Summary

Emotivist, or non-descriptivist metaethical theories hold that value-statements do not function by describing special value-facts, but are the mere expressions of naturalistically describable motivational states of (valuing) agents. Non-descriptivism has typically been combined with the claim that value-statements are non-cognitive: they are not the manifestations of genuine belief states. However, all the linguistic, logical and phenomenological evidence indicates that value-statements are cognitive. Non-descriptivism then has a problem. Horgan and Timmons propose to solve it by boldly combining a non-descriptivist thesis about value with the claim that value-judgements are after all cognitive. Although possessing many attractive features, I argue that their framework fails to deliver the promised results; it suffers from a certain internal incoherence about the concept of content and mis-characterizes the descriptive/non-descriptive content distinction required by non-descriptivism.

0. Introduction

Horgan and Timmons, hence forth H/T, describe and defend a metaethical framework, which they dub Nondescriptivist Cognitivism.¹ Their position is non-descriptivist since it follows in the tradi-

¹. This occurs chiefly in Horgan and Timmons (2000). Much of the background of the position is developed in a range of papers; e.g., Horgan and Timmons (1996).
tion of emotivist, or expressivist metaethical theories. According to this tradition, all facts about value are ultimately natural facts about empirical motivational states of (valuing) agents, and, moreover, value utterances and judgements are not descriptions or reports of these facts, but in some sense, expressions of them. What is novel about H/T’s nondescriptivism is that they combine this expressivist thesis with the claim that value judgements are the results or manifestations of genuine belief states. For H/T, value judgements are non-descriptive but, nevertheless, genuinely cognitive. The attractions of such a position are obvious: it combines the naturalism that expressivism offers with the capacity of cognitivism to explain the manifest surface features of moral discourse: truth-aptness, embeddability in logical compounds, sensitivity to rational considerations, etc.

This paper examines H/T’s brand of nondescriptivism. Although I think H/T are moving in the right direction for an adequate naturalist metaethics – a middle way that takes both cognitivist and expressivist elements – I shall argue that their framework fails to deliver the promised results. I show that: (a) Their framework is incoherent – although H/T are careful to distinguish various senses of ‘content’, they also conflate senses of ‘content’ which, when clearly distinguished, reveal inconsistencies in H/T’s position; (b) H/T, like other non-descriptivists, have mischaracterized the descriptive/non-descriptive content distinction required by nondescriptivism. This leaves them open to a powerful objection concerning the conditions governing content, assertion and truth to which they have no credible response.

1. The Moral Problem and Horgan and Timmon’s Solution

A good way to begin the discussion is with Michael Smith’s (1993) description of what he calls the moral problem. Smith’s moral problem is about reconciling three theses:

M1: Value judgements express beliefs.
M2: Value judgements have a necessary connection of sorts with being motivated.