

THE RELEVANCE OF MORAL DISAGREEMENT.
SOME WORRIES ABOUT NONDESCRIPTIVIST COGNITIVISM

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Summary

Nondescriptivist Cognitivism vindicates the cognitive value of moral judgements despite their lack of descriptive content. In this paper, I raise a few worries about the proclaimed virtues of this new metaethical framework. Firstly, I argue that Nondescriptivist Cognitivism tends to beg the question against descriptivism and, secondly, discuss Horgan and Timmons' case against Michael Smith's metaethical rationalism. Although I sympathise with their main critical claims against the latter, I am less enthusiastic about the arguments that they provide to support them.

Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons have recently elaborated a new collaborative paper entitled 'Nondescriptivist Cognitivism. Framework for a New Metaethics', where they vindicate the cognitive value of moral judgements despite their lack of descriptive content. In some of their preceding collaborative papers, Horgan and Timmons had already developed a number of arguments to challenge a few current attempts to buttress descriptivism and the corresponding metaphysical stance, namely: moral realism. They have mainly challenged Brink's and Boyd's attempt to treat moral terms as functional, that is, as terms that designate functional properties. Although, in 'Troubles for Michael Smith's Metaethical Rationalism', they also object to Michael Smith's interpretation of the claim that normative reasons require the convergence "in the desires of fully rational agents."¹

1. Smith (1994), p. 173.

Their line of attack focuses in both cases on the connection between descriptive content and convergence. They assume that descriptive content is somewhat associated with the possibility of achieving a certain sort of convergence as to the correctness of judgements. They argue, however, that such kind of convergence is not at all available in the case of moral discourse. And this comes up as a serious reason to reject moral descriptivism. The novelty in their approach lies precisely in the fact that they want to resist the temptation to think that the dismissal of descriptivism entails that moral judgements are deprived of any assertoric force, of all cognitive significance. On the contrary, they would like to somewhat honour the intuition that moral judgements have assertoric force, that they are truth-apt. To do so, they distinguish between cognitive and descriptive content. And this is why they can contend that moral judgements have cognitive content, are cognitively assessable, even if moral discourse does not qualify as descriptive. 'Nondescriptivist Cognitivism' is unsurprisingly the name reserved for that kind of approach.

In what follows, I intend to raise a few worries about the proclaimed virtues of this new metaethical framework as well as challenge one of Horgan and Timmons' main anti-realist arguments. More specifically, in section 1, I will indicate the fundamental features of Nondescriptivist Cognitivism and argue that, contrary to what Horgan and Timmons' suggest, this framework tends to beg the question against descriptivism and, in any event, does not help the descriptivist to address the internalist issue. In sections 2 and 3, I will explore one of Horgan and Timmons line of reasoning against moral realism. In particular, I will discuss their case against Michael Smith's metaethical rationalism. Thus, I will firstly dispute most of Horgan and Timmons' arguments against Smith's proposals, while, at a second stage, I will sketch an alternative line of objection that will support most of their critical claims. I will finally suggest that, despite the fact that moral judgements cannot obtain the kind of convergence that Horgan and Timmons ascribe to descriptive discourse, this may not be a reason to abandon moral descriptivism. For that convergence demand may not even be satisfied by judgements that are paradigmatically descriptive, like judgements about the shape of objects.

1. *Descriptivism and the New Metaethical Framework*

1.1 Part of the novelty in Horgan and Timmons' metaethical framework derives from their attempt to distinguish three kinds of content, namely: declarative, cognitive, and descriptive content. As they say

Declarative content ... is possessed simply as a result of a grammatical form. Typical moral judgments are expressible by declarative sentences ... Cognitive content is belief-eligible and assertible content ... Descriptive content is content that purports to represent the world as being in a certain way ... Cognitive content has been assumed, by all parties in these discussions, to be the same thing as descriptive content.²

Traditional metaethical approaches tend to conflate cognitive and descriptive content. For they assume that a content is belief-eligible if and only if it represents the world as being in a certain way. No conceptual room seems then to be left for a judgement to be cognitive without thereby being descriptive and, consequently, the dismissal of descriptivism appears to lead quite straightforwardly to the rejection of cognitivism.

Horgan and Timmons seek to block this transition by pulling apart cognitive and descriptive content. To do so, they resort to Crispin Wright's minimal notion of truth or truth-aptness, and the associated distinction between superficial and deep features of a discourse. Truth-aptness comes up, in this sense, as a superficial feature, since its possession by a discourse exclusively depends on the existence of a disciplined practice of assessment together with its submission to the logical trappings of assertion.³ No deeper question needs to be raised in order to classify a certain discourse as truth-apt in this minimal sense. That is why the minimal notion of truth cannot by itself settle the deeper issue raised by realists and anti-realists. It is not easy to express, however, what the precise content of the real-

2. Horgan and Timmons (2000), p. 2.

3. As Wright points out: "... Assertoric discourses are demarcated not by any deep feature of their contents which might be simulated or masked by surface syntactic features, but merely by their statements' being subject to acknowledged conditions of acceptance and their possessing the appropriate surface syntactic features." (Wright (1992), p. 74)

ist question could be, that is, to specify the deeper feature that a discourse must possess to meet the realist demand. That deeper feature is, in any case, the kind of feature that, according to Horgan and Timmons, descriptive content is supposed to apprehend, namely, the sort of feature that alludes to the capacity of a discourse to represent the way the world is.

1.2. On the basis of the distinction between cognitive and descriptive content, Horgan and Timmons claim to be in a position to pick up the kind of content that is proper to moral judgement. Thus, they introduce the notion of ‘a base-case belief’ as a basic psychological state that involves a commitment which can adopt one of the two following forms, namely: an is- or an ought-commitment. If Carme believes that she is studying hard, she has a certain kind of base-case belief, namely, she has an is-commitment with regard to the content ‘that I am studying hard’. We may then say that a belief of this kind is a descriptive belief. By contrast, if Carme believes that she ought to be studying hard, she has a different sort of base-case belief, i.e., she has an ought-commitment with regard to the content ‘that I am studying hard’. In this case, we may say that Carme has an evaluative belief. It seems clear, in any case, that a descriptive and an evaluative belief may have some content in common, say, a core descriptive content:

A base-case belief is a kind of psychological commitment state, of which there are two main species: is-commitments and ought-commitments.

Beliefs of both sort have what we call core descriptive content – a way-the-world-might-be-content.⁴

It is easy to see, however, that core descriptive contents are not, despite appearances to the contrary, descriptive. For descriptive contents have essentially to do with a representation of “the world *as being* in a certain way” and thereby they already have a certain direction of fit; while core descriptive contents are merely concerned with ‘a way-the-world-*might-be*-content’ because they are meant to be neutral with regard to the direction of fit. Hence, it seems at least inappropriate to claim, as Horgan and Timmons do, that, with regard

4. Horgan and Timmons (2000), p. 6.

to descriptive beliefs, “the belief’s declarative content coincides with its core descriptive content.”⁵ They may try to avoid this problem by offering an alternative characterisation of descriptive beliefs. In fact, the quotation above forms a part of a longer sentence that says:

An ordinary descriptive belief ... is an is-commitment with respect to a core descriptive content, and so the belief’s declarative content coincides with its core descriptive content ... (6)

Hence, Horgan and Timmons might just drop the last claim, and confine themselves to assert that “an ordinary descriptive belief ... is an is-commitment with respect to a core descriptive content”. The declarative content of such beliefs could thereby be identified as the combination of two elements: an is-commitment and a core descriptive content.⁶ While evaluative beliefs will come up as beliefs that combine a core descriptive content with an ought-commitment. Moral beliefs are, in any case, regarded as beliefs of the evaluative kind:

Whereas descriptive beliefs involve an is-commitment (a how-it-is-with-the-world commitment) with regard to a core descriptive content, moral beliefs involve a different type of commitment: a how-it-ought-to-be-with-the-world commitment with regard to a core descriptive content.⁷

1.3. Two of the proclaimed virtues of the new framework are: (a) that it does not beg the question against descriptivism, and (b) offers the descriptivist a conceptual apparatus to overcome one of her most serious shortcomings, namely: her difficulties to account for the motivational force of moral judgements. I will argue, however, that none

5. Horgan and Timmons (2000), p. 6. It seems clear that the word ‘descriptive’ is employed in two senses. In one of them, Horgan and Timmons would claim that moral judgements have no descriptive content, while on the other (i.e., the one that figures in the phrase ‘core descriptive content’) moral judgements would certainly be identified as having descriptive content.

6. This way we could consistently maintain the neutrality of core descriptive contents with regard to the two sorts of commitments that can be taken towards such contents.

7. Horgan and Timmons (2000), p. 6.

of these virtues can really be retained. For, if I am right, the descriptivist stance cannot even be stated within the new framework and, even if after some tinkering it could be finally accommodated, I see no reason to think that the proposed framework would really help the descriptivist to explain moral motivation.

According to Horgan and Timmons, descriptivism should be characterised within the new framework as follows:

The descriptivist ... could grant what we have said about ought-commitments and is-commitments being distinct commitment types, ... without having to deny that morality-involving beliefs and assertions have overall descriptive contents (the fundamental claim of the descriptivist). Our framework, recall, leaves open whether or not the overall declarative content of a moral belief is descriptive.⁸

It is the last claim that I doubt. I do not think there is any relevant sense in which the new framework leaves open the possibility that the overall declarative content of a moral belief could be descriptive. Recall, at this stage, that moral beliefs are uncontroversially evaluative. The issue then is not simply whether moral beliefs can be descriptive, but rather whether moral beliefs, despite being evaluative, can also be descriptive. And it is exactly to this question that the descriptivist say yes and the nondescriptivist say no. The problem is that the new framework appears to rule out the kind of possibility that attracts the descriptivist. For it characterises evaluative and descriptive beliefs in exclusive terms. Descriptive beliefs constitutively have a feature that evaluative ones essentially lack:

By contrast, an evaluative belief is an ought-commitment with respect to a core descriptive content. Evaluative beliefs differ *essentially* from descriptive beliefs in the following respect: the core descriptive content of an evaluative belief does not coincide with its overall declarative content.⁹

Hence, and contrary to what Horgan and Timmons urge, it seems that there is no relevant sense in which the descriptivist could consistently claim that “morality-involving beliefs and assertions have overall descriptive contents (the fundamental claim of the de-

8. Horgan and Timmons (2000), p. 10.

9. Horgan and Timmons (2000), p. 6, stress is mine.

scriptivist)”. In the light of this, it is hard to see how the descriptivist stance could even be stated within Horgan and Timmons’ new framework. There are, however, some other resources to which they may appeal in order to expound the descriptivist view.

They provide such further resources as they seek to explain how the new framework allows the descriptivist to accommodate our intuitions about the motivational relevance of moral judgements:

Adopting the framework, descriptivists would maintain that the belief, e.g., Bertie ought to mail the parcel is *both* an *is-commitment* with respect to the overall declarative content (which they understand to be descriptive), that it ought to be that Bertie mails the parcel, and an *ought-commitment* with respect to the core descriptive content, that Bertie mails the parcel. Given the specific functional role and phenomenology distinctive of ought-commitments, descriptivists could thereby neatly combine their view with internalism ... So descriptivists have no reason to suppose that our framework begs any important metaethical questions against them, and they have good reason to positively embrace it.¹⁰

We should then say that, according to the descriptivist, Carme’s belief ‘I ought to be studying hard’ involves two commitments. A trivial ought-commitment with ‘that I am studying hard’ as its core descriptive content, and an is-commitment with regard to a rather peculiar kind of core descriptive content, namely: ‘that it ought to be that I am studying hard’. We thus seem to obtain a way in which the descriptivist stance could be finally expressed within the new framework. But is this new presentation really intelligible?

The first worry is whether ‘that it ought to be that I am studying hard’ could really count as a core descriptive content. Core descriptive contents have been identified as ‘a way-the-world-might-be’ and, consequently, as essentially open to any direction of fit. Hence, if we should include an ought-commitment within a core descriptive content, I do not really see how that neutrality could at all be preserved. A second, related concern is that I do not think Horgan and Timmons have provided any sense in which, as their characterisation of the descriptivist view require, an ought-commitment could be nested into an is-commitment. For, in principle, these two sorts of

10. Horgan and Timmons (2000), p. 10-11, stress is mine.

commitments have been individuated as having two opposite directions of fit.

Let us, in any event, suppose that these problems could be overcome and descriptivism could be properly stated within the new framework, my next difficulty is that I do not see how such a framework could really help the descriptivist to address the internalist issue, that is, to show how the acceptance of a moral judgement could be internally connected with being motivated to act in a certain way.

Horgan and Timmons suggest that the descriptivist should regard Carme's belief 'I ought to be studying hard' as a single belief involving two sorts of commitment, an is- and an ought-commitment. Nothing is said, however, about how these two commitments are supposed to be united in a single belief. First of all, as Horgan and Timmons identify them, they do not even have their core descriptive content in common. The is-commitment has 'that it ought to be that I am studying hard' and the ought-commitment has 'that I am studying hard' as their respective core descriptive contents. But, secondly, even if the required unification between the two commitments could be obtained, the internalist problem for the descriptivist still remains. The difficulty lies precisely in showing how out of an is-commitment as to the content 'I ought to be studying hard' an ought-commitment as to 'I am studying hard' should necessarily originate. Couldn't Carme just assume the is-commitment without the ought-commitment being thereby engendered? I honestly do not see how the new framework can help the descriptivist in this respect. I guess that those who would perceive the gap between accepting a moral judgement and being motivated, would still notice it in Horgan and Timmons' restatement of the descriptivist stance. These people would then ask: Why does a moral judgement necessarily involve not just an is-commitment but an ought-commitment as well? The use of the word 'commitment' should not hide the opposite direction of fit that characterises is- and ought-commitments.¹¹ In fact,

11. "... Moral beliefs differ from descriptive beliefs by not being governed by a platitude that Jackson, Oppy, and Smith claim holds for beliefs in general -viz. that a belief is a state *that is designed to fit the facts.*" (Horgan and Timmons (1996b), p. 231) It seems, though, that Horgan and Timmons also concede this point insofar as they assert that it is essential to evaluative beliefs that their overall declarative content does not coincide with their core descriptive content.

the contrast between these two sorts of commitments just represents a rather traditional way of expressing the distinct directions of fit that serve to identify, within a Humean theory of motivation, beliefs as opposed to desires. And, as Michael Smith has brilliantly put forward,¹² the assumption of such a theory is the main source of concern for any attempt to regard moral judgements as both descriptive and motivational. This does not mean that such a tension is ultimately insurmountable, I am just urging that Horgan and Timmons still owe us an account of how their framework could contribute at all to assuage such a strain.

We can thus conclude that, contrary to what Horgan and Timmons claim, their metaethical framework: (a) seems to beg the question against the descriptivist because it has trouble stating that sort of stance, and (b) it is uncertain whether that framework could really help the descriptivist to account for our internalist intuitions.

1.4. Horgan and Timmons are, in any case, convinced that descriptivism is wrong. In fact, they devote a significant portion of their reflection on metaethical issues to challenge a few recent realist proposals, namely:¹³ (i) Brink's and Boyd's project to show that there are moral facts because, after all, moral terms refer to functional properties, and (ii) Michael Smith's metaethical rationalism. In both cases, the notion of convergence plays a crucial role. Horgan and Timmons assume that the lack of the required kind of convergence casts doubt on the objectivity of moral facts. This is why they try to motivate the following claim: with regard to moral judgements, rational agents cannot achieve the kind of convergence that is associated with descriptive discourse.

In this paper, I will specifically intervene in Horgan and Timmons' debate about moral realism by examining their case against Michael Smith's metaethical rationalism. Although I sympathise with Horgan and Timmons' main claims in this respect, I am less en-

12. Cf. Smith (1994), ch. 1

13. "First is what Jackson (1998) calls the location problem in ethics – the problem of locating putative moral facts and properties in the natural world ... Here, we refer our readers to some of our past writings in which we show (so we think), that various realist attempts to solve the problem inevitably fail, and are destined to keep on failing" (Horgan and Timmons (2000), p. 11).

thusiastic about the arguments that they provide to support them. That is why I will divide the discussion into two basic steps: (1) I will present Smith's argument for the contention that normative reasons require the convergence "in the desires of fully rational agents", (2) I will reconstruct and challenge Horgan and Timmons' stance with regard to this contention.

2. *A challenge to Michael Smith's Metaethical Rationalism*

1.2. Michael Smith argues that reasons are not agent-relative, that having a reason for an action cannot be relative to a given agent.¹⁴ Of course, a particular agent A may have some features (say, talents, preferences, attachments, and so on, that other agents lack) which are relevant to the fact that she has, in the circumstances, a reason R to σ . But this does not pick up a relevant sense in which that reason is agent-relative, since it forms a part, as Smith urges, of the concept of rationality that any agent with the same relevant features would have, in the same circumstances, a reason R to σ . In general, we can say that every agent whose circumstances (including talents, attachments and so on) would coincide with those of agent A, would also have a reason R to σ . This is why Smith sustains:

... it is desirable that p in C just in case we would all desire that p in C if we were fully rational.¹⁵

But this amounts to claiming, according to Smith, that all fully rational agents would desire that p in C and, consequently, that all fully rational agents must converge on their judgements about what is desirable in C. And this is possible, as we have seen, because the agent's preferences are represented as part of the circumstances that a fully rational agent should take into account in her deliberation.¹⁶

14. Cf. Smith (1994), ch. 5.

15. Smith (1994), p.167.

16. "... Even if an agent's preferences may enter into a specification of the circumstances that she faces it may still be the case that whether or not she is rationally justified in taking her own preferences into account, and the way in which she is justified in taking them into account if she is, depends on whether fully rational agents would all converge on a desire which makes the preferences

This does not entail that all fully rational agents should act the same way because, obviously, the circumstances in which each of these agents might be placed will certainly vary.¹⁷

Once one accepts that, if there are normative reasons, then the desires of fully rational agents must converge,¹⁸ Smith still needs to specify the means by which such a convergence should take place, that is, some procedures must still be mentioned to determine what a fully rational agent has a reason to do in circumstances C. Smith resorts, at this point, to the idea of reflective equilibrium. He assumes that a rational agent should try to increase the degree of unity and coherence among her beliefs and desires.¹⁹ This search will eventually lead to the acquisition of new beliefs and desires, as well as to the abandonment of others. A rational agent would thus adopt the set of beliefs and desires that, after a process of reflection, possesses the highest degree of unity and coherence.²⁰

Horgan and Timmons object that this procedure by itself does not ensure that the process will conduce to the kind of convergence among fully rational agents that Smith calls for. In fact, the experience of moral disagreement is so pervasive that we could hardly expect that such a convergence would at all take place. To motivate this claim, Horgan and Timmons ask us to indulge into a thought experi-

she has relevant to her choice and, if they do, the way in which the desire they converge upon makes her preferences relevant to her choice." (Smith (1994), p. 171).

17. "In their own worlds fully rational agents will find themselves in quite different circumstances from each other, circumstances that are conditioned by their different embodiments, talents, environments and attachments in their respective worlds. Their desires about how to organize their own lives in their own worlds will therefore reflect these differences in the circumstances. The convergence required is rather at the level of their hypothetical desires about what is to be done in the various circumstances in which they might find themselves (Smith (1994), p. 173).

18. "In defending the non-relative *conception* of normative reasons we have therefore said nothing to suggest that, *substantively*, there are any such reasons." (Smith (1994), p. 173)

19. These are just two values among many others.

20. Strictly speaking Smith (1994, p. 159)'s use of the idea of reflective equilibrium is only concerned with beliefs (including beliefs about one's own desires) as a part of his anti-Humean theory of normative reasons.

ment involving the differences between Earth and Moral Twin Earth, and conclude that moral differences between earthlings and twin-earthlings are rationally irreducible. This thought-experiment is quite recurrent in Horgan and Timmons' challenge to moral realism, although the argument that they run rests on a number of substantial assumptions. Such assumptions are, indeed, shared by the realists to which their objections are raised in each case, but make it difficult to use a thought-experiment as *prima facie* evidence for the lack of the required convergence in the case of moral discourse. There is, however, a second line of reasoning which invites the same thought, although in a rather less theoretically committed way.

Horgan and Timmons appeal, in this respect, to the controversy between Hilary Putnam and Robert Nozick about the moral adequacy of government spending on welfare. One of the interesting features of this case is that the disagreement remains after a long, detailed, and honest process of discussion; that the failure to converge cannot, at first sight, be imputed to some cognitive shortcoming in the process of reflection. It looks as if the situation were ideal to reach the required convergence, that if such a convergence cannot be obtained in this case, then there is no reason to think that it could ever be achieved. In other words, we cannot expect that the disagreement between Putnam and Nozick could be finally overcome thanks to a further step in the process of reflective equilibrium. For their divergence is not to be explained by a deficiency in this process, but by their disparate moral sensitivities. So, it seems that reflective equilibrium may lead to different peaks depending on the moral sensitivity that guides the reflection.²¹

It is uncertain whether this sort of consideration may really touch Smith's stance. After all, he does not hold that all fully rational agents would converge in their *actual* desires but only in their *hypothetical* ones. The set of desires that a fully rational agent *actually* has, will surely depend on the circumstances were she is *actually*

21. "... When one reflects on this sort of case [Putnam vs. Nozick], involving a very high level of sophistication and moral sensibility, it just looks very unlikely that any movement in the direction of yet greater unity and coherence will bring the two together on this issue ... It seems much more plausible to attribute their differences to significantly different moral sensibilities" (Horgan and Timmons (1996a), p. 212).

placed. Whereas her *hypothetical* desires concern the desires that she would have if she were placed in such and such circumstances. Trivially, fully rational agents could only converge on their hypothetical desires. And this is really plausible if, as Smith does, we assume that the agent's attachments, preferences, and so on, do not belong to her identity as a rational agent, but instead to the circumstances that the rational agent must contemplate in her practical deliberation. This is why the agent's actual desires are irrelevant to the kind of convergence that Smith calls for and that should be reached through a process of reflective equilibrium.²²

Smith could argue, as a result, that, even if Putnam and Nozick actual desires differ with regard to certain issues, this does not imply that their hypothetical desires would diverge too. Their moral disagreement could be explained by the disparity in the constellation of moral values that they endorse. And, consequently, Smith could suggest that the fact that an agent subscribes to a particular set of moral values does not really form a part of her identity as a fully rational agent, that this fact, like all her attachments and preferences, should instead be approached as part of the circumstances upon which a rational agent should deliberate. And, in this sense, it is clear that Putnam and Nozick despite their confrontation may still coincide on their hypothetical desires. Putnam could acknowledge that, if he had had Nozick's moral sensitivity, he would have rejected welfare policies, and Nozick would certainly concede the reciprocal claim.

It is important to see that this line of reasoning holds no matter whether an agent's moral values are or not ultimately reducible to her nonmoral attachments and preferences. If they were reducible, then they should be straightforwardly treated, according to Smith, as part of the circumstances upon which the rational agent must deliberate. And if they were not, shouldn't the agent's attachments and preferences quite reasonably be treated as thick experiences where

22. "Which desires I would end up with, after engaging in such process [a process of systematic justification], thus in no way depends on what *my* actual desires are to begin with. Reason itself determines the content of our fully rational desires, not the arbitrary fact that we have the actual desires that we have. Reflection on the concept of desirability thus leaves the normative significance of facts about what is desirable and undesirable perfectly intact." (Smith (1994), p. 173).

moral and nonmoral values coalesce? But, in that case, the agent's moral values would be at least partly embodied in her attachments and preferences and, thereby, would form a part of the circumstances upon which rational agents deliberate.

2.3. Be that as it may, Horgan and Timmons allow for an interpretation of the term 'rational' such that Smith's fundamental claim comes up as a conceptual truth, namely:

(T1) normative reasons require the convergence in the desires of fully rational agents,

But, indeed, they take it that their remarks about Putnam vs. Nozick controversy support:

(T2) Moral disagreements cannot always be solved rationally.

And, indeed, the combination of (T1) and (T2) seem to imply that there cannot be normative reasons in the moral domain. Yet, Horgan and Timmons try to block this transition by distinguishing between a thin and a thick notion of rationality. Thin rationality is supposed to be morally neutral, while, on the thick view, rationality constitutively involves the endorsement of some moral values. Consequently, what Horgan and Timmons' considerations would show is simply that there is no way in which thin rationality could settle moral disagreements. In other words, they take it that (T2) holds insofar as 'rationally' in that statement is thinly interpreted. On the contrary, they claim that (T2) is false on a thick interpretation of that term:

If one interprets the platitudinous connection [i.e., (T1)] in questioning terms of a thick notion of rationality, then ... we can allow that normative-reasons claims, of the sort implicated by moral judgements, are tied to being fully rational and presuppose that all fully rational agents would converge. Of course, in rejecting the thin notion of rationality, we construe judgements about normative reasons as morally charged.²³

23. Horgan and Timmons (1996a), p. 221-2.

As a result, Horgan and Timmons suggest that, since rational assessments are morally loaded, Putnam could judge "... that Nozick's moral outlook is not fully rational because part of being fully rational is having a suitable moral sensitivity, which is something Nozick simply lacks."²⁴ It would trivially follow that Nozick's convergence on Putnam's view is not something that (T1) would ask for because Nozick is not, after all, a fully rational agent.

This sounds quite unsatisfactory, however, because Nozick could certainly make a claim parallel to the one ascribed to Putnam, he could legitimately say that Putnam's moral outlook is not fully rational because the latter does not have the suitable moral sensitivity. This possibility is, in fact, contemplated by Putnam as he points out, in a long text quoted by Horgan and Timmons, that "each of us regards the other as lacking, at this level, a certain kind of sensitivity and perception."²⁵

To put it another way, it seems clear that we can buy convergence in moral judgements by buying divergence in the identification of 'fully rational agents'. But I think (T1) could only retain some content if a certain convergence in the determination of fully rational agents is taken for granted. And, as we have seen, the thick notion of rationality could only render (T1) true on the basis of a shifting identification of the set of rational agents.

This is not to deny that, as Putnam emphasises, moral judgements are not a matter of taste, that a sort of contempt for the divergent moral view is constitutive of taking a moral stance. I could even accept that such a contempt could eventually be expressed as a lack of rationality on the other's side: "... One really does feel that one view is reasonable and the other irrational."²⁶ The deep problem is how to compatibilize these contentions with the fact that Nozick would have exactly the same sort of contempt and could legitimately denounce Putnam's irrationality. And, insofar as this tension is not released, there is no way in which we can contentfully allow for (T1). But this is not my only worry with Horgan and Timmons' strategy to deny (T2) on the basis of a thick understanding of rationality. There

24. Horgan and Timmons (1996a), 220-2.

25. Putnam (1981), p. 165.

26. Putnam (1981), p. 166.

is, at least, a further concern.

I think it can be shown that, even if thick rationality involves some moral values, it does not follow that all difference in moral sensitivity are differences in rationality. In fact, this is a point that Horgan and Timmons seem to concede as they approvingly characterise Putnam's view:

It is worth noting that the morally thick usage of terms like 'reasonable' and 'irrational' that Putnam is here highlighting is not necessarily so thoroughly tethered to one's own moral sensibility that one would classify as irrational (under this usage) anyone whose moral sensibility and considered moral judgments diverge from one's own. The terminology can instead be used in a way that (i) is morally loaded, yet (ii) recognizes certain alternative moral perspectives as falling within the bounds of rationality, but (iii) classifies as irrational certain moral perspectives that differ in significant enough ways from one's own.²⁷

A consequence of this is that, on some occasions, two agents could diverge in their moral judgements because they have different moral sensitivities and, nevertheless, be both fully rational. For their respective moral sensitivities are not far enough to discard each other as irrational, but they are not close enough to ensure that they coincide in their moral judgements about any particular situation.

2.4. It seems, then, that the notion of thick rationality does not permit us to exclude (T2). And this sounds like a serious problem for Horgan and Timmons because they want to have normative reasons and, nevertheless, are reluctant to jettison (T1) because they regard it as a platitudinous contention about normative reasons. What to do then? In Corbí (2000), I propose to challenge (T1). In that paper, I argue, firstly, that Smith's argument for (T1) is a *non-sequitur* and, secondly, that (T1) is internally inconsistent because it rests on an unintelligible notion of 'fully rational agent'. But if (T1) is not a necessary condition for normative reasons, this may certainly be welcome by Horgan and Timmons. For this outcome suggests an interpretation of moral discourse that may retain its normativity and, nevertheless, do not ask for the kind of convergence that (T1) vindicates and that sounds specific of a descriptive discourse. We could thus

27. Horgan and Timmons (1996a), fn. 23.

have both cognitivism and nondescriptivism. I suspect, however, that this transition to nondescriptivism rests on an implausible convergence demand. For, if I am right, that demand cannot even be satisfied by those kind of discourses that are paradigmatically presented as descriptive, like, for instance, the discourse about the shape of objects.

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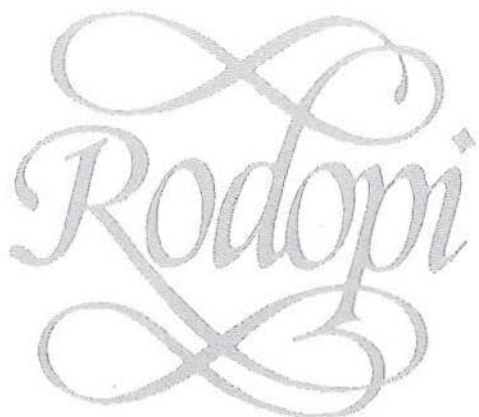
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