuitions about consequence and inconsistency are not affected by whether the predicate is moral or non-moral. For example, the opinions expressed by the following two sets of sentences seem equally inconsistent:

1. (A) If lying makes one nervous then telling one’s little brother to lie makes one nervous.
   (B) Lying makes one nervous.
   (C) Telling one’s little brother to lie does not make one nervous.

2. (A') If lying is wrong then telling one’s little brother to lie is wrong.
   (B') Lying is wrong.
   (C') Telling one’s little brother to lie is not wrong.

Unfortunately for the emotivist, the standard way to “make sense“ of intuitions of consequence and inconsistency appeals to truth. Make the reasonable assumption that we are interested in having true rather than false beliefs. Furthermore, make the standard assumption that a set of opinions is inconsistent if and only if the conjunction of its members cannot be true; and that an opinion, o, follows from a set of opinions, O, if the truth of o is guaranteed by the truth of the conjunction of the members of O. (Depending on how “cannot” and “guaranteed” are read in this sentence, we get different kinds of consequence or inconsistency.) Under such assumptions, it would come as no surprise that our reasoning would be sensitive to relations of consistency and consequence: responding to such relations would let us avoid falsehoods and reach new truths on the basis of old ones. But it is not clear how options can be true or false.

A part of this problem is that quite ordinary conditional opinions expressed by sentences of the form “If he acted wrongly then [...]” – sentences such as (A') – have been seen as incomprehensible on an emotivist theory: unless “he acted wrongly” represents a (possible) state of affairs,
how can anything be conditional on his acting wrongly?\(^1\) And what does the negative opinion that an act isn’t wrong amount to unless the opinion that the act is wrong represents some (possible) state of affairs? These difficulties are at odds with the plausible assumption that almost all speakers of English find the two above sets of sentences equally inconsistent in spite of the latter’s containing \((A')\) and \((C')\).

The problem for emotivism, then, is to give an alternative explanation of intuitions about consequence and inconsistency, and to explain the nature and existence of various conditional and negative opinions expressed by sentences such as \((A')\) and \((C')\).

3. Explaining moral reasoning

As noted above, whether an opinion is moral or non-moral makes little difference from the point of view of our intuitions of inconsistency and consequence. In some sense, our logical intuitions are the same in both cases, and this suggests a cognitivist account of logical intuitions across the board: it does seem mandatory for paradigmatic cases of belief, so why not assume that it covers all cases?\(^1\) I think this is a very good question. But there are two considerations that leave room for an emotivist account of moral reasoning.

The first is the possibility that moral optations have dual functions, providing goals for action like desires but also providing a map of parts of reality (moral reality), like paradigmatic beliefs. That would seem to be a quick way out, but the question would remain how a state could have both these functions. More to the point, the question would remain why we should expect an optation to figure in inferences or be the subject of logical intuitions, something it would have to do if it were a belief: but that is

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Why Emotivists Love Inconsistency

exactly the question we are trying to answer. So, even though I have refrained from defining emotivism negatively as the view that moral opinions are not beliefs, our problem remains.\(^2\)

The second possibility, and the one developed here, is that even if an emotivist must say that the account of reasoning will be different for moral reasoning than for paradigmatically cognitive thinking, he might be able to show that both cognitive and emotive accounts are special cases of one general account – a unified psychological account of logical intuitions. Hence our intuition would indeed be “the same” in both cases if emotivism were true.

In fact, my point of departure in providing an emotivist account will be a set of general functional analyses of logical intuitions and logically complex opinions such as conditionals. Starting with complex opinions and proceeding to our logical intuitions I will use this section to present these general analyses. In sections 4 through 7, I show how both cognitive and emotive analyses represent special cases of their general counterparts.

Basically, the idea is this. We start with everyday experiences of the role that logical intuitions and complex opinions play in our thinking, and hypothesize that these roles are purposive, chosen by natural selection and our learning mechanisms. That is the task for this section. We then ask whether and why we should expect to have states with such hypothesized functions given that our simple moral opinions are beliefs and optations.

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\(^2\) In “Gibbard’s Theory of Norms”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22:1 1993, pp. 67-78, Paul Horwich argues that once it is recognized that expressions such as “rational” (or “wrong”, I suppose) are logical predicates (logically functions as predicates), there is no mystery to explain. I disagree: the question is why we should expect a term expressing an optation to be a logical predicate. And the problem with Gibbard’s account is that although it provides an interesting formal model of the logical relations in which moral opinions are involved, it fails to provide an explicit explanation of why those relations seem to obtain.
Why Emotivists Love Inconsistency

respectively. That is the task for sections 4 through 7. If we come up with plausible answers with respect to beliefs, our initial hypotheses are vindicated. If we come up with plausible answers with respect to optations too, emotivism is vindicated.

I suggest the following analyses of complex opinions:

*Negative opinions* – opinions to the effect that something isn’t so-and-so – are states the function of which is to keep their positive counterparts from being accepted.¹

*Conditional opinions* – opinions to the effect that if something is so-and-so then something is such-and-such – are states the function of which is to make one accept that something is such-and-such given that one accepts that something is so-and-so.²

¹ When Frege discusses complex opinions – “Gedankengefüge” – he insists that the satiation of an incomplete thought (such as the conjunction or the negation) is not a process in time. (See the first footnote of Logische Untersuchungen, dritter Teil: Gedankengefüge, first published in Beiträge zur Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus 1, 1923-6, pp. 36-51.) Our interest in complex opinions is very different from Frege’s, however. From the point of view of psychological explanation, negation causally and quite literally operates on the negated opinion.

² This is a simplification: conditional opinions presumably also have the function of making us reject the antecedent when rejecting the consequent. However, this will make little difference to the following discussion.

Simon Blackburn describes conditional opinions as commitments to either accept the consequent or reject the antecedent. (See chapters 5 and 6 of Spreading the Word, Oxford: Oxford U. P. 1984 and p. 503 of “Attitudes and Contents” in Ethics 98, 1988, pp. 501-17.) This, too, must be a simplification: we can accept a conditional while neither accepting the consequent nor rejecting the antecedent, as when withholding judgment. Moreover, talk about commitments has caused some confusion. Mark van Roojen objects that accepting the conditional and finding reason to reject the consequent, one is not committed to reject the antecedent; rather, one might give up the conditional opinion. (See “Expressivism and Irrationality”, The Philosophical Review 105:3 1996, pp. 311-35.) But if conditional opinions are commitments, they are obviously commitments that can be given up: that is exactly what we do when we cease accepting the conditional. At least, that is what should be said if
Conjunctive opinions – opinions to the effect that something is so-and-so and something is such-and-such – are states the function of which is to keep otherwise separate opinions available for inference (activating conditional opinions and logical intuitions – see below).\textsuperscript{1}

To see how some of these analyses work together, think about our previous example:

(A) If lying makes one nervous then telling one’s little brother to lie makes one nervous.
(B) Lying makes one nervous.
(C) Telling one’s little brother to lie does not make one nervous.

And add:

(D) Telling one’s little brother to lie makes one nervous

Let us use (A*), (B*), (C*) and (D*) to talk about opinions expressed by sentences such as (A), (B), (C) and (D).\textsuperscript{2} According to the above hypotheses, the function of (A*) is to cause one to accept (D*), given acceptance of (B*). Bringing (A*) and (B*) together and thus forming a conjunction of (A*) and (B*), we form a state the function of which is to make us accept (D*).

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{1} To make inferences we must bring together the premises employed: our opinions are not all involved in inference all the time. (Saying that we believe every logical consequence of what we believe seems obviously false and methodologically unhelpful if considered as a characterization of belief – at least when trying to understand the workings of our mind.)
\textsuperscript{2} (A*) is an opinion to the effect that if lying makes one nervous then telling one’s little brother to lie makes one nervous; (B*) is an opinion to the effect that lying makes one
What I suggest is that taking (D*) to follow logically from the conjunction of (A*) and (B*) is to appreciate the functional connection between accepting the conjunction of (A*) and (B*) and accepting (D*). Of course, we do not appreciate the connection under the above, technical, description “functional connection”, but we do think of accepting (A*) and (B*) as somehow forcing us to accept (D*), and that is the phenomenon to explain.

As suggested by our traditional distinctions between what follows logically and what follows causally, say, seeing (D*) as following from the conjunction of (A*) and (B*) is somehow different from thinking that (D*) follows from (B*); that is, different from accepting (A*). Failing to grasp the former implication is a matter of failing to fully grasp that which implies (D*) – failing to fully grasp and conjoin (A*) and (B*). Given the relevant interpretation of what it is to conjoin (A*) and (B*), and given the function of (A*), to accept the conjunction just is to accept a state the function of which is to make one accept (D*). By contrast, one can accept (B*) without being in a state the function of which is to make one accept (D*), as long as (B*) is disjoined from any state like (A*).

Now consider our intuition that (A*), (B*) and (C*) are inconsistent. When we try to conjoin (C*), the function of which is to keep one from accepting (D*), with (A*) and (B*), our thinking is thrown into conflict. It is told by the conjunction of (A*) and (B*) to accept (D*) while being told by (C*) not to accept (D*), but both these things cannot be done simultaneously: we need some procedures for handling such cases. I suggest that taking the conjunction of (A*), (B*) and (C*) to be “logically” inconsistent is an appreciation of the functional conflict within the set which is independent of whether or not we accept any further opinions. The function of this appreciation is to keep us from accepting the conjunction,
thus eventually allowing us a determinate attitude towards \((D^*)\) or to direct our minds at more fruitful tasks.

Understood this way, our everyday intuitions about consequence and inconsistency (as opposed, perhaps, to a philosopher’s sophisticated theoretical ideas about these things) are reasonably seen as states of mind the function of which is to guide our reasoning, telling us what conclusions to draw given other opinions and what combinations of opinions to give up. From this perspective, they are integral parts of our practice of giving up or coming to accept various opinions – a part of our practice of reasoning. As such they are explained when that practice is explained.

What we have at this stage is a general analysis of logical intuitions as well as negative, conditional and conjunctive opinions. What remains to be done is to explain why beliefs and optations, respectively, are the subjects of logical intuitions and related in various ways by complex opinions. These explanations are crucial for the present argument: if there are no explanations for beliefs, the above hypotheses are undermined; if there are explanations for beliefs but not for optations, emotivism is undermined; but if there are explanations for both beliefs and optations, an emotivist account of moral reasoning seems viable, and emotivism is vindicated. As we shall see, there is considerable support for the last alternative.

Notice that, although sadly neglected by much writing on logic and emotivism, the parallel treatment of cognitivist and emotivist accounts is absolutely crucial to the issue at hand. The only way to make a fair comparison of two explanatory hypotheses – or indeed to have two seriously contending hypotheses – is to develop them sufficiently, continually replacing vague intuitions with explanatory structure. And although the length of this paper and my limited knowledge prevent anything like a final decision as to emotivism’s capacity to explain reasoning, I am confident that it takes us in the right direction. To keep on track, though, it is important to remember that the purpose of the emotivist identifications is to explain various empirical features of our moral lives, not necessarily to justify them.
or explain wherein the *validity* of certain inferences lie. When people argue that the justification of moral reasoning would become impossible under emotivism, that might be a problem for us, or for morality, but it does nothing to undermine the truth of emotivism: only explanatory failure does.¹

4. Judgment and inconsistency

Judgment is the home of logical intuitions, whether moral or non-moral. A certain object might look heavy but sound light to a person without her being inconsistent. But when she embarks on judging whether the object *is* light or heavy – when she tries to form a determinate representation of the object’s weight – then she cannot accept both what her eyes and what her ears tell her.

As it is with appearances, so it is with optations. To have conflicting optations is not to be inconsistent, as critics of emotivist accounts of logic often point out. Here is how G. F. Schueler puts the point:

Almost every time I walk past the cookie jar ... I experience such a conflict of attitudes. On the one hand, I approve of my eating a cookie since, from long experience, I know I will enjoy it. On the other hand, I also disapprove of my eating one since, from equally long experience, I know what it does to my waistline. So here is a clash of attitudes, but where is the “mistake” ... that is supposed to be involved?²

¹ In “Outline of an Argument for Moral Realism”, *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 12/13 1981, pp. 215-25, Lars Bergström argues that the only explanation that would render our interest in consistency justified would make reference to the idea that inconsistent opinions cannot all be true, and Torbjörn Tännsjö advances the same view on pp. 8-9 in *Moral Realism*, Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield 1990. In the context of explanation and psychological analysis, however, that is just beside the point.

Agreed, there is no mistake involved. But neither do we take ourselves to be mistaken or inconsistent when having conflicting impressions concerning an object’s weight. It is when we embark on deciding what attitude to express or act from – when we try to form a determinate optation towards an object – that inconsistency becomes an issue and consistency a necessity. Shueler’s attitudes tell him both to eat the cookie and not to, and both these things cannot be done, as he is well aware. In Kantian lingo: it is when involved in making determinate judgments that the avoidance of inconsistency is a categorical imperative. (For Kant, remember, the moral law is a categorical imperative for creatures judging on their subjective desires.)

The need to dissolve cognitive as well as optational conflicts, I suggest, is the explanation of our capacity for theoretical and practical judgment. At bottom this is a practical need. To live on, creatures with substantial capacities to adapt their behavior to variations in the environment need both maps of the world in which they act (some of which are stored and retrievable from memory) and goals that are themselves adapted to the environment in complex ways; but inconsistent maps make achievement of goals a random matter, and lack of determinate goals make maps useless.¹

However, it has been doubted that our worries about inconsistency are fully explained by such “pragmatic” aspects of reasoning. For example, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong claims that not all cases of inconsistency are the subjects of pragmatic pressures, despite there still being something wrong

¹ For previous works on the idea that non-cognitivist logic can be built on a notion of practical inconsistency, see especially Simon Blackburn’s *Spreading the Word*, chapters 6 and 7 and “Attitudes and Contents”, but also Allan Gibbard’s *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Oxford: Oxford U. P. 1990, pp. 74-5, 284-91 and Folke Tersman’s “Non-Cognitivism and Inconsistency” in *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 33, 1995, pp. 361-371. In his *The Logic of Commands*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1966, Nicholas Rescher argues that the logic of commands should be approached by means of ordinary assertoric logic and the notion of command termination, i.e. the realization of the action commanded. Insofar as optations are “inner commands”, this would give us a “logic of optations”.
with them: this would leave the appearance of validity of arguments containing normative judgments without full explanation.¹

I agree that inconsistencies can be pragmatically innocent, and that there might be good reasons not to try to get rid of them. Faced with puzzles like the liar, the lottery paradox, or the concept of free will and having no professional interest in finding a solution, it might be wise not to search for a consistent set of opinions about the matter. And there might indeed be rewards other than saving time: Sinnott-Armstrong suggests that harboring certain moral inconsistencies might help a political career, and this might well be true about most ways of life. But these cases are no problem for our explanation of the faculty of judgment, and of the existence of intuitions about “logical” rather than pragmatic mistakes. In order to explain the stable existence of a device in a species, there is no need to assume that it is used frequently – many devices of many animals are used in average less than once per individual – nor is there any need to assume that every employment of a device brings some benefits for the system to which it belongs, or indeed for its own reproduction and continued use.²

Although the basic rationale for a faculty of practical and theoretical judgment is fairly straightforward, filling in all the details would demand considerable space – not to mention considerable research. Still, I will try to say something: with respect to judgment as applied to memory and perception, and as applied to optations and emotions.


² Sinott-Armstrong thinks that the gap between what is pragmatically bad and what is logically mistaken needs explanation only under non-cognitivist accounts. He is not alone in making this one-eyed mistake. In his papers “Ethical Consistency” and “Consistency and Realism” (both in Problems of the Self, London: Cambridge U. P. 1973), Bernard Williams argues that cognitivism gives moral inconsistency an “ultimate kind of significance” whereas non-cognitivism would give it limited pragmatic significance. I suggest that
It is clear that our sensory impressions are intimately related to our beliefs about our physical environment: to cause beliefs is certainly one of the most important functions of our impressions. But it is also clear that the two cannot (always) be identified. Our senses tell us what to believe, but we sometimes distrust their verdict, and many beliefs are formed through a complex weighing of various impressions and beliefs since they concern states of affairs that resist simple observation. Three meshed aspects of judgment apply: one of gathering information, one of weighing together various aspects, and one of censorship or selective attention. Finding our grounds for belief insufficient we can gather new information by searching the environment or the memories of ourselves and others, eventually weighing together what we have found in a judgment that can be added to the arsenal of inner maps that we use for orientation. Other impressions and memories are kept from these maps because they come in conflict with better supported representations or because they originated in a way that makes them unreliable, or perhaps because they are emotionally difficult to handle – think of representations of our own abilities and shortcomings.

Now, what I claim is that just as we are capable of deciding which of our impressions and memories to be governed by, we are capable of deciding what optations and plans of action to take seriously. The reason that we have this capacity is the same in both areas: it matters a great deal both what beliefs and what optations and intentions we have.

Optations giving rise to essentially social emotions – such as guilt and indignation – are especially prone to have important consequences since (1) they have a tendency to show in posture, gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice unless deliberately and skillfully constrained, since (2) the attitudes of others toward us will depend on how they more or less consciously perceive our attitudes, and since (3) how well we fare will

Williams’ talk about “ultimate significance” expresses a philosopher’s penchant for truth rather than any insight into the matters at hand.
depend in crucial ways on what attitudes others have towards us. In order to adjust our behavior and emotional reactions to complex variations in social and physical environment, information must be gathered about the variety of different considerations, we must weigh incoming pieces of information, and some ways of thinking and reacting must be censored. If I am right, then, opinions to the effect that an act or kind of act is wrong are optations that survive or result from an act of judgment.

To recapitulate: our moral opinions – as any other opinions – are subject to judgment, and that is why they are subject to intuitions of inconsistency. As we have seen, the need for judgment is equally great with respect to our moral optations as it is with respect to representations of features of the world. However, a more complete grasp of judgment and logical intuitions (including intuitions of inconsistency) will have to await our account of negative and complex opinions.

5. Negative opinions

One of the hypotheses introduced in section 3 was that negative opinions are states the function of which is to keep their positive counterpart from being accepted, or, put differently, from governing our thinking and behavior. Such states are of course intimately connected to the faculty of

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1 For interesting work on the role of guilt and indignation in social coordination, see chapter 7 of Allan Gibbard’s *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*.

2 Judgment is of course more complex than pictured here. In particular, the states rejected in judgment can linger in spite as when you cross the index and middle fingers of one of your hands and draw them up and down along the bridge of your nose, one fingertip at each side and focus on what your fingers tell you: it will feel as if you have two noses, but that is not what you believe. Or focus on the fact that some act of yours has seriously upset someone whose approval means much to you: even though you think that you did the right thing, it is likely that you will feel guilt. Also, judgment is not entirely stable but changes with mood, which makes undated talk about a person’s opinions somewhat imprecise.

3 Simon Blackburn’s answer to Shueler is similar, but with fewer explanatory bells and whistles. See pp. 509-10 of his “Attitudes and Contents”.

judgment, as were our intuitions of inconsistency: insofar as judgment involves discrimination between alternatives, it involves refusing to accept certain alternatives.

A cognitivist will stress the importance of representations of wrongness that correspond to moral reality, and the need to keep representations that do not from being accepted. An emotivist will stress that it has been (and continues to be) important for us both that we abstain from actions and react with indignation or guilt on some occasions, and that we do not on others. We have negative opinions because abstinence, guilt and indignation are costly, keeping possible means to our goals out of consideration. Since guilt and indignation are social emotions, this is largely a cost with social ramifications, as seen in various adverse reactions to moralizing.

So far, the emotivist account of negative opinions seems no less plausible than the cognitivist counterpart. Of course, so far we have only considered negations of opinions to the effect that some act is wrong. But it is quite clear how this account can be extended to any functional state of mind resulting from judgment: to the extent that it is important not to be in a state with a particular function on certain occasions, and to the extent that finding out that this is such an occasion takes time and cognitive resources, there will be a need to “poison mark” certain states in the above fashion.

6. Conditional opinions

According to our hypothesis in section 3, conditional opinions are states the function of which is to make one accept that something is such-and-such given that one accepts that something is so-and-so. Our question is why we would have such states, given that the moral so-and-sos and such-and-suches are the results of judgment as applied to, respectively, optations and beliefs.

Since the antecedent (the so-and-so) as well as the consequent (the such-and-such) can be either a moral or a non-moral opinion, we shall –
somewhat artificially – divide our discussion in four parts, concentrating in turn on:

(1) Opinions where both the antecedent and the consequent are non-moral: If heavy weight is put on a branch, it will snap.

(2) Opinions where the antecedent is non-moral and the consequent moral: If he hit her, it would be wrong not to punish him.

(3) Opinions where the antecedent is moral and the consequent is non-moral: If he does something wrong, Sarah will lecture him.

(4) Opinions where both antecedent and consequent are moral: If he has done something wrong, it would be wrong not to punish him.

To simplify the discussion, we shall assume that the non-moral opinions are beliefs rather than non-moral optations.

As I see it, all four kinds of conditionals have their source in a need to adapt behavior to increasingly complex factors. Start with opinions of type (1). By connecting factors that are perceptually obvious in different circumstances, we can represent in advance what we will face, and therefore react in advance to these representations. For example: seeing that great weight is put on a branch, I am led to represent the branch as snapping, which might cause a reaction of fear and flight before the event, thereby radically increasing my chances to avoid a falling branch. Some of these connections produce not only prediction, but also figure in instrumental reasoning, by making desires for goals translate into desires for means: wanting the branch to snap, and having my representation of its snapping connected to my representation of its being put under weight, I now want to put it under weight.

Among our conditional opinions of type (1) we also find various “analytic” ones with a similar point, letting us access and combine
information that would otherwise not have been available in prediction and planning. For example, knowing that Christie is an oculist, and knowing a great deal about eye-doctors, the idea that if someone is an oculist then she is an eye-doctor lets us access new information about Christie.

Having the outlines of a reasonable explanation of our conditional opinions of type (1), we also have a vindication of our general hypothesis concerning the function of conditional opinions. As far as moral cognitivism is concerned the other types can be subsumed under this one, but the emotivist needs different stories. First, consider conditional opinions of type (2), opinions with non-moral antecedent and moral consequent. On emotivism, these are the (unsurprising) connections between a representation, $r$, and a moral optation operating on some representation connected to $r$ via conditional opinions of type (1).

Second, think of conditional opinions of type (3), opinions with moral antecedent and non-moral consequent. Abstractly, we might say that these are no different from type (2) opinions: in ordinary sentential logic, sentences of the form “If [moral opinion] then [non-moral opinion]” – which conventionally express opinions of type (3) – translate to sentences of the form “If not [non-moral opinion] then not [moral opinion]” – which conventionally express opinions of type (2). The rationale for both kinds of connection is essentially the rationale for judgment: it has been (and is) of great importance both to have a specific moral optation on certain occasions and not to have it on other occasions.¹

Still, some opinions naturally expressed in the format of “If [moral opinion] then [non-moral opinion]” are not straightforwardly understood along these lines. This is true when, like the opinion that if Charles does

¹ The importance of not having moral optations unless certain conditions hold, or when certain other conditions hold, also accounts for the phenomenon, pointed out by Nicholas Sturgeon, that confidence in our moral opinions is undermined if we find out that they are caused or sustained by the wrong kind of reasons. See p. 410 of his Critical notice of Gibbard’s Wise Choices, Apt Feelings in Noûs Vol. 29, No. 3 1995, pp. 402-24.
something wrong, Sarah will lecture him, they seem to predict non-moral states-of-affairs on the basis of moral ones, or when similar opinions provide the basis for causal explanations of non-moral states-of-affairs (“if Charles did something wrong, Sarah would indeed be lecturing the way she is right now, and I can see no other cause for such behavior”). In these cases our interest is not so much to have appropriate moral opinions as to understand what has happened, or will happen, non-morally. How can emotivism make room for such thoughts?

The most straightforward and plausible explanation is that the deliverances of moral judgment have become natural signs of various non-moral facts/representations, thereby inviting prediction. This is not too surprising. First, of course, a person’s moral opinions are bound to be somewhat reliable signs of her own future behavior and emotive reactions. Second, a person’s moral opinions will be more or less systematically connected to various non-moral features of the actions concerned, and since such features will tend to have interesting repercussions, especially social ones, they will also be connected to those. Third, since our tendencies to form moral opinions are susceptible to social pressures, they will be more or less coordinated, especially within socially stable groups: the moral judgment of one person will be a reasonably reliable guide to the judgment of others, and to features that are likely to produce such judgment.¹

Finally, consider conditional opinions of type (4), opinions where both antecedent and consequent are moral. Some such opinions concern causal or predictive relations; others are better described as moralistic. In the first category we will, for example, find opinions to the effect that if one person behaves wrongfully, others will behave wrongfully, too. Such opinions are reasonably understood as based on combinations of type (2) and type (3) conditionals, where the latter is of the causal or predictive type. The second

¹ See pp. 204-7 of Simon Blackburn’s “Just Causes” in his Essays in Quasi-Realism for an earlier emotivist account of thoughts about moral causes.
category – moralistic conditionals – is exemplified by opinions to the effect that

(A) if behaving in a certain way is wrong for me, it is wrong for him too

or to the effect that

(B) if behaving in a certain way is wrong, it is also wrong to make others behave in that way.

These are connections from one moral opinion to another, and the task of emotivism is to explain why we should expect such connections if moral opinions are the results of judgment applied to moral optations. The answers will differ from case to case (as under a cognitivist explanation), but we might use the above examples as a test. With regard to (A), it is clear why sets of optations that allowed me but not others to do things would be met with a certain resistance by others, and so it is clear why sets of optations with a more egalitarian structure are likely to be mutually accepted and therefore more likely to allow valuable co-operation.¹ It is no wonder, then, that there will be a pressure towards accepting the first connection. As to (B), instrumental reasoning will lead us from disliking something to disliking means to that something; hence the connection between thinking that a certain kind of act is wrong to thinking that making someone perform such an act is wrong.

Of course, both these connections – though coming naturally – can be negated in judgment. For example, one might think that in some cases, the cost of avoiding certain acts that cause someone to do something wrong is

¹ The degree of expected egalitarianism seems to vary across social species, as well as across different human societies. Anger / indignation is evoked when expectations are foiled. See Frans de Waal’s Good Natured, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P. 1996, chapter 4.
such that these acts should not be ruled out. But the point here is just that moralistic type (4) connections can be readily explained by emotivism.

The last remark about negation holds for all kinds of connections discussed above (as well as to negative opinions). For example, my thought that \( p \) might be connected to my thought that \( q \), but I might already be thinking that not-\( q \), or my thought that \( p \) might be connected to my thought that \( r \) which is connected to my thought that not-\( q \). Neither of these connections from my thought that \( p \) to thoughts that \( q \) and not-\( q \), respectively, are my conditional opinions until judgment has determined which to follow, by gathering information through memory or senses, by weighing various aspects and connections, and by censoring or attending to some representation that supports one connection rather than the other. As always, our tendency to apply judgment rather than randomization to solve conflict is explained by the importance (as explained above and in section 4) of having certain conditional opinions rather than others.

7. Conjunctive opinions

As we have seen, the existence of negative and conditional opinions of various sorts is no more of a mystery for emotivists than for cognitivists. Now, conjunctive opinions have not, to my knowledge, been taken to provide any extra difficulties for the emotivist account, but I will say something about them to provide a fuller account of reasoning in general.

If what has been said this far has been correct, there is an obvious psychological need for opinions the function of which is to keep otherwise separate opinions available for inference. It is not until we form conjunctive opinions that it becomes possible to employ the conditional opinions that are necessary for advanced interaction with the environment: a conditional opinion to the effect that if \( p \) then \( q \) must be brought together with \( p \) or with not-\( q \) in order to yield \( q \) and not-\( p \), respectively. Moreover, when considering alternatives in forming explanations or plans of action it might be important
to hold opinions about several of the alternatives in mind at the same time, for example that *neither* alternative is wrong.

Disjunctive opinions – opinions to the effect that either $p$ or $q$ – form one interesting kind of conjunctive opinions. Plausibly, they are states the function of which is to make one accept that $p$ given that one accepts that not-$q$, AND to make one accept that $q$ given that one accepts that not-$p$, AND to keep one from accepting that $p$ given that one accepts that $q$, AND to keep one from accepting that $q$ given that one accepts that $p$. (Since I take exclusive disjunctions to be what we most often have in mind when we ascribe disjunctive opinions, my suggestion concerns these.) Accordingly, disjunctive opinions are conjunctions of four conditional opinions, two of which involve negation. Since we have been through conditional and conjunctive opinions above, further explanations might seem superfluous. But keeping in mind the human propensity for inferential fallacies, our relatively effortless everyday handling of disjunctive opinions deserves a comment. A reasonable explanation departs from the fact that disjunctive opinions are complex capacities of considerable practical importance, namely capacities to keep track of *alternatives*. Accepting a disjunctive opinion is to keep a number of hypotheses “at hand”, hypotheses concerning what to do, what to wish, what to believe, etc., so that accepting one hypothesis leads us to discard the others, and negating one leads us to consider the others (or embrace the only remaining one). In effect then, disjunctive opinions let us focus our limited judgmental capacities on promising alternatives. One could expect our mind to be relatively well suited for that purpose.\(^1\)

8. Understanding moral discourse

Given an understanding of the state of mind involved in moral reasoning, how can we understand sentences conventionally expressing moral opinions? In particular, how can we understand our intuitions concerning logical relations between sentences? Traditional answers refer to the content communicated by the sentence, and that is indeed what I will do. The development of the answer will go little beyond sketch and it will leave untouched an enormous literature on the philosophy of language: hopefully, though, it will suggest how someone tempted by the above emotivist account of moral opinions can begin to deal with moral language.

Above, we have explained our appreciation of logical relations with reference to the function of the opinions involved, and that approach can quite plausibly be applied to language as well. Communication has presumably evolved for its capacity to transmit or copy psychological states from one creature to another. For this to have been possible, receivers must have had an interest in being affected by senders, and senders must have had an interest in affecting receivers: in this sense, communication is a cooperative enterprise (which in no way rules out a certain amount of uncooperative use of the tools of communication).¹

For humans, communication allows the sharing of beliefs and complex opinions involving beliefs, and it allows the coordination of emotions and actions by transmitting optations and complex opinions involving optations. Entities used in communication such as words and linguistic forms are continually selected for their tendency to cause specific features of the states communicated: the states successfully communicated by linguistic acts or sentences that differ in these respects will themselves be different in corresponding features. Accordingly, we can talk about a state of mind and its corresponding linguistic acts or sentences and we can talk about

¹ For a complex theory of communication as an evolved phenomenon, see Ruth Garrett Millikan’s Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories.
sentences and their corresponding states of mind. (This correspondence is neatly mirrored by the way in which we employ sentences in the indicative to talk about states of mind: the sentence “It is raining” corresponds to the opinion that it is raining; “What Bill did was wrong” corresponds to the opinion that what Bill did was wrong.) To understand a sentence is to go into the corresponding state of mind: to accept the sentence is to understand but not to negate or suspend that state of mind.\footnote{According to interesting psychological research, understanding a sentence normally involves accepting it: only cognitive effort (negation) keeps the two apart. See Wegner, D. M.; Coulton, G.; Wenzlaff, R. “The transparency of denial: Briefing in the debriefing paradigm.”}

But now it seems clear that there is a way in which sets of sentences can throw our thinking into conflict, a way that corresponds to the way in which sets of opinions throw our thinking into conflict: by fulfilling their function, thereby causing in the receiver a functionally conflicting set of opinions. It is thus no wonder that we employ judgment to decide which sentences to accept and which to negate, and no wonder that intuitions about inconsistency and consequence will apply as naturally to sentences as to the corresponding states of mind.

With this said, let me address a complaint recently raised by Mark van Roojen against non-cognitivist accounts of our logical intuitions.\footnote{See his “Expressivism and Irrationality”}. The complaint is based on the fact that in explaining the meaning of moral sentences, non-cognitivists have often said that moral sentences express emotions or desires or perhaps acceptance/rejection of such states, and that their logical relations to other sentences should be understood in that light: in a way, that is also what I have suggested above. But, van Roojen claims, that leaves the non-cognitivist account without means to explain why we take the following sentences to be consistent:

(A) “X is not wrong”
(B) “I hereby express judgmental acceptance of negative moral emotions towards X”

According to van Roojen, the non-cognitivist account of logical intuitions concerning moral language must admit that (B) is equivalent to

(C) “X is wrong”

which is clearly inconsistent with (A). Hence, the expressivist account is mistaken. But although this objection might apply to theories explaining inconsistencies between sentences solely on what they express, it misses out on the present emotivist account. Given our focus on what it is to accept a sentence, there is a good, non-ad hoc reason to reject the equivalence of (B) and (C). To accept (C) is presumably to be of the opinion that X is wrong which, according to our emotivism, is to have a judgmentally accepted moral optation for X not to be performed. However, to accept (B) is presumably to accept a representation of the person uttering (B) as expressing such a state of mind. (This is just a special case of the plausible general thesis that the function of sentences beginning with the first person singular is to convey some fact about the issuer of that sentence, what fact depending on the rest of the sentence and conversational context.) But that is not to accept the state of mind expressed by (C). Hence, no inconsistency.

A non-moral case is treated analogously:

(D) “Stockholm is not the capital of Sweden”

(E) “I hereby express judgmental acceptance of a representation of Stockholm as being the capital of Sweden”

(F) “Stockholm is the capital of Sweden”

Isn’t the person uttering (D) expressing judgmental acceptance of a representation of Stockholm as not being the capital of Sweden? Why then do we take (D) to be logically inconsistent with (F) but not with (E)? Because the state of mind corresponding to (E) – the acceptance of (E) – is the
acceptance of a representation of the utterer as expressing acceptance a representation of Stockholm as being the capital of Sweden, while the state corresponding to (D) is a negation of a representation of Stockholm as being the capital of Sweden, that is, a negation of the state corresponding to (F). Hence, no contradiction.

9. Concluding remarks

I have discussed emotivism as the positive claim that (certain) moral opinions are states the function of which is to affect action through eliciting emotional reactions, rather than as the negative claim that moral opinions cannot be true or false. As we saw in section 5, it is reasonable to expect moral optations to be cognitively employed – employed in prediction and instrumental reasoning – and this might explain some of our tendency to form moral opinions and hence be a part of their function, although perhaps not a very important part. Moreover, the literature contains a number of sophisticated efforts to show that plausible emotivist accounts imply that moral opinions can be true or false.¹ But this is not the place to decide whether the above account suggests cognitivism, or whether such a cognitivism would be of much interest. Our focus has been elsewhere. What we have seen is how emotivism (and indeed cognitivism) can begin to explain our intuitions of inconsistency and consequence. To my mind, the emotivist sketch seems as promising as its cognitivist counterpart. The need

¹ In “Gibbard’s Theory of Norms”, Paul Horwich argues that Allan Gibbard’s non-cognitivist theory collapses into cognitivism. There has also been extensive debate about the connection between “minimalist” accounts of truth and representation and expressivist or non-cognitivist theories. See for example Crispin Wright’s Truth and Objectivity, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P. 1992, especially chapters 1 and 2; Michael Smith’s “Why Expressivists about Value should Love Minimalism about Truth”; Paul Horwich’s “The Essence of Expressivism”, both in Analysis 54:1 1994, pp. 1-12 and 19-20 respectively; and Ralph Wedgwood’s “Non-Cognitivism, Truth and Logic” in Philosophical Studies 86:1 1997, pp. 73-91.
to correlate opinions with other opinions is considerable regardless of whether these opinions are optations or beliefs and, consequently, so is the need for conditional and conjunctive opinions and for inference. Furthermore, the need for determinacy is as urgent with respect to optations as with respect to representations and so, consequently, is the need for negation. All this seems to undermine one of the most persistent arguments against emotivism.

Although emotivism provides an explanation of why we think that there are relations of inconsistency and consequence, we admittedly have no ready account of what these relations are. Given that our explanations have been correct, though, this poses no threat to emotivism. Our primary evidence for the existence of such relations are our intuitions of inconsistency and consequence, and these intuitions can be explained by emotivism: evidence explained by a theory can hardly tell against it. However, the claims made in this paper might be clarified by some speculation about what such relations could be, given that emotivism is correct. Assume that our intuitions of inconsistency and consequence are largely responsive to such relations, whether concerned with moral opinions or paradigmatically factual ones. (This is one of the assumptions behind the argument against emotivism that we have considered: emotivists are asked to explain it, or explain why it appears to be correct). If so, the relevant relations will be ones that take moral optations as relata. Now, either cognitivism is true and moral optations can be true or false, or it is not. If it is true, it might well be (a) that our intuitions of inconsistency are responsive to whether a set of opinions is such that not all of them can be true, and (b) that our intuitions of consequence are responsive to whether the truth of the members of some set of opinions guarantees the truth of the members of some other set. If so, the standard accounts of inconsistency and consequence can presumably be preserved. On the other hand, if non-cognitivism is true, a different account suggests itself. The explanations in this paper implies (a*) that intuitions of inconsistency are responsive to
whether a conjunction of opinions would be *functionally* inconsistent in a certain way, and (b*) that our intuitions of consequence are responsive to whether some conjunction of opinions would have as its *function* to cause acceptance of some opinion. If so, inconsistency and consequence could well be seen as a species of functional relations. But to expand on these suggestions would take us beyond a defense of emotivism and must be left for another occasion.¹

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