ON EMOTIVISM AND INCONSISTENCY

Jason Berntsen
Xaxier University of Louisiana

Emotivism is the view that to make a moral judgment is not to have a belief but is rather to have a kind of desire. For example, according to emotivism, judging that abortion is immoral is not a matter of believing that the action type of abortion has a certain property but is rather more like desiring that abortions not be performed. Emotivism's appeal consists in the thought that it explains the essentially practical nature of moral judgment.[1] However, even theorists impressed by the practical aspects of moral thought acknowledge that moral judgments seem to share features with paradigmatic beliefs. Moral judgments seem, for instance, to stand in logical relations. This has been thought by many to pose a serious problem for emotivism, since desires do not appear to be the sort of thing that can stand in logical relations. Furthermore, all of the standard solutions to this problem face serious objections.[2] In a recent paper, Gunnar Björnsson offers a new solution to this problem. I argue, here, that Björnsson's attempted solution fails.

Let me begin by explaining the problem that Björnsson is attempting to solve in a bit more detail.[3] As stated above, moral judgments at least *seem* to stand in logical relations. Björnsson illustrates the point with the following two sets of judgments:

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.[4]

As Björnsson notes, (1) and (2) both seem inconsistent. And just as (A) and (B) imply:

A. Telling one's little brother to lie makes one nervous,

(A') and (B') seem to imply:

D'. Telling one's little brother to lie is wrong.

Why exactly does this pose a problem for emotivism, the view that moral judgments are desires as opposed to beliefs? The first thing to point out is that the standard conceptions of the logical relations of inconsistency and consequence are truth-theoretic. On these conceptions, a set of opinions is inconsistent just when it is impossible for all of its members to be true, and an opinion, *o*, follows from a set of opinions, *O*, just when it is impossible for *o* to be false when all of the members of *O* are true (Björnsson 86). But desires are not capable of being true or false.[5] So, it seem that moral judgments cannot stand in relations of inconsistency or consequence if emotivism is true.

All of this suggests a simple *modus tollens* argument against emotivism: emotivism implies that moral judgments do not stand in logical relations; but moral judgments do stand in logical relations; thus, emotivism is false. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the original datum was not that moral opinions *actually* stand in logical relations but rather just that they *seem* to stand in logical relations (90, see also 103). This gives the emotivist room to maneuver. There are two general moves available. First, the emotivist can argue that moral judgments do not have to be truth-apt in order to stand in logical relations. Alternatively, he can try to explain the fact that moral judgments *seem* to enter into logical relations in a way that is consistent with their not *really* entering into those relations. Each move comes at a cost. The cost of the first move is that it forces the emotivist to abandon the standard conceptions of inconsistency and consequence, conceptions that have considerable theoretical appeal. The cost of the second move is that it rules out the most straightforward explanation of the datum. According to that explanation, the reason that moral judgments *appear* to stand in logical relations is that *they really do* stand in such relations.

Björnsson takes the second approach. As I read him, Björnsson thinks that he overcomes the difficulty facing this move by providing an explanation that is just as good as what I have just referred to as "the most straightforward explanation."[6] Björnsson arrives at his alternative explanation by executing a two-part strategy, which he describes the strategy thus:

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…. We then ask whether and why we should expect to have such states given that our simple moral opinions are beliefs and [desires], respectively…. 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 [desires] too, emotivism is vindicated. (88)[7]

Notice that this strategy is *functionalist* in two senses. First, it is functionalist in that it appeals to the way in which logical intuitions and logically complex opinions (for example, conditional opinions) interact with other elements of our overall thinking.[8] Second, the strategy is also functionalist in a more explicitly teleological sense, since it involves taking the identified roles to be "purposive, chosen by natural selection and our learning mechanisms." To anticipate, my objection will concern Björnsson's account of the teleological function of logical intuitions. Specifically, I will argue that this account is inadequate even when we consider only paradigmatic beliefs.

The first step in Björnsson's strategy is to offer hypotheses about "the roles that logical intuitions complex opinions play in our lives." Björnsson takes logically complex opinions first and suggests the following analyses:

> *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.
> *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 someone accept that something is such-and-such given that one accepts that something is so-and-so.
> *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 (88).

Björnsson then appeals to these analyses of complex opinions to give his analyses of logical intuitions, specifically analyses of intuitions of inconsistency and intuitions of consequence. I will focus on Björnsson's treatment of intuitions of inconsistency. According to Björnsson, the intuition that (1) is inconsistent is "an appreciation of the functional conflict within the set which is independent of whether or not we accept any further opinions"—where the conflict is that to accept the conjunction of (A) and (B) is to be in a state the function of which is to *get one* to accept (D), while to accept (C) is to be in a state the function of which is to *keep one* from accepting (D). Björnsson suggests that "the function of this appreciation is to keep us from accepting the conjunction [of (A), (B), and (C)], thus eventually allowing us a determinate attitude towards (D) or to direct our minds at more fruitful tasks" (Björnsson

89).

Note that since the above analyses of negative, conditional, and conjunctive opinions purport to cover both complex opinions with exclusively non-moral components *and* complex opinions that have moral components, Björnsson's analysis of the intuition that (1) is inconsistent generalizes not only to other non-moral cases but to moral cases as well. For example, he can give an exactly parallel analysis of the intuition that (2) is inconsistent. Furthermore, since "opinion" is intended to cover both beliefs and desires, the emotivist can accept those analyses. This, in turn, means that emotivists can accept the analysis of intuitions of inconsistency in terms of "appreciations" of functional conflicts.

The first step of Björnsson's strategy is now complete: he has provided general accounts of the roles that logical intuitions and complex opinions play in our thinking (90). The next step is to ask "whether and why we should expect to have such states given that our simple moral opinions are beliefs and desires, respectively."[9] I will continue to focus on intuitions of inconsistency. Assuming Björnsson's analysis, why would intuitions of inconsistency be "chosen by natural selection and our learning mechanisms"? How, in other words, do we (more precisely: how did our ancestors) benefit from the existence of these states? We have already seen Björnsson's answer: these states benefit us by allowing us to either have a "determinate attitude" toward something or "to direct our minds our minds towards more fruitful tasks." Let me try to unpack this idea.

We need to first get clearer on the idea of a "determinate attitude." As I understand it, Björnsson's distinction between determinate and non-determinate attitudes is between cognitive and practical representations that govern behavior and those that do not. Consider this modified example of Björnsson's (90-91). A stick partially submerged in water looks bent but feels straight. There is no inconsistency here. However, when the time comes for action a decision has to be made. My behavior obviously cannot be governed at once *both* by the representation of the stick as straight *and* the representation of it as bent. At the end of the day, only one of these representations can be "included in the arsenal of inner maps that … [I] use for orientation." The upshot of my decision about which of these representations I will allow to govern my behavior (Björnsson calls the decision an "act of judgment") is my determinate cognitive attitude vis-à-vis the shape of the stick. Suppose that my determinate attitude is the representation of the stick as straight. In that case, the representation of the stick as *bent* is then a cognitive representation that is *not* a determinate attitude.

Parallel remarks can be made about practical representations. When I walk past the cookie jar I desire to eat a cookie. At the same time I desire to stick to my diet. Again, there is no inconsistency.[10] But these desires cannot both be realized. So, when the time comes for action a decision ("act of judgment") again has to be made. This time the decision is about which desire will govern my behavior, which one I will "take seriously." The upshot of this decision is

my determinate practical attitude vis-à-vis my eating a cookie. Suppose that my determinate attitude is the desire to stick to my diet. The desire to eat the cookie would then be a practical representation that is *not* a determinate attitude.

Björnsson's idea, as I understand it, is that we need determinate attitudes in order to survive (91), hence intuitions of inconsistency benefit us by helping us to avoid entering states of mind in which we are hopelessly conflicted about what determinate attitude to have (see 91-93 and 103). To be sure, there may be times when we are better off not having any determinate attitude at all toward some matter. But intuitions of inconsistency benefit us in these circumstances as well, for the functional conflicts they help us avoid do not present indifference as an option. Someone who accepts (A), (B), and (C), for example, cannot happily lack a determinate attitude on the issue of whether telling one's little brother to lie makes one nervous. Furthermore, we need determinate *practical* attitudes no less than we need determinate *cognitive* attitudes (91-93, 103). That is, our need for desires and plans of action that we "take seriously" is just as great as our need for "inner maps that we use for orientation." That is why, Björnsson reasons, we should expect there to be intuitions of inconsistency involving moral opinions regardless of whether moral opinions are beliefs or desires (93).

This completes the second part of Björnsson's strategy for solving the problem of reconciling the emotivist's claim that moral judgments are desires with the datum that moral judgments seem to stand in logical relations. Björnsson has now arrived at an explanation of that datum that (a) is compatible with emotivism, and that (b) he takes to be just as plausible as the straightforward explanation that says that moral judgments *seem* to stand in logical relations because they *do* stand in those relations. I will now argue that Björnsson's explanation is unsatisfactory.

Björnsson's explanation depends crucially on the idea that our ancestors benefited from the existence of a state the function of which is to keep one from accepting conjunctions like the conjunction of (A), (B), and (C) and the conjunction of (A'), (B'), (C'). This assumes that it is *possible* to accept such conjunctions. But is it? Consider the following remark Björnsson makes about conditional opinions:

> Thinking that *p* might lead me to think that *q*, but I might already be thinking that not-*q*, or might perhaps be led from thinking that *p* to think that *r* which leads me to think that not-*q*: neither of these connections are my opinions that if *p* then *q* until judgment has determined which to follow[.] (98-99)

Björnsson is claiming here that one cannot have the opinion that if *p* then *q* at the same time one is both thinking that *p* and thinking that not-*q*. Now, it is unclear how we should read the expressions "thinking that *p*" and "thinking that not-*q*." Is thinking that *p* the same thing as accepting the opinion that *p*?

Presumably, Björnsson thinks not. But what then is the difference? The expression "are my opinions that if *p* then *q*" also needs clarification. Is *having* an opinion the same thing as *accepting* an opinion? And how exactly do all of these states relate to the notion of a *determinate opinion*? I will not try to untangle all of this but will instead make two assumptions. The first assumption is that one *accepts* an opinion only when one *has* that opinion, in whatever sense of the latter that is operating in "are my opinions that if *p* then *q*." The second assumption is that one *has the opinion that p* only if one is *thinking that p*, in whatever sense of "thinking" that Björnsson has in mind. Once these assumptions are in place a clear problem emerges for Björnsson's explanation. At the center of that explanation is Björnsson's analysis of intuitions of inconsistency, that is, his account of the role these intuitions play in our lives. According to that analysis, the role of intuitions of inconsistency is to keep us from accepting conjunctions like the conjunction of (A), (B), and (C), and the conjunction of (A'), (B'), and (C'). But Björnsson's remarks in the passage just quoted (together with my two assumptions) imply that *it is impossible for someone to accept such a conjunction anyway.* And, if it is impossible to accept such conjunctions, it is a mystery why intuitions of inconsistency, as Björnsson understands them, would be "chosen by natural selection and our learning mechanisms."

The upshot is that Björnsson has failed to provide a plausible alternative explanation for the fact that moral judgments appear to stand in logical relations, an alternative, that is, to the straightforward explanation that moral judgments seem to stand in those relations *because they really do* stand in them. I can think of two responses that Björnsson might give at this point. First, he might retract his claim that it is impossible for someone to have the opinion that if *p* then *q* at the same time that one is both thinking that *p* and thinking that not-*q*. He can then say that that claim was never a central part of his solution anyway. Alternatively, he might reject one of my two assumptions. Both of these responses face the same difficulty, however—their success depends upon the details of what Björnsson has in mind with the expressions "accepting the opinion that *p,*" "*p* is my opinion," and "thinking that *p*." But, it is far from clear what those details are. This means that we are not in a position to evaluate either response. Nevertheless, we *are* certainly in a position to conclude that has at least not yet offered a new solution to the emotivist's problem of explaining how moral judgments can be desires given their apparent ability to stand in logical relations.

In this paper I have considered and rejected Gunnar Björnsson's recent attempt to solve the problem of squaring the emotivist's claim that moral judgments are desires with the datum that moral judgments seem to stand in logical relations, in particular, relations of inconsistency. I explained that there are two general kinds of solutions to this problem. The first kind of solution tries to show that moral judgments can stand in logical relations even if they are not truth-apt. The second kind of solution tries to explain the datum in a way that is consistent with moral judgment's not actually standing in relations of

inconsistency. We have seen that Björnsson's solution is of the second kind. This kind of solution comes at the cost of the most straightforward explanation of the datum: moral judgments *seem* to stand in relations of inconsistency because they *do* stand in relations of inconsistency. I have argued that Björnsson's solution fails because he does not articulate a plausible rival to this straightforward explanation. Of course, this does not mean that there is no such plausible alternative, and it is important to remember that the cognitivist faces a problem of her own, namely explaining the apparent ability of moral judgments to motivate us all on their own.

Notes

1. The idea that moral thought is essentially practical is closely associated with Hume. See Hume 455-458.

2. For a nice overview of the standard solutions and the standard criticisms of those solutions see section four of Van Roojen.

3. Unfortunately, Björnsson is not at all clear about what exactly he takes the problem to be. I am confident, however, that the problem that I describe captures at least one of the issues that Björnsson is trying to resolve.

4. These come from straight from Björnsson 85-86, with one modification: Björnsson uses the letters to stand for sentences, not judgments He later introduces the device of adding asterisks to pick out the judgments expressed by the sentences that the letters without the asterisks pick out. Thus, he uses "A*" to stand for the judgment that if lying makes one nervous, getting one's little brother to lie makes one nervous, "B*" to stand for the judgment that lying makes one nervous, and so on. Nothing I say here depends on keeping sentences neatly separated from the judgments they express, so I am using the letters without the asterisks to stand for the judgments directly. I modify a quote below to accommodate this. I signal that modification.

5. There is a complication here. Björnsson begins his article: "Emotivists hold that moral opinions are wishes and desires, and that the function of moral language is to 'express' such states" (81). However, he almost immediately replaces "desire" with "optation": "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'" (82, original emphasis). It is unclear why he does this. More importantly, it is unclear what he means by "optation." At times he writes as if optations are a species of desire or wish. He says, for example: "Exactly how to distinguish moral optations from other kinds of wishes and desires is a difficult matter" (82). At other times, however, he apparently wants to leave open the possibility that moral optations are a kind of belief-desire hybrid or even simply *beliefs*! (87). Consider: "This means that even though I refrain from defining emotivism negatively as the view that moral opinions are not beliefs, our problem remains" (87). Relatedly, Björnsson seems to waffle on the issue of whether emotivism implies that moral judgments are not truth apt. He writes, "[u]nfortunately for the emotivist, the standard way to 'make sense' of intuitions of inconsistency and consequence appeals to truth" (86), and "the problem for emotivism … is to explain intuitions of inconsistency and consequence without appeal to truth" (86). This suggests that Björnsson thinks that emotivism does imply that moral judgments are not truth-apt. Later, however, he says, "the literature contains a number of sophisticated efforts to show that plausible emotivist accounts imply that moral opinions can be true or false. 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" (Björnsson 103). The first two quotations are very odd if we are leaving open the possibility that emotivism is consistent with moral judgments' being truth-apt. And if we are also leaving open the possibility that moral optations are beliefs, it is hard to see what the contrast between

emotivism and cognitivism is supposed to be. For what it's worth, I suspect that Björnsson is jumping back and forth between three related but distinct issues: (i) Are moral judgments intrinsically motivating? (ii) Are moral judgments beliefs or desires? (iii) Are moral judgments truth-apt? In any event, I will follow Björnsson's original characterization of emotivism as the view that moral judgments are kinds of wishes or desires. I will further assume—as Björnsson apparently does throughout most of his article—that it is part of this view that moral judgments are not truth-apt. I feel justified in doing this because the alternative leaves Björnsson's paper highly obscure. For clarity and convenience, I replace "optation" with "desire" in a couple of quotations. I signal each such replacement.

6. Note the following two passages: "although sadly neglected by much writing on logic and emotivism, the parallel treatments of cognitivist and non-cognitivist accounts is absolutely crucial to the issue at hand" (90); "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" (Björnsson 103). Unfortunately, it is unclear just what Björnsson takes the "cognitivist sketch" to be. However, there is some textual support for the idea that he identifies it with what I called the "most straightforward explanation" (See Björnsson 86). That, together with the idea highlighted in the above two quotes that we should be concerned with determining the plausibility of the emotivist's explanation of intuitions of inconsistency *relative to the plausibility of the cognitivist's explanation*, lends support to the interpretation I have just given in the main text.

7. I have replaced "optation" with "desire." See note 6. Notice also that Björnsson uses "moral opinions" instead of the more standard "moral judgment." I will use these expressions interchangeably.

8. By "logical intuition" Björnsson seems to just mean a thought to the effect that certain opinions stand in a logical relation to one another, specifically, that a set of opinions is inconsistent (an "intuition of inconsistency"), or that an opinion is implied by other opinions (an "intuition of consequence).

9. I have replaced "optations" with "desires." See note 6.

10. At least there is no *logical* inconsistency. The example is from G.F. Schueler 500. Björnsson discusses the example to, among other things, make the point I am making in the body of the text (91).

Works Cited

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