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Phenomenological Objectivity and Moral Theory

Abstract

The relation between moral phenomenology and moral theory is dealt with. The aims in the paper involve the following: clarifying the notion of moral phenomenology, especially the impact that it has on moral theory; interpreting the discussion between moral cognitivism and non-cognitivism in the light of moral phenomenology; presenting the most recent position of cognitive expressivism concerning this debate; pointing out the main shortcomings of this theory, especially in respect to the purported objectivity of moral judgements. Cognitive expressivism still leaves a gap between the immediate features of our internal moral psychology and their theoretical explanation, thereby losing much of its apparent phenomenological support. A proper understanding of the purported phenomenological objectivity is proposed along with its consequences for moral theory.

Keywords

moral phenomenology, moral theory, objectivity, cognitivism, non-cognitivism, cognitive expressivism, belief, truth, moral realism

**1. Moral phenomenology:
introductory methodological remarks**

Recently we have witnessed an increased interest in moral phenomenology as a basis for metaethical debates. Despite of their controversial status, appeals to phenomenology of moral experience and phenomenological arguments accompanied debates in moral theory from the very beginning, although not necessarily in an explicit manner. The term “moral phenomenology” may be understood in a multitude of ways, namely as a method of inquiry, i.e. the first person introspection-based investigation of our moral experience, as moral philosophy in phenomenological tradition or as phenomenal, qualitative, “what-it-is-like” features of moral experience that are available to introspection. Even within this latter understanding one can discern broader (e.g. in terms of deeply embedded features of moral thought and discourse) or narrower interpretations. Horgan and Timmons distinguish between different aspects of the broader notion of moral phenomenology as encompassing

“... (1) the grammar and logic of moral thought and discourse; (2) people’s ‘critical practices’ regarding moral thought and discourse (e.g., the assumption that genuine moral disagreements are possible), and (3) the what-it-is-like features of concrete moral experiences” (Horgan and Timmons 2005: 57).

In what follows we will understand moral phenomenology referring to this latter, narrower sense of moral phenomenology as qualitative aspects of moral experience, except in cases where there is some inseparable overlap between, for instance, what-it-is-like aspects and other mentioned aspects.

One common way to look at the debate about moral phenomenology and its relation to moral theory is to view it as putting forward phenomenologi-

cal arguments. Those are, roughly, arguments that start from the mentioned “what-it-is-like” phenomenal character of moral experience and move to consequences that are important for moral theory or metaethics (cf. Kirchin 2003: 243). As such those arguments are thus supposedly relevant for metaethical debates and could provide support for or against a given metaethical position (cf. Kriegel 2008). We hereby propose the following sketchy definition of phenomenological argument in metaethics:

Phenomenological argument is an argument that starts from “what-it-is-like”, raw phenomenological character tied to a certain aspect of our moral experience, and from this draws conclusions relevant for moral theory.¹

Not everyone will happily welcome the alleged importance of such arguments. We can roughly delineate three distinct attitudes that accompany them, namely (a) *the neutral view*: moral phenomenology may perhaps offer an interesting description of moral experience that may well represent a contribution to descriptive moral psychology, but nothing more than that; it certainly cannot substantially influence the metaethical debate; (b) *the modest view*: moral phenomenology is relevant for the metaethical debate, but its importance is limited and certainly not equal to the one of other theoretical, i.e. metaphysical, conceptual or epistemological arguments; it may well, for example, represent a starting point of the discussion or at least put some restrictions on a moral theory (e.g. Kirchin 2003: 244); (c) *the strong view*: moral phenomenology and phenomenological arguments are (almost) as important as other metaphysical, semantic or epistemological theoretical arguments; although it is true that a given metaethical position would not “stand or fall” with moral phenomenology, the same goes for most other types of metaethical arguments (Dancy 1998, Horgan and Timmons 2005).

In what follows two presuppositions will be taken for granted in regard to the importance of moral phenomenology. While neither is unproblematic, they are shared by the here discussed authors, indicating positions that we are most interested in as well as the ones against which we argue. So presupposing them is not question-begging within this dialectical context.

- (P1) Moral phenomenology and phenomenological arguments have at least some theoretical force on the same scale as other sorts of metaethical arguments.
- (P2) The best way to understand the import of the phenomenological arguments is indirect, in the sense that one cannot simply conclude on the basis of a given phenomenological description that morality is such as it is presented to us by experience and only accept moral theories that comply with that.² Instead one must allow for a certain moral theory to propose a way of accommodating³ the nature of experience, and only then – if the accommodation is not successful or convincing – treat the concerned moral theory as having lost at least some of the “plausibility points”⁴ on the metaethical scoreboard.

Here is how we will proceed. In section II we go on to describe moral phenomenology that supposedly supports what we would call *robustly realistic cognitivism* and to present the debate between cognitivism and non-cognitivism in the light of the aforementioned aspects of phenomenology. In section III we concentrate on the position of cognitive expressivism, considering its claim that it scores very high in respect to smoothly accommodating moral phenomenology. Contrary to that, we argue that it cannot accommodate phenomenology properly and that it thus ends up in a particular type of error theory. In section IV we conclude with a proposal on how to properly understand the purported phenomenological objectivity, laying down the consequences that such understanding bares for moral theory.

2. Moral phenomenology, moral realism and cognitivism

In what follows we first lay out phenomenological aspects of moral experience underlying the often made claim that moral phenomenology supports or favours moral realism and cognitivism (*robustly realistic cognitivism*) over anti-realism and non-cognitivism. We focus mostly, but not exclusively upon the phenomenology of direct first-order moral judgment about our obligations⁵ or, to put it more simply, judgments where in the light of present circumstances one forms a judgment that there is a particular obligation which one needs to fulfil.

1

This characterization is similar to the one made by Kirchin (2003: 243). Usually such characterization of phenomenological arguments is accompanied by several constraints and conditions that have to be fulfilled. Firstly, the relevant phenomenological description of moral experience must be pre-theoretical or neutral, meaning that it should not directly presuppose the (in)correctness of a given metaethical position or employ heavily theory-laden concepts as a part of the phenomenological description of moral experience (Kirchin 2003: 251–252). Secondly, the offered phenomenological argument must be characteristically phenomenological and thus distinct from other metaphysical or semantic arguments. Thirdly, it should rely on introspection and with it on introspectively cognizable aspects of our own moral experiences. And finally, such arguments presuppose that the employed aspects of moral phenomenology are widely shared between moral agents in normal conditions (cf. Horgan and Timmons 2008).

2

Such understanding of phenomenological argument is certainly very strong, but there are indications that certain authors would accept it. Here is a quote from Dancy, who believes that phenomenological argument is the only direct argument one can offer in support of moral realism. “[W]e take moral value to be part of the fabric of the world; taking our experience at face value, we judge it to be experience of the moral properties of actions and agents in the world. And if we are to work with the presumption that the world is the way our experience represents it to us as being, we should take it in the absence of contrary considerations that actions and agents do have the sorts of moral properties we experience in them. This is an argument about the nature of moral experience, which moves from that nature to the probable nature of the world” (Dancy 1998: 231–232). McNaughton takes a similar line: “The realist maintains that we should take the nature of our moral experience seriously. In seeking to discover what the world is like we have to start with the way our experience represents

the world being – where else could we start. The realist insist on an obvious, but crucial, methodological point: there is a presupposition that things are the way we experience them as being – a presumption can only be overthrown if weighty reasons can be brought to show that our experience in untrustworthy or misleading. Moral value is presented to us as something independent of our beliefs or feelings about it; something that may require careful thought or attention to be discovered. There is a presumption, therefore, that there is a moral reality to which we can be genuinely sensitive.” (McNaughton 1988: 40)

3

The notion of accommodation used here follows what Timmons labels as *internal accommodation* and defines in the following way: a given moral theory must comply with deeply-rooted and deeply-embedded presuppositions and characteristics of ordinary moral discourse and moral practice (Timmons 1999: 12). What we need to add is that what-it-is-like phenomenological aspects of our moral experience are also part of ordinary moral discourse and moral practice.

4

For a useful utilization of the plausibility points notion see Enoch’s book *Taking Morality Seriously* (2011) in which he defends a robust version of moral realism.

5

Horgan and Timmons offer an elaboration of types of moral experience (2008), partially based on the work of Mandelbaum (1955). We follow their developed terminology, referring with direct first-order moral judgment to a basic judgment of one’s obligation in the situation, where one is directly confronted to act or refrain from acting in a particular way; e.g. when one forms a moral judgment that he/she must keep a promise and go to his/her friend’s house in order to help her with moving out. Of course one could also consider phenomenology of judgments of value or experience embedded in moral emotions like guilt, regret, shame, moral outrage, etc.

2.1. Moral phenomenology favouring moral cognitivism and realism

The phenomenological support to robustly realistic cognitivism mostly comes from the following two highlighted aspects of moral phenomenology embedded in moral judgment within the context of a complete judgmental act:⁶

- (i) *Belief-like aspects*: Moral judgments are in many respects belief-like; they typically share phenomenological characteristics of beliefs such as that there is the “subjective feel of being aware of a proposition and presenting it to oneself as true or plausible” (Kriegel 2011: 11); moral judgments share with beliefs their fundamental generic, phenomenological and functional features, i.e. “[t]hey involve an involuntary, categorizing way of psychologically coming down on some issue of moral concern, on the basis of considerations that are experienced as rationally requiring the judgment – where this judgment is experienced as truth-apt and hence as naturally expressed in thought and language by sentences in the declarative mood” (Horgan and Timmons 2007: 269); moral judgments share with beliefs the feel that we are assessing the situation and that we are able to provide justification (reasons) for them and join them in a web of interconnected beliefs. In addition, they can also exhibit degrees of certitude, robustness, and importance (Smith 2002).⁷
- (ii) *Objective aspect*: Moral judgments involve a feeling of their objectivity; they seem independent of our interests and desires; it appears as if their force comes from outside (that they have external origin) i.e. from the relevant moral circumstances that exert pressure on us to act in a certain way (Mandelbaum⁸), limiting the range of our choices; “the agent experiences a ‘felt-demand’ on behaviour” that is phenomenologically grounded in apprehension of (un)fittingness and is “issuing from the circumstances that I confront” (Horgan and Timmons 2006: 268); their subject matter is not “a matter of choice”, and “is more a matter of knowledge and less a matter of decision” (Mackie 1977: 33); from the agent’s perspective they feel authoritative (emanating from a source of authority external to our preferences and choices) and categorical; “in moral choice we struggle to find ... the right answer. We present our search to ourselves as one governed by a criterion which does not lie in ourselves; our fear is that we may make the wrong choice” (Dancy 1998: 232),⁹ they are a circumstantial response that is “absolute, not contingent upon any desire or preference or policy or choice” (Mackie 1977: 33); they seem to include “objective pretensions” (Gibbard 1992: 155) by which the moral norm in play appears valid independently of our accepting it and thus stakes a claim to authority (Gibbard 1992: 171; cf. Ross 1927).

Together belief-like aspect and objective aspect form a realistic and cognitivist moral phenomenology that supposedly supports robustly realistic cognitivism; the belief-like aspect favouring cognitivist interpretation of moral judgments, and objectivity aspect favouring moral realism.¹⁰

2.2. Cognitivism vs. non-cognitivism debate in the light of moral phenomenology

We can look at the traditional metaethical debate between two major rivals, i.e. cognitivism and non-cognitivism from the perspective of moral phenomenology. At the first stage of debate cognitivism and realism implicitly pre-

supposed that the aforementioned combined aspects of morality more or less directly support robustly realistic cognitivism, while non-cognitivism tried to undermine their importance – usually either by highlighting some other aspects of moral phenomenology (Stevenson 1994; Williams 1965) or by disregarding it or even interpreting it as erroneous in some respects (Hare 1978). At the second stage we have witnessed the emergence of mixed theories that did find at least some of the lessons from moral phenomenology plausible, yet were not willing to accept all of the conclusions that would follow from it. A typical example is Mackie's error theory that follows moral phenomenology in accepting cognitivism (moral judgments are descriptive beliefs) and in staking a claim to objectivity as a part of the meaning of moral judgments, at the same time refusing to accept moral realism by offering strong metaphysical and epistemological arguments against it and thus ending up with an error theory. Blackburn's project of projectivism and quasi-realism may as well be seen as an answer to the purported phenomenological considerations and an attempt to "account for the realism-sounding moral claims" (Tenenbaum 2003: 393), explaining how we get from preferences to "attitudes with all the flavor of ethical commitment" (Blackburn 1998: 9), thus engaging in accommodation of the relevant phenomenological aspects.¹¹

6

Mandelbaum understands complete judgmental act as consisting of the content of our moral judgment, psychological attitudes included in the judgment and situation or circumstances in which the judgment is made (cf. Mandelbaum 1995: 40; Horgan and Timmons 2010: 108–109)

7

There are also aspects of phenomenology of moral judgments that are not belief-like or that are not typically presented in the phenomenology of ordinary beliefs. One of the most often exposed characteristics is that moral judgments are "motivationally hot" (Horgan and Timmons 2006). It seems like no desire is needed to motivate the rational subject judging that action A is his duty to be motivated to do A; a sincere moral judgment that I ought to A is in most cases accompanied by motivation to act upon this judgment. Other authors also point to some important dissimilarities. Williams (1965) lists at least three: (i) moral judgments seem not to weaken when in conflict (as it is with ordinary beliefs); (ii) the defeated moral judgment survives the point of conflict and decision and represents an appropriate basis for compensation or some attitude such as regret; and (iii) when moral judgments are in conflict we cannot opt for indifference, ignorance, skepticism or *ataraxia* as a way of avoiding conflict. Smith (2003) also points to the strong correlation between agent's judgments about obligations and motivational potential.

8

Mandelbaum characterizes this in the following way. "[A] demand is experienced as a force. Like other forces it can only be characterized through including in its description a reference to its point of origin and to its di-

rection. It is my contention that the demands which we experience when we make a direct moral judgment are always experienced as emanating from "outside" us, and as being directed against us. They are demands which seem to be independent of us and to which we feel that we ought to respond." (Mandelbaum 1955: 54); "When I experience a demand to keep a promise this demand does not issue from me, but is levelled against me: it is not that I want to give five dollars which motivated me, but the fact that I feel obligated to keep my promise. The promise itself appears as an objective fact which places a demand upon me whether I want to keep it or not.... In this type of case... it becomes clear that the element of moral demand presupposes an apprehension of fittingness: the envisioned action places a demand upon us only because it is seen as connected with and fittingly related to the situation which we find ourselves confronting" (Mandelbaum 1955: 67–68).

9

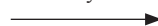
Dancy (1998) refers to this feature of moral phenomenology in terms of authority.

10

It would be better to say that objective aspect favours acceptance of moral objectivism of some sort, but given that most authors (Mandelbaum, Dancy, McNaughton) utilize this phenomenological argument to support a realist version of objectivism, we too simply go with moral realism.

11

Blackburn feels the pull of the mentioned phenomenological aspects and says about defenders of cognitivism and realism that "[p]erhaps their weightiest point is that the cast of mind we voice is inextricably linked



But that is not the end of it, since recently there occurred a third stage of development. It was introduced by a new, more refined understanding of cognitivism that puts more weight on the psychological side of the debate. This was made possible by breaking cognitivism down into two separate theses, namely the *psychological thesis* which says that moral judgments are genuine beliefs, and the *semantic thesis* according to which moral judgments are in the business of describing the world and are capable of being true or false (Horgan and Timmons 2000), thereby opening a new theoretical area in metaethics. So, roughly speaking, at least two new possible theories were able to enter the stage.

moral judgments	descriptive	non-descriptive
beliefs	<i>traditional cognitivism</i>	<i>cognitivist expressivism (non-descriptive cognitivism)</i>
non-belief states	<i>fictionalism</i> ¹²	<i>traditional non-cognitivism</i>

Within this framework cognitivist expressivism seems to present the position that combines best of all (or nearly all) worlds, since it is able to accommodate phenomenology of moral judgments by claiming that they are genuine beliefs, while at the same time denying their descriptive interpretation and insisting that they are neither true nor false, thereby avoiding ending up in an error theory while maintaining an ontology free of “queer” moral properties and facts, and in addition to that refraining from a commitment to a mysterious epistemological access to them. There are of course further reasons to acknowledge that the proper way to distinguish between cognitivism and non-cognitivism positions is to examine how each classifies “the states of mind expressed by moral statements: either they are beliefs or they are pro-attitudes like desires” (Harold, forthcoming), since the old criteria, like meaningfulness and truth-aptness, seem less plausible with the appearance of expressivist/non-cognitivist positions (e.g. Gibbard, Blackburn) which claim that moral judgments can be both truth-apt and meaningful in some sense.

One can also notice that the impact range of phenomenological arguments narrowed considerably along the developing debate, at the first stage ranging over moral psychology, semantics and ontology (Mandelbaum), at the second stage over psychology and semantics (Mackie) while becoming limited mostly to psychology at the third stage.

3. Cognitivist expressivism and moral phenomenology

In assessing the prospects of cognitive expressivism we will limit ourselves to the question of how it fares in relation to the two mentioned aspects of moral phenomenology. As said, the prospects are *prima facie* very promising indeed. But let us first briefly sketch the main characteristics of cognitivist expressivism.

3.1. Cognitivist expressivism

In a series of papers Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons (2000, 2006, 2007) defend the metaethical position called cognitivist expressivism (CE). In a nutshell, CE (previously also labelled non-descriptive cognitivism and assertoric non-descriptivism) is a position claiming moral judgments to be genuine be-

liefs, while at the same time not being descriptive in their overall content. This is made possible by breaking the traditional cognitivism into aforementioned two theses: (a) the *psychological* thesis by which moral judgments/statements typically are or express beliefs and (b) the *semantic* thesis by which moral judgments/statements have a descriptive role (they express descriptive propositions and can be true or false). CE accepts the first but not the second thesis on the basis of rejecting a deeply entrenched assumption that beliefs must be descriptive.¹³

Psychological cognitivism is defended by Horgan and Timmons by appeals to moral phenomenology and phenomenological arguments. Moral judgments share with beliefs their fundamental generic, phenomenological¹⁴ and functional features, thus they must be accepted as genuine beliefs. But moral judgments are not descriptive in their overall content and thus their role is not to represent or describe some moral reality that would be somewhere out there. Moral judgments are a type of beliefs, namely *ought beliefs*, that are based on our ought-commitments toward a given content, e.g. a commitment that it ought to be the case that I refrain from torturing animals. “An ought-commitment is not a mental state whose overall content is descriptive, representing a way the world might be; hence it is not a state of mentally affirming that the world is such in a descriptively-represented way” (Horgan and Timmons 2006: 271). The following schema should make things more clear.

		belief	
		<i>commitment state</i>	
		<i>is-commitment</i> (is-belief)	<i>ought-commitment</i> (ought-belief)
<i>overall declarative content</i>	“John mailed the package.”	“John ought to mail the package.”	
<i>cognitive content</i>	John mailed the package.	John ought to mail the package. ¹⁵	
<i>core descriptive content</i>	John mailed the package.	John mailed the package.	+ it ought to be that ... (not part of the descriptive content; ought is in the attitude rather than in a-way-the-world-might-be-content)

to the propositional form in which we voice it – and discuss it, learn it, ponder in and teach it. If we want to know what state of mind is voiced by an ethical or modal remark, it is most natural to locate it as simple belief, for instance X is good, or Y permissible” (Blackburn 1993: 9).

12

We are uncommitted about whether this is a proper interpretation of all versions of fictionalism, but at least some of these could be characterized in the proposed way (e.g. Calderon 2005).

13

Horgan and Timmons label this semantic assumption, which they define in the following way: “All cognitive content (i.e., belief-eligible, assertible, truth-apt content) is descriptive content. Thus, all genuine beliefs and all genuine assertions purport to represent or describe the world” (2006: 256).

14

For Horgan and Timmons (2006) phenomenology of occurrent belief typically includes “(1) psychologically ‘coming down’ on some issue, in a way that (2) classifies (sometimes spontaneously) some ‘object’ of focus as falling under some category, where one’s classificatory coming down is experienced (3) as involuntary, (4) as a cognitive response to some sort of consideration that is experienced (perhaps peripherally in consciousness) as being a sufficient reason for categorizing as one does, and (5) as a judgment that is apt for assertion and hence is naturally expressible in public language by a sentence in the declarative mood.”

15

In Potrč and Strahovnik (2009) we argue that CE is close to some sort of Meinongian view of moral judgments since we find a similar distinction there between the attitude and the content of mental phenomena, also adding



Moral judgments as ought-beliefs¹⁶ are thus strictly speaking neither true nor false but nonetheless do allow for morally engaged semantic appraisal. In the latter case semantic appraisal is fused with moral evaluation (normative appraisal) to render those judgments true or false, given the moral standards that are in force in the context of their utterance.

The proposed position thus combines psychological aspects of cognitivism with an overall expressivist and irrealist view. In what follows we will examine more closely the support it can gain (or lose) on account of moral phenomenology as Horgan and Timmons in several places explicitly appeal to moral phenomenology in defending their position,¹⁷ also stating that one of its attractions (over other expressivist positions) is the capability of smoothly accommodating it. How does CE thus fare in respect to the mentioned belief-like and objective aspects of moral judgments?

3.2. *CE and accommodation of moral judgments’ belief-like phenomenology*

Accommodation of belief-like aspects of moral experience seems at first sight smooth and unproblematic within CE. As said, CE builds upon the presupposition that moral judgments are genuine beliefs and in this way it accommodates phenomenology (belief-like aspect) pretty straightforwardly. Horgan and Timmons claim that phenomenology supports the psychological part of the traditional cognitivism thesis and that on the other hand there is no phenomenological evidence that would support the descriptivity claim (the claim that moral judgments are descriptive). The question however remains whether the ought-belief or ought-commitment analysis that their theory offers really is sufficient to capture all there is to belief-like aspects of phenomenology. One can point out two things:

- (A) The first is related to the introduction of a special kind of belief, that is ought-belief, that can be seen as a “quick fix” solution to the problem. Leaving other considerations on the side and concentrating merely on phenomenology, CE seems to leave a great part of belief-like aspect out of the picture, namely the “subjective feel of being aware of a proposition and presenting it to oneself as true or plausible”, truth-aptness of beliefs and their direction of fit.¹⁸ It seems that beliefs are just the kind of things that might be true or false, and according to CE they can be true or false but only under certain conditions, i.e. only in contexts that are morally laden. As for the direction of fit, since ought-beliefs are not in the business of representing or describing the world it seems that the direction of fit for ought beliefs is a “world-to-mind” direction. Note that according to CE in moral judgment we are ought-committed that something be the case. “Ought” is not a proper part of the content of our judgment (if that would be the case then coupled with irrealism CE would end up in error theory), so it must be the ought-commitment that is doing the work here. The phenomenology of belief-like aspect clearly favors “mind-to-world” direction of fit for moral judgments. All this introduces a gap between our experience and the deep nature of morality. Horgan and Timmons (2000) accuse the more traditional non-cognitivist projects of distinguishing between surface features of moral thought and discourse and the supposedly deep features that CE avoids, but it seems that the same worry looms for CE.
- (B) Another, and more pressing thing to notice is that Horgan and Timmons (forthcoming) in their recent analysis of the problem of moral error (in

which they purport to offer an expressivist solution to that problem), while discussing Blackburn's quasi-realism, lay attitude as a basis for ought-commitments and ought-beliefs. Somehow they seem to be moving away from the cognitivist part of their theory and accepting a more straightforwardly expressivist account, since they say that ought beliefs or ought commitment states are in fact based on attitudes.

"We ourselves have a version that embraces certain kinds of psychological states that we call ought-commitments (which we treat as a species of belief). We also here posit what we call good-commitments. On our view, then, both *ought-claims* and *good-claims* are expressions of certain attitudes, which generically can be called *ought-attitudes* and *good-attitudes*. So, for example, one can have, say, an ought-attitude toward keeping one's promise to meet his or her spouse for lunch at noon" (Horgan and Timmons, forthcoming; emphasis ours).

This clearly seems like a big step in the direction of pure expressivism. As Blackburn noticed, what is important is "the fundamental state of mind of one who has an ethical commitment ...". In the case of expressivism

"[t]his state of mind is not located as a belief (the belief in a duty, right, value). We may end up calling it a belief, but that is after the work has already been done. ... The question is one of the best theory of this state of commitment, and reiterating it with a panoply of dignities – truth, fact, perception, and the rest – is not to the point. The point is that the state of mind starts theoretical life as something else – a stance, a conative state or pressure on choice and action" (Blackburn 1993: 168).

It seems that we are now again faced with a distinction between a surface characteristic of moral judgments and their deep(er) nature. On the surface moral judgments are belief-like and digging deeper we discover that their source are attitudes. There is nothing wrong with characterizing moral judgments in this manner or proposing this kind of view. But if we now return to the question of moral phenomenology, we can see that the dialectical advantage of CE is somehow diminished; while it can accommodate moral phenomenology on the surface level it cannot account for it on the deep level, so there is a sort of gap between our moral experience and the deep nature of moral judgments

that parts of the cognitive content are posited as objects; in the case of moral judgment its objects are oughts (*Sollen*).

16

Again, we are limiting our use of the term moral judgment to direct first-order moral judgments about one's obligation here, therefore excluding judgments of moral value, second-order judgments etc.

17

E.g. "First, we will dwell on matters of moral phenomenology—the "what-it-is-like-ness" of experiences involving moral judgment; we will argue on one hand that this phenomenology supports the cognitivist contention that moral judgments are genuine beliefs, and on the other hand that such cognitive phenomenology also comports with the denial that the overall content of moral judgments is descriptive" (Horgan and Timmons 2006: 257–258).

18

Here is Smith (2003) expressing this concern: "The function of a belief is to represent things

as being a certain way. Beliefs manage to do this, in part, by coming prepackaged with links to other beliefs and perceptions that serve as sources of epistemic support. In the absence of these sources of epistemic support it is the role of beliefs simply to disappear. To believe something at all is thus to believe a whole host of things which, together, are supposed to provide some sort of justification for what is believed. Desires, by contrast, are the exact opposite of beliefs in this respect. The function of a desire is not to represent things as being a certain way, but rather (very roughly) to represent things as being the way they are to be. Desires thus do not come prepackaged with links to other desires which provide them with (some analogue of) epistemic support. Instead they come prepackaged with the potential to link up with beliefs about means so as to produce action, and in the absence of which they remain (more or less) dormant" (cf. Smith 2002).

and morality.¹⁹ Things don't look as promising for CE and its accommodation of moral phenomenology as in the beginning. At least we can say that CE doesn't gain any plausibility points, but at the same time it doesn't lose many either, since it can offer a sort of accommodation of experience on the surface level of moral judgment, under the condition that such accommodation gets backed up by a convincing explanation of why phenomenology only reveals the surface layer and the relation between the surface layer and the deep layer (this is something CE is still missing).²⁰

3.3. CE and accommodation of objective aspects pertaining to moral judgments' phenomenology

Things are also interesting when we look at the objective-like aspects of moral experience.²¹ On the one hand CE (Horgan and Timmons 2008) obviously rejects the strong, ontological notion of objectivity referring to some independently existing values, instantiated moral properties or moral facts in the world, our judgments hitting upon them and there being the right answer to moral question irrespective of our standpoint (due to irrationalism). CE furthermore rejects the notion of rationalist objectivity, where some sort of an objective or neutral procedure or method of thinking and reasoning would guarantee ending up with convergence of our moral judgment on given moral issues.²² What CE offers is a much weaker notion of (expressivist) objectivity and analysis of the objective feel. What it claims is that it is enough that, while forming the so-called ought-commitments or ought-beliefs, one experiences oneself as becoming and being so committed in a non-self-privileging posture, i.e. taking an impartial stance²³ in which one does not privilege oneself and where one relies on reasons to guide the decision. It thus seems that CE offers two aspects of the analysis of moral judgments as objective. One of them is that they are grounded in reasons (provided that the notion of reasons also gets an expressivist analysis) so that we experience them as being supported by reasons (grounded in non-normative features of a situation – see quote below) and being objective in this sense. And the other thing is that CE stresses the notion of not privileging oneself. It seems that these two offer a much too weak notion of objectivity to be able to fully account for the distinctive objective phenomenology of moral judgments described above.²⁴

Notice that the two aspects of objectivity (non-self-privileging and reason-based commitment) are something that even inter-subjectivism or subjectivism could probably accept. On a standard view objectivism employs standards that are out there, independent of us. But for CE nothing is out there; nothing moral is out there; there is only the situation and me bringing to it the moral norm I happen to hold. That is why for instance, the CE talk of objectivity and reasons is misleading, since reasons are the features of a situation that carry some moral import, but it seems that CE can only appeal to features themselves and this does not allow for it to speak about objective *moral* reasons (and it seems that CE is wedded to this view); one's attitude of acceptance is the one that turns these features into proper moral reasons. If we start simply with some factual considerations about the situation to represent reasons and claim that this is all it takes for moral judgments to be objective, then surely this is not enough, since the moral relevance of these in turn can depend on our attitudes.

CE aims to accommodate the objective aspect by offering a two-step picture of what is going on in forming a moral judgment, namely that "one experiences oneself as:

- (1) becoming (or being) ought-committed to doing (or omitting) some action in a non-self-privileging way; and
- (2) becoming (or being) so ought-committed because of certain objective non-moral but normatively relevant factual considerations” (2010: 121).

Here we can see that in step (2) Horgan and Timmons speak about “normatively relevant” considerations, but the question is what makes them such other than our moral attitudes and the moral outlook that we happen to hold.²⁵ If that is the source of reasons then the “external” nature of moral phenomenology is deeply erroneous in respect that this again introduces a gap between surface, phenomenological characteristic of moral thought and its deep nature.²⁶

19

“The point of the image of projection is to explain certain seeming features of reality as reflections of our subjective responses to a world which really contains no such features. Now this explanatory direction seems to require a corresponding priority, in the order of understanding, between the projected response and the apparent feature: we ought opt be able to focus our thought on the response without needing to exploit the concept of the apparent feature that is supposed to result from projecting the response” McDowell (1998: 157).

20

Here is a hint on where CE might go on this issue. “Moral phenomenology may very well be susceptible to influence by higher-order beliefs about the nature of morality itself. Certainly many people believe that there are objective moral facts—a belief that can easily be instilled, for instance, through the persistent intertwining of religious instruction with moral education. For those who believe (perhaps only implicitly) in objective moral facts, there may well arise a derivative kind of moral phenomenology—induced by the interaction of this higher-order belief with the more universal aspects of moral experience—that does include descriptivity. But even if such erroneous moral phenomenology sometimes occurs by virtue of the permeating effects of false beliefs about the metaphysics of morals, we contend, the more fundamental, more universal, kind of moral experience does not include an aspect of phenomenological descriptivity” (Horgan and Timmons 2006).

21

Horgan and Timmons devote a special paper (2008) on the topic of moral phenomenology and objectivity. Their general take is that they try to somehow undermine the objective aspects of moral judgments on the one hand and on the other hand to offer an understanding of objectivity that could be included into CE.

22

Horgan and Timmons (2008) also point out that one can defend both ontological and ra-

tionalist objectivity (e.g. Mackie), only ontological objectivity (e.g. McDowell) or only rationalist objectivity (e.g. Hare, Korsgaard).

23

“First, direct moral experiences qua moral have to do with taking what we will rather vaguely call a ‘non-self-privileging’ stance toward one’s action and circumstances. Taking this sort of stance involves being open to being affected by desire-independent considerations that have largely to do with not hurting others.” And “in coming to have and experience oneself as being ought-committed to some course of action (or inaction), one experiences oneself as (1) becoming ought-committed in a non-self-privileging way, and (2) as becoming so committed because of certain non-normative factual considerations” (Horgan and Timmons 2008).

24

One aspect of this argument could also be brought up by an argument for robust moral realism that was just recently made by Enoch (2011), i.e. the so-called “argument from moral consequences of objectivity”. As we understand Enoch, he is roughly claiming that “truth does make a difference”. Is morally engaged truth that CE employs enough to fend off this argument? We think that this Enoch argument runs against traditional non-cognitivism as well as against CE.

25

Miller (2003: 38) points to this implied error problem, since if rightness and wrongness are merely something that we project to the world and if we can speak as if there was property in the world, then this is in some sense a mistake or error.

26

Horgan and Timmons themselves notice this problem in regard to noncognitivist positions. “And so the nondescriptivist, rejecting the thesis of semantic unity, must distinguish, for moral discourse, between *surface features of moral thought and discourse* and the *supposedly deep features* that reveal its true semanti-



Anyway, if this is true, it is certain that CE position doesn't gain any plausibility points regarding phenomenology of objectivity. It also seems that it loses them since we saw that CE analysis comes down to a position where moral judgments are made in a sort of morally engaged context (intertwined with moral norms that we are committed to) and it seems that this goes contrary to the "objective pretensions" of moral judgments, since the basis of these morally engaged contexts are actually moral standards and views that we bring into them. The accommodation project of CE is thus flawed in several important aspects.

4. Conclusion

If both points that we have just mentioned are correct then it would seem that CE loses the advantage of support from moral phenomenology and is on the same level as any other expressivist or non-cognitivist position out there since this one pretty much provides the capacity to accommodate belief-like aspect and objective aspect of moral phenomenology. First of all CE seems to be caught into a dilemma that is probably characteristic of many phenomenology-based arguments.

4.1. The puzzle of moral phenomenology and prospects for cognitivist expressivism

This can be labelled as the puzzle of moral phenomenology. If one understands the notion of phenomenological arguments too loosely and also characterizes the nature of moral experience in a sufficiently vague and weak way then it seems that any metaethical theory could claim to gain support from them or at least remain unaffected by them. If on the other hand one understands phenomenological argument too strongly then one faces the objection that one has built the preferred theory into the phenomenological argument itself, which makes it hard for any competing theory to successfully accommodate it.²⁷

We can now run through this puzzle in the case of CE. CE seems to be caught in the same conundrum. On the one hand it strives to get the upper-hand over other expressivist positions by embracing a claim that moral judgments are genuine beliefs. On the other hand expressivism and its irrealism undermine its accommodation attempt to fully account for belief-like aspect and objective phenomenological aspect of moral judgments. If moral phenomenology and phenomenological arguments are understood in a weak way, then moral phenomenology does indeed support CE but the same goes for a number of other metaethical positions and CE thus loses its advantage. If on the other hand moral phenomenology and phenomenological arguments are understood in a strong way, CE faces two choices. It can go on to claim that moral judgments are genuine beliefs. Paying respect to belief-like aspect and objective aspect of moral phenomenology CE then moves in the direction of traditional moral cognitivism and is forced either to accept some kind of moral realism and/or objectivism or to bite the bullet and end up in a sort of error theory in respect to moral experience (i.e. leaving a large gap between our moral experience and deep nature of morality, thus rendering the experience fundamentally erroneous in several respects).

An alternative move for CE would be to aim in the direction of more traditional moral expressivism, thereby effectively coming very close to a sort

of quasi-realism, which would again undermine most of the support it could get from moral phenomenology and its theoretical advantage as a genuinely distinctive position within metaethics.²⁸

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cal workings. Hence, the project of the traditional nondescriptivist was to characterize the deep semantic workings of moral thought and discourse—often through reductive meaning analyses that essentially equated declarative moral content with some kind of non-cognitive content expressible in nondeclarative language. Eschewing descriptive declarative content for moral thought and discourse, the traditionalist embraced some form of non-cognitivism (e.g., emotivism)” (Horgan and Timmons 2002: 130) It seems that their cognitivist expressivism can avoid this duality regarding some of the belief-like aspects of phenomenology (if we grant that there really are such things as ought-beliefs), but certainly not regarding objectivity and truth.

27

A further way to weaken appeals to phenomenological arguments is to claim that for example the debate on cognitivism and non-cognitivism forms the point of view of moral phenomenology, which is to be put under question by skepticism in respect to folk psychology, in particular regarding concepts

of belief, desire, attitude, etc. This is what Harold (forthcoming) is forcefully doing, claiming that in “the light of a reasonable skepticism about folk psychology, the distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism must be once again re-conceptualized, or abandoned.” This means that “the concepts of FP (folk psychology) (such as belief and desire) are not sufficiently rigorous to provide clear answers to hard questions, and that there is little hope that we can refine these concepts to become more rigorous without begging important metaethical questions” and “ordinary folk intuitions about FP concepts like belief are too context-dependent and incomplete to yield precise criteria to use in determining what does and does not belong to that concept.”

28

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Matjaž Potrč, Vojko Strahovnik

Fenomenološka objektivnost i moralna teorija

Sažetak

U članku se razmatra veza između moralne fenomenologije i moralne teorije. Ciljevi rada uključuju: razjasniti pojam moralne fenomenologije, posebice utjecaj koji je imala na moralnu teoriju; dati tumačenje rasprave između moralnog kognitivizma i nekognitivizma u svjetlu moralne fenomenologije; predstaviti najrecentniju poziciju kognitivnog ekspresivizma u vezi ove rasprave; ukazati na glavne nedostatke ove teorije, posebno po pitanju navodne objektivnosti moralnih iskaza. No kognitivni ekspresivizam i dalje ostavlja jaz između neposrednih značajki naše unutarnje moralne psihologije i njihovih teorijskih objašnjenja, gubeći tako većinu moguće fenomenološke potpore. Konačno se predlaže odgovarajuće razumijevanje navodne fenomenološke objektivnosti zajedno s posljedicama za moralnu teoriju.

Ključne riječi

moralna fenomenologija, moralna teorija, objektivnost, kognitivizam, nekognitivizam, kognitivni ekspresivizam, vjerovanje, istina, moralni realizam

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Phänomenologische Objektivität und Moraltheorie

Zusammenfassung

Es wird die Relation zwischen Moralphänomenologie und Moraltheorie behandelt. Die Ziele dieser Abhandlung beziehen Folgendes ein: Klarstellung des Begriffs der Moralphänomenologie, insbesondere des Einflusses, den sie auf die Moraltheorie ausübt; Interpretation der Diskussion zwischen dem moralischen Kognitivismus und Nichtkognitivismus im Lichte der Moralphänomenologie; Präsentation der jüngsten Position des kognitiven Expressivismus bezüglich dieser Debatte; Hindeuten auf die wichtigsten Unzulänglichkeiten dieser Theorie, vor allem in Bezug auf die vorgebliche Objektivität moralischer Urteile. Der kognitive Expressivismus hinterlässt jedoch eine Kluft zwischen den unmittelbaren Merkmalen unserer innerlichen Moralphänomenologie und ihrer theoretischen Erklärung, wodurch ein Großteil seiner potenziellen phänomenologischen Unterstützung verloren geht. Vorgeschlagen wird ein angemessenes Verständnis der angeblichen phänomenologischen Objektivität zusammen mit deren Konsequenzen für die Moraltheorie.

Schlüsselwörter

Morphänomenologie, Moraltheorie, Objektivität, Kognitivismus, Nichtkognitivismus, kognitiver Expressivismus, Glaube, Wahrheit, moralischer Realismus

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Phénoménologie objective et théorie morale

Résumé

Cette article considère la relation entre la morale phénoménologique et la morale théorique. Les objectifs de ce travail sont les suivants : éclaircir le concept de la morale phénoménologique, en particulier l'influence qu'elle a eu sur la morale théorique; interpréter les discussions entre le cognitivisme morale et le non-cognitivisme à la lumière de la phénoménologie morale ; présenter la position la plus récente de l'expressivisme cognitif en lien avec ce débat ; indiquer les principaux défauts de cette théorie, principalement en ce qui concerne la prétendue objectivité des jugements moraux. En effet, l'expressivisme cognitif creuse encore un fossé entre les caractéristiques immédiates de notre psychologie morale intérieure et ses explication théoriques, perdant ainsi la majeure partie du soutien phénoménologique apparent. Finalement, une compréhension adéquate de la prétendue objectivité phénoménologique est proposé avec la théorie morale.

Mots-clés

phénoménologie morale, théorie morale, objectivité, cognitivisme, non-cognitivisme, expressivisme, croyance, vérité, réalisme morale