

THEORY-INDEXED MORAL CONTEXTUALISM

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Abstract: One way to understand the nature of our moral disagreements is to study the meaning of moral discourse. Nonetheless, Metaethical Theories that account for these disagreements face important challenges. For instance, if our theory of moral terms assigns them a reference too specifically related to a contextual parameter, we might be ruling out the substantiality of moral disagreements (e.g., while ‘To eat people is wrong’ is plausibly true relative to our culture, it’d be false for a community of cannibals). This paper (1) explores the theoretical room for a contextualist account of moral terms that models the substantiality of moral disagreements; (2) sketches the characterization of the contextual parameter these terms’ meaning is sensitive to; and (3) shows the tools this account has to avoid reducing moral disagreements to merely linguistic ones.

Keywords: moral twin-earth; moral contextualism; moral disagreements; verbal disagreements; moral externalism.

1. Introduction

In the present paper¹, I would like to account for what I call *Theory-Indexed Moral Contextualism*. That is: a contextualist and realist account for moral terms. In Section 1, I present Horgan and Timmons’ Moral Twin-Earth argument that purports to argue against any approach with fixed references for moral terms. In Section 2, I present an empirical test provided by Khoo and Knobe about our semantic intuitions that I use as the ground to account *contra* the Moral Twin-Earth Argument’s conclusions. In Section 3, I elaborate on how a contextualist approach to moral terms would look like. Finally, in Section 4, I use a Hirsch-like argument to reveal the commitment of speakers’ claims under a moral disagreement by showing how moral disagreements under contextualist modeling of moral terms can still be substantive.

2. On Moral Twin Earths

Horgan and Timmons (1991, 1992a, b) propose the following thought experiment. Let’s imagine that on the planet Earth, earthlings behave, think, and argue morally according to Consequentialist principles. And whenever earthlings use moral terms, like ‘good’, to evaluate their actions, the references of those will

¹ In the present work I show the main ideas argued in my postgraduate thesis (2021) in the University of Tartu.

be related to Consequentialist properties (e.g., what maximizes expected utility). Let us say that the extension of the predicate ‘good’ used by the earthlings is *Ec*. That is, *Ec* the set of whatever falls under the predicate ‘good’ that earthlings use. On the other hand, on another planet Twin-Earth, twin-earthlings behave, think and argue morally according to Deontological principles. And whenever twin-earthlings use moral terms, like ‘good’, to evaluate their actions, the reference of those will be around Deontological properties (e.g., what honors Kantian categorical imperative). Similarly, let’s say that the extension of the predicate ‘good’ used by the twin-earthlings is *Ed*. Furthermore, let us concede that *lying for saving a life* is considered as a good thing according to Consequentialist principles, but as something wrong by Deontologist principles. For exposition purposes, let’s name ‘Coco’ and ‘Dede’ our representatives of each respective planet². Let’s now imagine that Dede, a twin-earthling, manages to go to Earth and she argues with Coco, an earthling, about the truth of the sentence ‘Lying for saving a life is good’. As Horgan and Timmons (H&T) point out, there is an intuitive sense in which the earthling, Coco, and the twin-earthling, Dede, are having a moral disagreement. In that sense, they are arguing about whether *lying for saving a life* is morally good or not and not merely about something linguistic. If we are to take Coco-Dede’s disagreement as a substantive moral disagreement, and not as a merely linguistic one, H&T argue that we would need to take their uses of ‘(morally) good’ as referring to the same property. Otherwise, if we take Coco and Dede to be arguing about if *lying for saving a life* is morally *good_c* or morally *wrong according to its coherence with so and so principles*, H&T point out that a strong moral relativism comes into place since we can take both Coco and Dede to hold something true at the same time. That is, it would be simultaneously true that lying for saving a life is *good_c*, and also that lying for saving a life is not *good_d*. If we follow a standard treatment³ of reference fixation and we claim that meaning is determined by the properties causally regulating the uses of a term, we will have to admit that some sort of relativism seems to be in place. Insofar as earthlings’ and twin-earthlings’ moral claims are causally regulated by different properties, their moral terms will refer to different properties. Since *lying for saving a life* is part of the extension *Ec* but not of the extension *Ed*, then the earthling’s ‘good’ and the twin-earthling’s ‘good’ are not co-extensional. That drives H&T to argue that one of the following must be false:

- (1) Moral properties causally regulate how we use moral terms. The extension of moral terms is determined by the moral principles ruling the user’s community.

² The names ‘Coco’ and ‘Dede’ weren’t mentioned by H&T but by me for exposition purposes

³ I understand a *standard* metasemantics as what the *Causal Theory of Reference* (Boyd 1988), or what Putnam’s *Twin-Earth Argument* (1975) shows.

(2) The meaning of ‘good’ is the same in Coco-Dede’s dispute.

H&T argue that for understanding Coco and Dede’s exchange as a moral disagreement, we would have to take (2) to be the one that is true. It’s intuitive, they claim, that in this kind of exchange the earthling and twin-earthling are having a moral disagreement while disagreeing about the truth of ‘Lying for saving a life is good’. And both uses of ‘good’ have to refer to the same property. Denying (2), according to H&T, would rule out the possibility of substantive moral disagreements in cases like the one presented and we would be left only with a merely linguistic disagreement. Since (1) seems to be predicting that two different properties are the ones behind the two uses of ‘good’ by the disagreeing parties, H&T argue that (1) is false, as it is inconsistent with (2). Any story like (1) about how moral terms fix their references has to be false, since it wouldn’t capture the substantivity of the disagreement. That way, we could build a Moral Twin-Earth disagreement scenario with different properties regulating the use of moral terms. If a moral term has a fixed reference R , then a Moral Twin-Earth disagreement scenario can be built with different fixed reference R_2 for the moral terms of the twin-earthlings to show that the intuition about this being a moral disagreement is not compatible with any fixed reference for our moral terms; at least with our standard story of reference fixation. Nevertheless, there are different attempts to escape from this problem. In the following section

David Copp (2007), on the other hand, argues that we could accept as true both (1) and (2) and, at the same time, make that compatible with the satisfaction of the widespread intuition about the earthling and the twin-earthling having a substantive moral disagreement. Copp argues that both communities (earthlings and twin-earthlings) use those terms to guide their behavior. Earthlings and twin-earthlings will disagree in many practical implications of their respective uses of ‘lying for saving a life is good’, for example, earthlings will advise their children to lie when the life of a person is at risk, and twin-earthling will advise their people to avoid or resist lying even when the life of a person is at risk: they will still convey appraisal of actions. Also, Copp argues that it’s plausible to believe that consequentialist’s and deontologist’s ‘good’ share an important part of the extension. Based on that, as Copp (2007: 214-215) puts it, we can think that earthling’s ‘good’ is the best possible translation of twin-earthling’s ‘good’. In that sense, we can consider Coco’s and Dede’s ‘good’ to have the same *meaning*. In order to hold that, Copp reveals what seems to be an assumption from H&T—that I will put in the following terms:

(1) Moral Extensionalism is true: the meaning of a moral term is determined by its extension.

Since (1) is considered true by Copp, the only way to accept (2) too—to argue that the meaning of moral terms in Coco-Dede’s scenario are the same—is by disassociating extension from meaning. That is, Copp thinks of (3) as false. That way, with a broader notion of *meaning*, Copp satisfies our intuition regarding earthlings and twin-earthlings disagreeing morally by holding that the *meaning* of their moral terms is the same.

In the following, I would like to argue –*contra* Horgan and Timmons– not only that we could accept (1) and still consider Coco-Dede’s disagreement as a moral one; but also argue that we don’t have to reject (3) in order to do so.

3. *On the semantics of moral disagreements*

According to Copp, even though moral terms have the same meaning between disputants in moral disagreements, the extension of their moral terms might vary. H&T (2000) replied to Copp that even if we allow terms with the same meaning to have different extensions, problems remain. H&M hold that if our semantic treatment of moral terms in disagreements allows us to assign them the same meaning, we could escape from a relativism about concepts. Nevertheless, if the disputants refer to different properties in the moral disagreement, we wouldn’t be able to escape from a standard relativism: that is, with disagreeing parts holding at the same time something true *relative to their moral principles*. However, I claim that H&T ignored that in some moral disputes, backgrounds are far enough from each other, in order to think that necessarily one of the disputants is mistaken. About that, Khoo and Knobe (2018) have defended the plausibility of moral contextualism by taking semantic intuitions empirically tested as a guide. Let’s observe:

The experiment tested the semantic intuition about the existence of exclusionary content in a moral disagreement between two fictional characters uttering opposite moral claims about an action⁴. The intuition was tested in three different scenarios: when the fictional characters belonged to the same culture, when they were from far-away cultures within the same planet (an American student and a warrior from the Amazon), and with an inter-planetary distance between the origin of the characters. The intuition regarding the truth of the claim ‘At least one of them must be wrong’ changed from closer-to-true to closer-to-false while the characters were from further backgrounds. Khoo and Knobe (K&K) argue that the experiment shows that our semantic intuitions regarding the use of moral terms allow room for non-exclusionary disagreements; and that the semantic theorizing for our moral terms should give room for non-exclusionary cases too. That is, even though an individual utters something of the form «*x* is wrong» and another one utters «*x* is not wrong» –if their backgrounds are far enough, our

⁴ An individual that got a new knife and decided to test how sharp it was by stabbing the first person he encountered.

semantics should allow the possibility for both to be saying something true in their own terms.

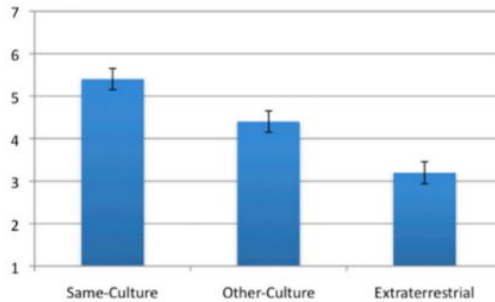


Figure 1. Mean agreement with the claim that “At least one must be wrong” by condition. Error bars show standard error of the mean.

If we want to follow K&K and make our semantic treatment for moral terms to allow space for non-exclusionary disagreements, we still need to explain how a moral disagreement is possible despite denying that necessarily one part is mistaken. We could adopt a Copp-like strategy and say that in a broad sense of ‘meaning’ we have moral disputants to be *meaning* something similar enough with their moral terms for us to consider their disagreement a moral one. That is, even if we are allowing disagreeing parts saying «*x* is wrong» and «*x* isn’t wrong» to be simultaneously correct, following a Copp-like strategy, we could still consider both parts to disagree in virtue of two things. First, in virtue of the partly shared extension of their moral terms; and second, in virtue of the fact that both parts *conventionally use* moral terms for expression of appraisal of actions.

Nevertheless, I think that we could question Copp’s approach in the following way. We could question if the intersection between what consequentialists and deontologists consider as *morally good* is bigger than its complement –as he seems to assume. Or at least argue that his solution isn’t clear enough for moral disagreements where the intersection of the extensions of the moral terms used isn’t bigger than its complement—or even null. In the following, I show the ground under which a Theory-Indexed Contextualist account for the meaning of moral terms finds its way to provide better solutions.

4. Contextualism and non-exclusionary disagreements

Let’s say that an Earthling speaks E-English and a twin-earthling, T-English. Let’s say that the moral sentence *p* is true in E-English but false in T-English. That means that *p* is true in E-English and «*not p*» is true in T-English. The risk of standard relativism appears in formalizations like the previous one because as H&T anticipated, we might be allowing people disagreeing morally to be saying something true at the same time in their different languages. The only logically

consistent way to allow earthlings and twin-earthlings to utter the same moral sentence—but also allow the sentence to be true for one and false for the other—is to argue that that moral sentence has different truth conditions in the earthling utterance and in the twin-earthling one. A disagreement like the previous could only be understood consistently under a *contextualist account*. That is, a moral claim is indexed to a contextual parameter of use in order for it to have truth-conditions.

At the same time, we don't want to reduce absolutely every moral disagreement to a non-exclusionary one based on differences in truth-conditions. If we are to follow K&K's test regarding our moral semantic intuitions, we should also allow room for exclusionary disagreements: that is, we should allow that people can express the same moral proposition from the utterance of the same sentence. One way to do it is to follow K&K's suggestion and try a contextualist approach that indexes moral utterances to the same local parameter to obtain the same proposition in same-culture-like cases and distinct propositions in the human-extraterrestrial-like case. That way, we could satisfy the semantic intuitions regarding the use of moral terms in disagreements with exclusionary content in same-culture cases and non-exclusionary content in the extraterrestrial case.

H&T ignored the possibility of legitimate non-exclusionary disagreements. Let's imagine for instance that in the Moral Twin-Earth disagreement, twin earthlings, instead of being human-like deontologists, would have been non-anthropomorphic entities that had a moral theory related to Nitrogen-Accumulation Principles. That is, their moral system would consider something to be *good* if the action accumulates a certain amount of nitrogen. In that case, earthlings and twin-earthlings could have been disagreeing about the truth of the moral sentence 'killing lives in order to get nitrogen is morally wrong' and that disagreement would have been clearly non-exclusionary. The participants of the disagreement could have been defending something true (even though one claim appears to be the negation of the other) because their claims are indexed to different contextual parameters. H&T would probably reply that if this new disagreement between these new earthling and twin-earthling were a moral one, it would have to be substantial otherwise a standard relativism would come into place. However, I argue that the standard relativism that H&T fear, in this case, is a desirable consequence for a semantic treatment that allows non-exclusionary disagreements. The earthling and the twin-earthling's utterances are relative to different contextual parameters and, in that sense, a fair semantic treatment—since different properties are being referred to—to allow the possibility of both utterances being true at the same time.

One way to understand the contextualist approach that we are proposing would be the following. Let C be a set of moral claims. And let a Moral Theory M be a finite set of sentences $\{s_1, s_2, s_3 \dots s_n\}$. For everything element of C , M

provides a corresponding truth value⁵. A Moral Theory sets the truth-conditions of a moral claim because a moral claim has a truth-value in virtue of a Moral Theory. One way to explain why earthlings and twin-earthling could have non-exclusionary moral disagreements is to index a different *M* to the earthling and the twin-earthling's utterance. That way, despite how exclusionary both utterances look, they would be related to different truth-conditions allowing the possibility of both moral sentences simultaneously true.

On the other hand, if the same moral sentence *s* uttered by an earthling and by a twin-earthling were indexed to the same Moral Theory, it would have the same truth conditions. Only with moral claims indexed to the same Moral Theory, we would have the possibility of exclusionary disagreements. That way, the intuition presented by K&K in their test is being met. Since it's natural to think that two people being culturally closer makes it easier for them to share a Moral Theory, we can now explain why the exclusionary feature of the disagreements rises in culturally close cases. Similarly, the further the communities of the people disagreeing morally, the easier to imagine that they endorse different moral theories: so, non-exclusionary disagreement's intuition is explained.

H&T might still consider, nonetheless, that substantive moral disagreements are something different than merely linguistic disagreements—and that our contextualist account is reducing at least some moral disagreements to that. In the following section, I would like to address that inquiry by presenting a Hirsch-like approach for differentiating substantive from merely linguistic disagreements.

5. A Hirsch-like argument for substantive disagreements

It might be argued that moral disagreements are not the kind of disagreement that can be solved just by adjusting our terminology—or by making explicit which Moral Theory works as a contextual parameter. If an earthling typically indexes its moral claims to the Moral Theory M_1 and a twin-earthling to the Moral Theory M_2 , then it will seem like their disagreement might be solved by just agreeing in the vocabulary. Let's take for instance the Coco-Dede's disagreement (where Coco is a consequentialist and Dede a deontologist). When Coco is saying 'lying for saving a life is not morally wrong'—according to our contextualist approach—he would be saying something like 'According to consequentialism, lying for saving a life is not morally wrong'. Similarly, Dede would be saying something like 'According to deontologism, lying for saving a life is morally wrong'. So, just by making the Moral Theory explicit, someone could think that the disagreement could be solved, as Coco wouldn't have any problem in accepting Dede's utterance. That might take us to think that moral disagreements modeled in that way, as H&T feared, would be reduced to merely linguistic

⁵ Or, if it's easier to understand, *M* is a subset of *C*. That is, *M* is the list of all the true moral claims out of the set of moral claims *C*.

disagreements. I don't think that's the case. About that, Eli Hirsch (2009) addresses the question about the difference between disagreements on reality and merely linguistic ones. So, following a Hirsch-like line of argumentation, I present one reason to believe that moral disagreements—even non-exclusionary ones under our contextualist approach proposed above—cannot be reduced to merely linguistic ones by comparing them to actual merely linguistic disagreements.

I would like to present how a merely linguistic disagreement would look like. Let's imagine that someone comes from a region X where they don't think that people «die» but that they «pass away». In a region Y, people think that people never «pass away» but they «die». If the inhabitant of X goes to the Y region and they are at the funeral of the baker of the town, the X-inhabitant will disagree when Y-people utter the sentence 'the baker died'. The X-inhabitant could reply that 'it is false that the baker died, he passed away'. Y-inhabitants could, of course, reaffirm themselves by saying 'You, X-inhabitant are totally mistaken, the baker didn't pass away. The baker died'. We are observing a highly shallow disagreement that has a clear solution. Now, let's imagine for instance that when the X-inhabitant arrived in the Y-region, he pretended to keep a low profile and to avoid being recognized as an X-inhabitant. The X-inhabitant decided to speak and behave like the Y-people but at the same time, he decided to keep all the beliefs he had from the past. So, the X-inhabitant decided to create a secret language: every time he would say or hear that someone «dies» he would think to himself that someone «passed away», that way his beliefs will be kept and he could accept what the Y-inhabitants tell him during the funeral. After this change in the meaning of those sentences that the X-inhabitant did in his mind is made, if he succeeds in that systematic translation, there will be no possible complication during his secret visit to the Y-region with that respect. No other possible dispute will arise from that sentence secret translation that would put at risk his secret visit and no ramifications of semantic complications are possible. The X-Y inhabitants' disagreement about the truth of 'the baker died' is, then, merely verbal.

Now, let us observe what would happen if the X-inhabitant didn't think that people «die» but that they «sleep for three days and resuscitate». In his travel to the Y-region, this time, the X-inhabitant decides to create the following secret language: every time he would say or hear that someone «dies» he would think to himself that someone «sleeps for three days and resuscitates». In this case, multiple possible disputes would arise after this arbitrary translation, even if he succeeds in interchanging a term for the other in his mind. Clearly, the X-inhabitant doesn't just have a merely verbal disagreement with the Y-inhabitants about if people just «die» or «sleep for three days and resuscitate». In that sense, the verbal translation fails.

Let us imagine now that Coco secretly travels to Twin-Earth and he wants to be there among the twin-earthlings without them noticing that he is an earthling. However, Coco doesn't want to forget his moral beliefs, so he creates a secret language that he only speaks while talking to the twin-earthlings. Whenever Coco utters 'Lying for saving a life is morally wrong', he is going to mean (secretly in his mind) 'Lying for saving a life is deontologically wrong'. We could be tempted to conclude, like in the «die»-«pass away» example, that since the twin-earthling's sentence can be translated into a sentence that Coco is willing to accept as true in his secret language, the disagreement is merely linguistic too. But that would be a mistake. Let's imagine that during his trip Coco is caught *lying for saving a life*. What honest answers could Coco give to justify his behavior in front of the twin-earthlings? Notice that Coco accepts the truth of the sentence 'Lying for saving a life is deontologically wrong', a sentence both Coco and twin-earthlings agree with, yet he still disagrees with the twin-earthlings⁶. Coco cannot solve the disagreement just by virtue of hiding the verbal differences through a secret language. If Coco or Dede are guided by their moralities—as the original Moral Twin-Earth experiment requires—then non-linguistic behavior will put into evidence Coco's disagreement with twin-earthlings.

This wouldn't happen if the disagreement were merely verbal. More than just vocabulary changes are needed by Coco to hide his disagreement. Now, it might seem that resources from outside contextualism are being imported to explain away the intuition of disagreement. Nevertheless, in general, it is only by virtue of resources from outside semantics that we are able to figure out if a disagreement is merely verbal or not. In that sense, the same conclusion holds for whatever piece of information from the world that is sufficient to show how making explicit the moral theory behind claims doesn't settle moral disagreements.

In Hirsch terms, "more is needed for an issue to degenerate into "merely a matter of choosing a language". It is required that each side ought to find it plausible to interpret the other side as speaking the truth in the other side's language." (Hirsch 2009: 238) The psychological reality of us endorsing our moral theories avoids the possibility of Coco, or Dede, finding it plausible to interpret Dede's, or Coco's, belief as being true in the other side's language. It's highly implausible that a moral disagreement could be solved that way. That is, the following argument holds:

⁶ It might be argued that a better characterization of the twin-earthling sentence 'Lying for saving a life is wrong' inside Coco's mind would be something like 'Lying for saving a life is wrong according to deontology & deontology is correct'. Nevertheless, since what is or isn't *morally wrong* in Twin-Earth is just—sort to speak—what is *deontologically wrong*, I believe that the chosen characterization proves the following point: even though there's a sentence that Coco is willing to accept in replacement of the twin-earthlings' moral claim, that doesn't rule out a possible disagreement.

- P1. A disagreement is merely verbal if it could be solved just by virtue of a change into a vocabulary the parties accept.⁷
- P2. Coco and Dede cannot solve their disagreement just by adjusting their vocabulary.
- C. Coco and Dede's disagreement is not merely verbal.

Even if we create a possible language in which a sentence we disagree with is true, the disagreement can still be substantive. Thus, it doesn't follow from H&T's Moral Twin-Earth argument that if there's room for Coco's and Dede's claims to be simultaneously true, then we wouldn't be able to explain how's that a real disagreement. As we have seen, since mere verbal disagreements behave differently, we have reason to believe that non-exclusionary moral disagreements might not be reduced to purely verbal ones. Anyone arguing that moral disagreements under a contextualist approach are reduced to purely verbal ones should explain why moral—and other substantive—disagreements don't seem to be settled just by vocabulary adjustments.

6. Conclusions

H&T's Moral Twin-Earth Argument purports to show the problems that arise from not treating moral terms as referring to the same property—even within different moral communities. Theory-Indexed Moral Contextualism treats moral terms from different moral communities as referring to different properties. Nevertheless, without having to reject (3)—that the meaning of a moral term is its extension—as Copp's strategy does, I've given reasons to believe that Moral Contextualism that has Moral Theories as the contextual parameter survives the Moral Twin-Earth Argument whilst properly fits K&K's test about our semantic intuitions on moral terms.

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