

# Precis of Moral Fictionalism

Mark Eli Kalderon

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Two main ideas animate *Moral Fictionalism* (henceforth, MF). Unfortunately, there are in tension with one another, if not, indeed, inconsistent.

The first main idea is that standard noncognitivism is a syndrome of three logically distinct claims. Standard noncognitivists claim that moral judgment is not belief or any other cognitive attitude but is, rather, a noncognitive attitude more akin to desire; that this noncognitive attitude is expressed by our public moral utterances; and, hence, that our public moral utterances lack a distinctively moral subject matter and so are not answerable to the moral facts. Notice, however, that these are logically distinct claims—the first is a psychological claim, the second and third, positive and negative semantic claims, respectively. We can regiment the familiar technical vocabulary as follow:

- *Noncognitivism* is the claim that moral judgment is a noncognitive attitude.
- *Expressivism* is the claim that the content of moral utterance is determined by the noncognitive attitude it expresses.
- *Nonfactualism* is the claim that the content of moral utterance fails to represent a distinctive domain of moral fact.

These claims are logically distinct. The content of moral utterance may be determined by the noncognitive attitude it expresses, but it may thereby come to represent the moral facts. Freestanding attributions of goodness may commend their objects, but in so commending they may represent their objects as good. Expressivism does not entail nonfactualism. Nor does the converse entailment hold. Consider redundancy theories of truth that maintain that a sentence and the corresponding truth-ascription have identical contents. Truth-ascriptions, so understood, do not represent sentences or the propositions they express as instantiating

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the property, truth. But the content of truth-ascriptions needn't be determined by the noncognitive attitudes expressed. Crucially, and more obviously once stated, the psychological claim of noncognitivism entails neither semantic claim.

This last observation has an important taxonomic consequence since it allows for the possibility of a fictionalist form of noncognitivism distinct from the more familiar standard noncognitivism. Specifically, if noncognitivism just is the claim that moral judgment is a noncognitive attitude, then what's to prevent this attitude being expressed by utterances that purport to represent the moral facts? Whereas nonfactualists seek to debunk the realist fiction of a moral subject matter, the moral fictionalist claims that the fiction is in no need of debunking but is the means by which the noncognitive attitude is conveyed by moral utterance. Moral fictionalism is noncognitivism without nonfactualism.

Not only does this last observation raise the possibility of moral fictionalism, but it makes clear the argumentative strategy of MF. To establish fictionalism, one would need to:

1. argue for noncognitivism (the task of chapter one)
2. argue against nonfactualism (the task of chapter two)

(Explaining how the positive case for noncognitivism and the negative case against nonfactualism together constitute a case for moral fictionalism is the task of chapter three.)

The second main idea that animates MF is that there is a constraint on public moral reasoning that is a necessary condition on its being a form of cognition—a constraint that is morally as well as epistemically significant. The constraint is that if public moral reasoning is cognitive, then it is *noncomplacent*—that it ought to be appropriately sensitive to the reasonable views of others, even where they disagree about fundamental matters of morals. Thus when faced with a disagreement about the moral significance of the given circumstances, one ought to be prepared to reflect further on one's considered moral judgment—perhaps one's disputant is onto something that one has so far overlooked. The argument for noncognitivism in chapter one of MF crucially turned on this constraint. If public moral reasoning must be noncomplacent to be cognitive, and it isn't, but is, rather, intransigent, then public moral reasoning and the judgments it issues are noncognitive.

Why think that moral judgment is intransigent? To claim that moral judgment is intransigent is not to make an *empirical* claim about the extent of intransigence in public moral discourse, but is, rather, to make a *normative* claim about intransigence—that intransigence is permissible given the norms that actually govern moral judgment. A conceivability argument was the basis for this normative claim. If we can conceive of cases where it makes sense to reflect no further on one's considered moral judgment even in face of disagreement with a reasonable disputant,

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then moral intransigence must be permissible by the norms that actually govern moral judgment that we tacitly appeal to in so conceiving.

So, if moral judgment is cognitive, then it is noncomplacent. But it is instead intransigent. And so moral judgment is noncognitive.

Noncomplacency may be necessary for public moral reasoning and the judgments it issues to be genuinely cognitive. But noncomplacency is not merely *epistemically* significant, it is *morally* significant as well. It is the moral significance of noncomplacency that accounts for the ambivalence with which MF ends.

To appreciate the moral significance of noncomplacency, consider the Formula of Humanity. Treating someone as an end in itself involves offering them reasons and treating them as capable of assessing those reasons. Conversely, it is to treat the reasons they offer as potentially genuine reasons that they are in a position to assess. It is this latter aspect of the Formula of Humanity that provides a rationale for noncomplacency. In the context of a disagreement about the normative significance of shared circumstances, treating your disputant as possessing potentially genuine reasons that they are in a position to assess is to have a motive reflect further on one's considered moral judgment. In general, to be noncomplacent is to strive to be responsive to what reasons there are. In the context of moral disagreement, it is to strive to be responsive to authoritative reasons—reasons with the authority of morality. Noncomplacency is thus a kind of moral perfection, and a failure to be noncomplacent is a moral failing.

So the form of moral fictionalism argued for is inherently unstable. Not so moral fictionalism more generally, for the noncognitivist component could be motivated on other grounds (say, for example, on more familiar motivational grounds.) But if moral practice is fictionalist because of the intransigence of moral judgment, moral practice requires reform. Whether reformed moral practice would be cognitive is an open question to be determined only by further inquiry.