Emotions and Incommensurable Moral Concepts

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Many authors have argued that emotions serve an epistemic role in our moral practice.[1] Indeed, it seems likely that emotions do play such a role. But at least one author (John McDowell) has taken the epistemic connection to be so strong as to make creatures who do not share our affective nature unable to grasp our moral concepts. Further, this incommensurability, or inability to understand certain moral concepts, might lead to relativism: you might think that if I cannot follow your moral concepts, then those concepts are not binding on me, and it might even be the case that moral claims that are true for you are not true for me. I would like to discuss the alleged incommensurability introduced into morality by emotion's epistemic role, and its feared consequences. I conclude that although emotion might play an epistemic role in our moral practice, this role does not lead to the incommensurability feared. In any case, such incommensurability would not entail moral relativism. Thus, if the argument of this paper is right, the epistemic role our emotions play in moral discourse does not relativize morality.

McDowell and Concept Application

The problem to be discussed has been suggested by John McDowell (although he doesn't take it to be a problem). McDowell argues that one who didn't share our characteristic concerns and affective nature couldn't follow the contours of our moral concepts. We can't 'disentangle' our evaluative concepts and our affective responses; they are bound up with each other so intimately that competent application of the former requires possession of the latter. McDowell writes:

> Consider, for example, a specific conception of some moral virtue: the conception current in a reasonably cohesive moral

[1] See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), chapters 6 and 14; and Michael Stocker, *Valuing Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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> community. If the disentangling manoeuvre is always possible, that implies that the extension of the associated term, as it would be used by someone who belonged to the community, could be mastered independently of the special concerns which, in the community, would show themselves in admiration or emulation of actions seen as falling under the concept. That is: one could know which actions the term would be applied to, so that one would be able to predict applications and withholdings of it in new cases—not merely without oneself sharing the community's admiration (there need be no difficulty about that), but without even embarking on an attempt to make sense of their admiration.[2]

McDowell doubts that this 'disentangling manoeuvre' can be pulled off. He doubts that a purely cognitive faculty could follow the contours of our moral concepts. Thus, a divergence in emotional make-up between two species might well result in *incommensurability*, the inability of one group to understand the other group's moral concepts. (I will restrict the term 'incommensurability' to inability to understand alien concepts. Thus, incommensurability is to be distinguished from *rational* incommensurability, which is when two points of view lack common standards for the rational resolution of disputes. Many claim that incommensurability entails rational incommensurability, but I merely wish to emphasize that they are distinct positions, and I will label them accordingly. Finally, by incommensurability I do *not* mean mere inability to translate a word from one language into another. As I will argue later, untranslatability in no way entails incommensurability.)

Before I continue, let me hasten to correct a possible misunderstanding. My discussion of McDowell might (and has) lead readers to think that I am accusing McDowell of being a closet believer in conceptual schemes. I attribute no such belief to McDowell. I merely wanted to find the most persuasive argument for the conclusion that moral cognition requires the participation of affect. The strongest argument supporting this view turns out, in my view, to be the one advanced by McDowell.

Back to the argument. At first, one might doubt whether this incommensurability entails any relativism at all. Suppose we came to interact with a community of Martians, a group whose affective nature was different from our own. Suppose, further, that there were human moral concepts they could not grasp, and vice versa.

[2] 'Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following', *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*, Holtzman and Leich (eds) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 144.

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Consider a certain particularly important Martian moral concept, Φ. Periodically, a human will perform an action that causes all the Martians in the area to run away screaming and kill themselves. Unfortunately, the class of actions that produces this response appears shapeless to humans. We cannot grasp its contours; we cannot predict when one of our actions will violate this moral rule. Does this mean we have no obligation to avoid being Φ? I would think that instead we would have an obligation to defer to those who were competent in the application of the concept Φ. Imagine that I was interacting with a group of Martians, and one warned me that I was running the risk of being Φ. What would the human moral response to me be if I were to say, 'So what? I have no obligation to avoid being Φ'. Clearly, I would be thought to be morally bad: I had a chance to defer to a Martian competent in the use of the concept Φ, thereby avoiding a particularly bad outcome, and I failed to do so. Notice that if McDowell's thesis entailed relativism, my flippant response would have been correct: I would be under no obligation to avoid being Φ.[3] But it seems clear that my response is morally bad. Thus, it would seem that inability to follow the contours of a moral concept does not entail that one has no obligation at all vis-à-vis this concept.

Unfortunately, matters are not that simple; we will not always be able to merely defer to the Martians. Our inability to grasp Martian moral concepts will often lead, it seems, to an inability to rationally resolve moral disputes. Suppose a Martian informs me that I have an obligation to kill my mother. I refuse, saying it would be cruel. The Martians counter that they just can't grasp this cruelty we humans are always going on about, but one thing they do know is that it would be Ψ of me to kill my mother, thereby presenting me with another moral concept whose contours I cannot grasp. Clearly, in this case I cannot simply defer to the Martians. Nor can I argue with them. Since neither can grasp the others' moral concepts, we cannot rationally debate which one correctly applies to my killing my mother. Is it cruel or Ψ? is a question we cannot, it seems, rationally resolve.

But perhaps we can rationally resolve the issue. Normally, when conflict arises in our practice, we move to the explicit giving of reasons (what Sellars calls the 'game of giving and asking for reasons'). It's not clear that we couldn't do this in the above case of disagreement; it's not clear we couldn't start arguing. How would that go? I

[3] Or to avoid performing actions which Martians would call Φ; it has been pointed out to me that I wouldn't have the conceptual resources to act under the description Φ.

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might say to the Martians that my mother really doesn't want to die, and that when someone really wants something, that's at least prima facie reason to let them have it. Or we could argue that the Martians ought to dispense with concept Ψ because it requires them to do morally bad things, such as kill people's mothers.[4] In any case, we can clearly argue with the Martians over what we ought to do: even if we can only take the Martians' word for it that killing my mother would be a case of a Ψ action, we can still argue about whether that is sufficient reason to kill my mother. Let us examine the possible outcomes for such an argument. To smooth our progress, I will put the possible outcomes in the form of an outline:[5]

I. One side is convinced that the other is correct.
II. Neither side is convinced.
  A. There is a non-relative fact of the matter about what I ought to do (say, not kill my mother).
    1. Martians are wrong, but justified in their belief that I ought to kill my mother.
    2. Martians are wrong, and not justified in their belief.
  B. There is no (non-relative) fact of the matter about what I ought to do.

I will consider each of these possibilities in order. It seems clear that if (I) is the case, then there is no problem: if the Martians and I can come to some agreement (say, that I ought not kill my mother), then the impetus McDowell's argument provided for the claim that our moral systems will be rationally incommensurable is removed.

Now consider (IIA1). I don't think we have to concede that this is a worry for moral realism. Consider the example of the brain in a vat. It seems to me that the brain is justified in thinking that it is interacting with people and objects; but it also seems to me that the brain is wrong. The brain is just unfortunate in this respect.[6] Or

[4] Feminists, for example, sometimes argue that we ought not employ concepts such as 'chaste', since they imply a certain moral code that many feminists reject.

[5] Mark Lance suggested this way of breaking down the possible outcomes of such a debate.

[6] Of course, many externalists would deny that the brain in a vat is justified in thinking that it is interacting with real people. But the brain in the vat seems among the strongest counterexamples to externalism. If the brain in the vat—despite all the evidence at its disposal—is not justified in believing it is interacting with people, then justification has all but collapsed into truth, and we cannot carry on our epistemic practice in any

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consider the Venusians, who don't have the cognitive apparatus to grasp Riemannian geometry; they can only conceive of Euclidian geometry. Such a group might be perfectly well justified in claiming that parallel lines never intersect, but the fact that they believe this doesn't bode ill for Einstein (since actual space is Riemannian, not Euclidian). We might regret this group's lack of smarts, but this doesn't mean that geometric truths are local, or that there are no geometric truths. It may well be that the Martians use a different affective state to track moral concepts; and that this cognitive make-up stands as an impediment to their perception of moral truths.[7] But the fact that there is some cognitive impediment to the Martians' grasping of certain moral truths doesn't bode ill for moral realism any more than the Venusians' cognitive shortcomings bode ill for scientific realism.

Consider the problem this way: there is no possibility (it seems) of rational convergence on a particular moral question between the Martians and us, but this in itself doesn't entail that there is no (non-relative) fact of the matter. There is no possibility of rational convergence on the answer to the question, 'Is the number of neutrinos in the universe odd or even?', but only a verificationist would deny that there is a fact of the matter on the answer. In other words, convergence worries are, at least on their face, epistemological worries, not ontological worries. So the inability of the Martians and humans to rationally resolve this moral dispute does not entail that there is no fact of the matter as to whether or not I should kill my mother.

If (IIA2) is the case, then there is again no problem. There is a fact of the matter about what I ought to do, and the Martians are not justified in denying it. This is something which arises all the time in scientific discourse. For example, a member of the Flat

[7] One might worry, though, that this affective state plays more than just an epistemic role in morality; one might argue that this state plays a constitutive (truth-determining) role. I argue that this is not the case in 'Response-Dependence in Morality: Scary, Tame, or Just False?' (manuscript).

meaningful way, in a way that would shape discourse. This would result in numerous unfortunate consequences—we could not distinguish between science and pseudoscience; we could not sort beliefs among those to be believed and those not to be believed; etc. For a discussion of the pragmatic importance of epistemic discourse, see my 'Do Normative Facts Need to Explain?' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* **81**, No. 3 (September 2000), 246–272.

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Earth Society is both wrong and not justified. I take it that the fact that the Flat Earthers and the Martians are stubborn and irrational has no dire consequences for scientific or moral realism.

(IIB), if true, would clearly bode ill for moral realism. But how is our example supposed to entail (IIB)? We have two races of creatures who need some subjective state (in this case, an emotion) to be able to follow the contours of a concept, and we can't reach an agreement when our judgments on a particular case cut different ways. Consider a parallel case: suppose I am interacting with a race which, while blind, has an extremely advanced and sensitive faculty of echolocation, much like that possessed by bats or dolphins. When observing someone who is embarrassed, I note that she is turning red and say, 'She is blushing; clearly, she is embarrassed'. This race of creatures, lacking any ability to sense colour, denies that any change has occurred; nor can I convince them that the individual in question has changed in any way. But the fact that (a) colour perception requires a special faculty and (b) I cannot convince a person lacking this faculty of a certain colour claim (namely, that the person before us is blushing) don't entail that there is no fact of the matter regarding whether the person in question is blushing. Indeed, the claim that epistemological localism (i.e., that certain facts are only knowable by certain individuals, and not by others) implies factual or ontological localism (i.e., that what is in fact the case is relative to the individual/culture/etc.) requires some sort of subjectivist and verificationist account of meaning. This race of echo-locators (and perhaps also the Martians) can't see all of reality, but that is an epistemological problem, not an ontological one. As I argued a moment before, even if the Martians' claims are justified, that doesn't entail that the Martians are right, or that there is no objective fact of the matter.

There are three important things to be gained from this conversation. First, we *judge* affective impediments to moral behaviour; we don't let them be the criteria for moral rightness or wrongness. Second, our inability to grasp the contours of alien concepts cannot force us into relativism. Even in cases where we cannot understand certain of the aliens' moral concepts, we can still argue about what one ought to do. And in any of the above cases where we and the Martians fail to come to an agreement, we can envision a future time when we become sufficiently well-acquainted with Martian culture to follow all their moral concepts (or vice versa), and agreement is reached then. Or we can imagine a third race of creatures, the Venusians, who can understand both human and Martian moral concepts, coming along and adjudicating our interplanetary moral disputes. In short, McDowell has not (indeed, cannot) show that

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the difference between Martian and human affective states makes it *in principle* impossible for us to communicate and rationally resolve moral disputes, even via a third party (the Venusians). Third, even in-principle inability to resolve disagreement (such as might arise with the Venusians, who can only think in Euclidian terms) does not entail the claim that there is no fact of the matter. It is a fact that actual space is Riemannian, whether we could ever convince the Venusians of it or not. Thus, as stated above, epistemological relativism does not entail ontological relativism or scepticism. If we are to be convinced of moral relativism, the anti-realist will have to come up with a different argument for the truth of moral relativism or scepticism.[8] In short, the argument discussed by McDowell has not *in itself* given us sufficient reason to regard morality as relative. In a moment, we will discuss Davidsonian reasons for thinking that incommensurability is itself in principle impossible. But first, let us briefly turn our attention to the question, Does evaluative knowledge really require particular affective capabilities?

Concepts and 'Shapelessness'

I included the above discussion about incommensurability because of my own uncertainty as to whether we can in principle rule out such incommensurability.[9] However, there is one reason to suppose that our moral concepts need not be so local as one might suppose.

[8] And elsewhere I have gone about undermining those claims advanced by the anti-realist which are supposed to accomplish this. See my op. cit., note 6, op. cit., note 7.

[9] It seems likely (to me, at least) that such incommensurability cannot be ruled out. For example, neuroscientists report that stroke victims often lose certain concepts. Damage to the left parietal lobe can result in 'left-right confusion', in which the victim loses the concepts of 'leftness' and 'rightness'. Victims of left parietal lobe lesions often suffer from a complete inability to perform even the simplest mathematical calculations, suggesting a loss of various mathematical concepts. It is at least conceivable that the human race is systematically incapable of grasping certain concepts that are, to other intelligent races (if any there be), just as basic as the concepts of left and right are to us. It is true that we could not be *aware* of such a deficit, but to conclude from this that there can be no such deficit is to conflate epistemological with metaphysical issues (as I think Davidsonians sometimes do, in arguing for the impossibility of incommensurability). These sorts of brain-damage induced cognitive deficits are fairly well-known; these examples are drawn from the University of Massachusetts Medical Center Strokestop Glossary (http://www.umassmed.edu/strokestop/Glossary.html).

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I think McDowell's argument that our contingent affective nature plays a crucial and necessary role in moral cognition is unsound. There is a crucial and, I believe, unsupported step in his argument. Let us see if we can bring out this step by closely examining the form his argument takes.

Let me begin by briefly outlining the views McDowell is attempting to discredit with this line of argumentation. The first is the Humean philosophy of mind, 'a philosophy of mind which insists on a strict separation between cognitive capacities and their exercise, on the one hand, and what eighteenth-century writers would classify as passions or sentiments, on the other'.[10] A mental state can be either a cognitive belief-state, or a non-cognitive affective state; no mental state can combine elements of both. The other view McDowell is trying to discredit is non-cognitivism in ethics. On this view, our cognitive capacities discern genuine, non-evaluative features of the world, and in some cases, an affective capacity or other 'paints' or projects value on to these features. McDowell describes the view in question as follows:

> Typically, non-cognitivists hold that when we feel impelled to ascribe value to something, what is actually happening can be disentangled into two components. Competence with an evaluative concept involves, first, a sensitivity to an aspect of the world as it really is (as it is independently of value experience), and second, a propensity to a certain attitude—a non-cognitive state which constitutes the special perspective from which items in the world seem to be endowed with the value in question. Given the disentangling, we could construct explanations of the character of value experience on the same general lines as the explanations of colour experience that we have in mind when we are tempted by the argument about secondary qualities: occupants of the special perspective, in making value judgements, register the presence in objects of some property they authentically have, but enrich their conception of this property with the reflection of an attitude.[11]

I will not discuss whether this is an accurate portrayal of typical non-cognitivism, or whether his arguments against this conception are adequate. I wish only to discuss whether his response to this position establishes the claim that one needs certain affective capacities to follow the contours of our moral concepts. McDowell is attempting to demonstrate that the classical non-cognitivist cannot explain how it

[10] Op. cit., note 2, 143.
[11] Ibid., 143–4.

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is that we are able correctly to apply moral concepts, and it is the argument he gives for this conclusion that we shall examine.[12]

Some philosophers have argued that even though a concept might supervene on the natural world, the set of objects it picks out is 'shapeless' if considered purely at the natural level. In other words, viewed purely naturalistically, these objects don't form a recognizable kind. To see why these objects belong together essentially requires the concept under which they fall. McDowell argues that it is so with moral concepts. That is, the set of actions that are correctly categorized as 'cruel' appears shapeless and gerrymandered; only when one is competent in the use of the concept 'cruel' can one see any shape to this set of objects. There is no such shape at the natural level. Here is McDowell, responding to the reply that a purely cognitive faculty could follow the contours of moral concepts, because moral properties supervene on natural properties:

> Supervenience requires only that one be able to find differences expressible in terms of the level supervened on whenever one wants to make different judgments in terms of the supervening level. It does not follow from the satisfaction of this requirement that the set of items to which a supervening term is correctly applied need constitute a kind recognizable as such at the level supervened upon. In fact supervenience leaves open this possibility, which is just the possibility my scepticism envisages: however long a list we give of items to which a supervening term applies, described in terms of the level supervened upon, there may be no way, expressible at the level supervened upon, of grouping just such items together. Hence there need be no possibility of mastering, in a way that would enable one to go on to new cases, a term which is to function at the level supervened upon, but which is to group together exactly the items to which competent users would apply the supervening term. Understanding why just those things belong together may essentially require understanding the supervening term.[13]

Arguments like this one have been used in areas other than moral philosophy. For example, Wilfrid Sellars uses such an argument for scientific realism.[14] Suppose a particular theoretical entity explains

[12] This doesn't mean that McDowell is arguing for cognitivism; rather, he is arguing for a third way, a 'via media' between cognitivism and non-cognitivism.

[13] Op. cit., note 2, 145.

[14] Wilfrid Sellars, 'Phenomenalism', *Science, Perception, and Reality* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1991). Sellars' argu-

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certain observations, and allows us to make new observations. In many cases, this total set of observations is gerrymandered; it does not form a recognizable kind at the level of observation. If this is so, the observations we have made so far will not allow us to predict future observations, or, more to the point, justify those predictions we do make—*unless* we import theoretical considerations which both explain the observations made so far and allow us to make new observations. Thus, the theoretical concept is made essential by the shapelessness at the empirical level of its set of confirming observations.

McDowell's picture should now be a bit more clear. We cannot conceive of utterly distinct cognitive and affective faculties, with the cognitive faculties discerning genuine features of the world and the affective ones projecting value on to them, because the extension of our moral terms does not form a kind characterizable in natural terms as a recognizable kind. There is no reason to suppose that there is a genuine feature for our cognitive faculties to discern; the extension is a recognizable kind only when viewed from the supervening level, but not when seen from the level supervened upon. Thus, as McDowell puts it, the 'disentangling manoeuvre' cannot be pulled off, and we must reject non-cognitivism and the Humean philosophy of mind as unable to account for our application of moral concepts. More important for our purposes, no purely cognitive faculty can follow the contours of a moral concept, and successfully apply it in new cases; a creature must share our affective nature to follow our moral concepts.

But the more McDowell's picture comes into sharp focus, the more its flaws become apparent. Let us suppose (for I think this is true) that the extension of a supervening concept does not form a kind which we could recognize as a kind if we were to use only the vocabulary of the level supervened upon. Thus, if we wish to go on to apply the supervening concept in new cases, we must use the supervening concept itself; we cannot go on in the same way if we avail ourselves only of the language of the level supervened upon. But all this shows is that we need the supervening concept to grasp the supervening concept; it shows nothing about what affective nature we need to do so. The assumption is that a purely cognitive capacity could not grasp a concept whose extension did not form a recognizable kind at the natural level, a kind that could be described

ment is nicely reconstructed in Marc Lange, 'Salience, Supervenience, and Layer Cakes in Sellars's Scientific Realism, McDowell's Moral Realism, and the Philosophy of Mind', *Philosophical Studies* **101**, No. 2/3 (December 2000), 213–51.

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in naturalistic terms in a way that would allow one to go on to new cases. But this seems false. For example, it seems likely that an infinite variety of different machines could manifest a state correctly characterizable as a belief; and it also seems likely that the only thing these states would have in common is that they were all belief-states (in other words, we could give no non-mentalistic account of why all these states formed a kind, if you will pardon my double negative). But it also seems likely that we do not need any particular affective capacity to correctly apply the term 'belief'. Pick your favourite supervening term: even if the extension of this term is shapeless at the supervened level, we need not conclude that a purely cognitive faculty should be incapable of discerning its contours.

Indeed, one of the stock characters in the philosophical literature, the amoralist, gives us good reason to think, contra McDowell, that one need not share the community's concerns to follow its moral concepts. Consider the case of Robert Harris, a thrill killer who knew that what he was doing was wrong, but did not care.[15] In other words, he could apply our moral concepts even though he did not share our moral concerns.

It looks, then, as though we could follow an alien community's moral concepts even if we did not share their affective nature. This is not a surprising result, I suppose; the one reason we had for supposing that we could not so understand the Martians rested on McDowell's argument about the shapelessness of moral concepts at the natural level. As we saw, this argument entailed only that we needed to grasp the moral concept to apply that moral concept, not that we needed a particular affective capacity to grasp the concept. I must conclude, then, that McDowell has given us no reason to suppose that emotion plays a critical role in the understanding of moral concepts. Further, examples such as the amoralist give us reason to think that one can apply a community's moral concepts without sharing that community's concerns.

Even Michael Stocker, who is quite emphatic that emotions play an important epistemic role in our moral lives, denies that one must share our emotions to follow the contours of our moral concepts. Arguing that one can understand our emotional mindset without sharing it, Stocker[16] cites psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg, who writes that people with 'obsessive personalities … may develop a surpris-

[15] This case is discussed in Gary Watson, 'Responsibility and the Limits of Evil', *Responsibility, Character and the Emotions: New Essays in Moral Psychology*, Ferdinand Schoeman (ed.) (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 256–86.

[16] Op. cit., note 1.

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ing understanding of emotional depth in others while being apparently so "cold" themselves';[17] and David Shapiro, who writes of a psychopath manipulating a prison psychologist: 'His awareness and his interest [in the prison psychologist] were probably limited essentially to what was immediately relevant to his own current requirements, but it was sensitive awareness nonetheless',[18] awareness which allowed him quite successfully to manipulate the psychologist. Stocker himself writes that 'we see little reason to think that incorrect emotion or lack of correct emotion, must preclude evaluative knowledge'.[19] Referring back to the passages quoted from Kernberg and Shapiro, Stocker continues: 'As suggested [earlier], successful scam artists and interrogators can have evaluative knowledge without having the relevant emotions'.[20] At the very least, such emotionally defective people can correctly apply our moral concepts, even if you think that their lack of felt obligation precludes full-fledged moral knowledge. But that is all that my argument requires: people lacking the relevant emotions can nevertheless follow the contours of our moral concepts. So not only does McDowell's argument fail to show that one needs a particular affective nature to understand our moral concerns, the literature of psychology provides us with examples of people who understand our moral concerns, without at the same time sharing our affective nature.

At this point, someone might want to object as follows: 'The passage you quoted from McDowell is only one part of his argument. But McDowell's argument—essentially, an argument for the conclusion that we should embrace a middle ground, a third option between cognitivism and non-cognitivism—is much broader than this one argument regarding the 'disentangling manoeuvre'. His argument is that we can understand neither the phenomenology of values nor moral psychology in general without adopting McDowell's middle position. As you have only addressed this one argument of McDowell's, you can hardly claim to have refuted him'.[21] This objection is right, up to a point. I haven't refuted

[17] Otto Kernberg, 'Factors in the Treatment of Narcissistic Personalities', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* **18** (1970), 51–85. Reprinted in *Essential Papers on Narcissism*, Andrew P. Morrison (ed.) (New York University Press, 1986). The above quote is taken from p. 218 of the latter.

[18] David Shapiro, *Neurotic Styles* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), 153.

[19] Op. cit., note 1, 203.

[20] Ibid., 203.

[21] I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

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McDowell's position that we must adopt a 'via media' between cognitivism and non-cognitivism. And that is good, because McDowell is probably right that we must adopt such a position. It was never my intention to undermine McDowell's entire project, and I think that McDowell is right to think that to be a moral agent requires certain emotional responses.[22] The actions of an agent who lacked key emotions could not be said to fall under a moral concept—she would not be a moral agent. McDowell and I agree on that much. But in the above-quoted passage from McDowell, he is arguing that someone who didn't share our affective natures couldn't even follow the contours of our moral concepts—they couldn't predict applications of them. That, I have argued, is false—I have shown that his argument for this conclusion is unsound; and further, that abnormal psychology provides us with examples of people who, although they lack our affective responses and can't in any way be said to be moral agents, can nevertheless follow and apply our moral concepts. And that is all that is required for my argument. I do not need to claim that someone lacking affect could be a moral agent, or that her actions could count as falling under a particular moral concept—I only need to argue that such a person might nevertheless be able to follow the contours of our moral concepts. And I hope I have done this much.[23]

On the Very Idea of a Moral Conceptual Scheme

All this talk of incommensurability and untranslatable concepts should call to mind that great foe of conceptual schemes, Donald Davidson. In his article 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', Davidson argues that incommensurability can be excluded on *a priori* grounds. It has been suggested that Davidson's argument against incommensurability can be used to exclude the possibility of *rational* incommensurability between different ethical outlooks.[24] The argument in the moral case has been developed in various

[22] Although I argue in op. cit., note 7, that there is no *particular* emotion one *must* experience to count as applying a particular moral concept. Many different emotions—even alien emotions—can do the work of making us moral agents.

[23] As I noted in the last footnote, someone's actions could still fall under our moral concepts if they had a different set of affective responses from us. This is, again, a conclusion I argue for in my op. cit., note 7.

[24] See Susan Hurley, *Natural Reasons* (Oxford University Press, 1989); David E. Cooper, 'Moral Relativism', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy III: Studies in Ethical Theory*, French, Uehling, and Wettstein (eds) (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978).

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sophisticated ways. I would like to examine whether we can turn to these arguments to help our moral realism along.[25] Unfortunately, I think we cannot, but the issue arises rather naturally at this juncture, and so demands discussion.[26] If I am wrong, my argument in this paper is hardly weakened. After all, if it is possible to rule out rational incommensurability in ethics (or even just incommensurability), then my argument is that much stronger. So let us examine these Davidsonian arguments.

Incommensurability (I don't mean rational incommensurability), Davidson claims, is ruled out by the principle of charity we must adopt when we are in the position of the radical interpreter, that is, when we are translating the speech of speakers of an alien tongue and unable to assume anything about their beliefs. According to Davidson, 'If all we know is what sentences a speaker holds true, and we cannot assume that his language is our own, then we cannot take even a first step towards interpretation without knowing or assuming a great deal about the speaker's beliefs'.[27] Since we do not know the speaker's beliefs, we must assume general agreement between her beliefs and ours. Thus, we must assume that her beliefs are true according to our best theory of what is true. This is Davidson's principle of charity.

According to Davidson, translating is a process of correlating sentences held true in the alien language with sentences held true in the translator's language. This combines with the principle of charity as follows: suppose the speakers of an alien tongue utter a certain sentence, S, when and only when the sun is shining. According to Davidson, if we are to be able to translate their language at all, we must assume that they believe the sun to be shining when and only when it is, in fact, shining. And so we must also take them to

[25] I will here be following the reconstruction provided by Gopal Sreenivasan in his 'Understanding Alien Morals', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **72**, No. 1 (January 2001), 1–32.

[26] Earlier in this paper, I distinguished between incommensurability and rational incommensurability. At this point, things get a bit sticky, because sometimes the way the term 'incommensurability' is used in the following debate is ambiguous. This is because the general course of the argument made by Hurley and Cooper is the following: the impossibility of incommensurability entails the impossibility of rational incommensurability. So when they conclude that incommensurability is impossible, they mean both that incommensurability and rational incommensurability are impossible. Nevertheless, I will try to keep things as clear as possible.

[27] Donald Davidson, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 196.

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believe the sun is shining precisely when we take the sun to be shining (since presumably our own beliefs about the sun are reliable). It thus makes sense to translate S as 'The sun is shining', thereby attributing to the aliens a true belief and correlating S with a true sentence in our own language. Since we must correlate their linguistic behaviour with their environment (with what we take their environment to hold), we can only get the translation project off the ground by assuming that their beliefs about their environment are true—true by our lights. The important thing to note, according to Davidson, is that the remaining differences between their language and ours do not license us to say that the alien conceptual scheme is different from our own, since 'no general principle, or appeal to evidence, can force us to decide that the difference lies in our beliefs rather than in our concepts'.[28]

According to philosophers such as Susan Hurley, this argument against incommensurability furnishes the materials for a demonstration that *rational* incommensurability is impossible in ethics. The procedure for interpreting set E (consisting of the ethical utterances in an alien language) is one of correlating sentences in E with sentences we ourselves take to be true. But as one commentator, Gopal Sreenivasan, points out, the evidence which vindicates our ethical sentences, which gives us reason to believe them true and which (perhaps) also explains why we hold them to be true, will *a fortiori* vindicate the corresponding sentences in E. 'In that case, however, there evidently exists a set of considerations that is at once recognized by the radical interpreter and the speakers of the alien language alike [as] sufficient, by their lights, to vindicate the truth of a particular ethical outlook—and so, *a fortiori*, the rationality of adopting it—namely, the truth conditions of [the alien's ethical sentences] together with the belief that these conditions obtain'.[29] Presumably (although Sreenivasan does not say anything about this), if the aliens typically present an odd bit of evidence for a moral claim (say, the same bit of evidence they produce to try to prove that the sun is shining), then we will either have to decide that the claim really is not a moral claim after all, or we shall have to reinterpret the evidence, or some other move. Thus, genuine *rational* incommensurability in ethics seems to be ruled out by Davidson's argument.

Sreenivasan goes on to critique the Davidson argument in a number of ingenious ways. I do not wish to get too involved in the Davidson debate; there is a huge literature on Davidson and incommensurability, and one section of one paper is hardly sufficient to

[28] Ibid., 198.

[29] Op. cit., note 25, 10–11.

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do it justice. However, I will present an example which seems to show that Davidson's argument doesn't rule out rational incommensurability in ethics.

It is possible to understand a bit of alien language without being able to radically interpret that bit of language. In other words, we can understand an alien sentence, even if there is no corresponding sentence (true or false) in the translator's language—at least, no sentence unless the foreign concept is imported into the translator's language. One may simply 'go native' (Sreenivasan's phrase) and master a concept within the foreign tongue, without there being a corresponding concept in one's own native language. Here is an example provided by Sreenivasan:

> [S]uppose that Q is [a language] spoken by a tribe, central to whose ethical outlook is a fierce communal pride. Underpinning their pride, let us say, is a belief in the inherent superiority of their tribe. Suppose further that this pride is partly what gives point to the tribe's practice of applying a certain one of Q's thick descriptions, 'plonk'. Calling things 'plonk' is partly an expression of pride and that some things are plonk is also a source of pride. It is a conceptual truth that if some*one* is plonk, then his interests count for no more than an animal's. Say the outsider does not believe in the inherent superiority of this tribe. Whatever her belief on this matter, the outsider has—if she is to master the use of 'plonk'—to know the role of the tribe's pride in the practice, as well as knowing what they count as an expression of pride, and what as a source of pride.[30]

The important thing to note is that the outsider may come to understand 'plonk', but her language may lack the resources to construct sentences that have the same truth-values as all the sentences of Q in which 'plonk' occurs. Now, the outsider may enrich her own language by adding a word—'plonk*'—which has the same conceptual meaning as 'plonk'. We do this all the time; every language has numerous foreign borrowings. But even if this is done, Q is not radically interpretable. Since the outsider knows that sentences containing 'plonk' or 'plonk*' are false or without truth value (since she does not believe in the inherent superiority of the tribe) her understanding of 'plonk' is not a matter of her correlating sentences held to be true with sentences held to be true. This is indisputable—the members of the tribe hold many sentences containing 'plonk' to be true, whereas the outsider holds the equivalent sentences in her own language (containing 'plonk*') to be false or meaningless.

[30] Ibid., 21–2.

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This point should be familiar to anyone who has learned a foreign language. Many foreign words have no direct equivalent in English. But the fact that, say, 'gemütlich' has no precise English equivalent is not an insurmountable obstacle to my mastery of the term 'gemütlich'. Becoming *fluent* (as opposed to merely conversant) in a foreign language is not a matter of correlating held-to-be-true sentences with held-to-be-true sentences—in fact, a sign of genuine fluency is that one no longer has to translate foreign sentences into one's own tongue. One comes to be inside of the foreign language, and able to think in terms of concepts—*plonk*, *gemütlich*, and so forth—that have no direct equivalent in the speaker's native tongue. In short, radical interpretation overlooks the way in which coming to be genuinely fluent in another language involves a total involvement in that language, and a corresponding separation from one's own language—at least when speaking or thinking in the learned foreign tongue. Davidson's mistake, briefly, is to think that inability to translate entails inability to understand—that is, to think that inability to translate entails incommensurability.

Another way of understanding concepts such as 'plonk' is via long, discursive translations of the sort offered by E. E. Evans-Pritchard.[31] Evans-Pritchard discusses several Zande words for which there is no word in English. However, he explains the meaning of these words via long translations. For example, *mangu* is defined as '(1) WITCHCRAFT SUBSTANCE: a material substance in the bodies of certain persons. It is discovered by autopsy in the dead and is supposed to be diagnosed by oracles in the living. (2) WITCHCRAFT: a supposed psychic emanation from witchcraft-substance which is believed to cause injury to health and property'.[32] Thus, even if a term such as 'plonk' or 'mangu' has no equivalent in English, we can often give a discursive translation of this term, thereby allowing English-speakers to understand this foreign concept.

Since we can understand a foreign sentence, held to be true by its native speakers, without being able to correlate it with a true sentence in our own language, *rational* incommensurability is not ruled out by Davidson's argument. The tribe might well think that things are plonk, and they might think that the tribe itself is superior. Further, they might support their claims of superiority by adducing certain unfalsifiable claims—the gods anointed them as the chosen tribe, and they are superior to all others because it was ordained by

[31] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for directing me to this work.

[32] Ibid., 9.

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the gods. Thus, the aliens might have a whole set of beliefs which we could understand (via discursive definitions or sentences using the borrowing 'plonk*')—and think to be false—even though we cannot correlate these beliefs with true sentences in our own language. Thus, there are ways of understanding a foreign tongue that do not involve radical translation. Since Davidson's argument could only hope to rule out incommensurability (and, by extension, rational incommensurability) if all such understanding were grounded in radical translation, Davidson has not succeeded in ruling out rational incommensurability in ethics (not that he was trying to do so). Stated differently, if we hold sentences containing 'plonk*' to be false, then *a fortiori* they are not vindicated by our own theory of the world. Ergo, rational incommensurability is not ruled out by Davidsonian arguments.

The basic problem with the Davidsonian argument against the possibility of rational incommensurability is that it assumes that radical translation is the only route to understanding: if understanding a foreign tongue is always a matter of correlating sentences held-to-be-true with sentences held-to-be-true, then whatever arguments vindicate a sentence in our language will then vindicate whatever we determine to be the corresponding sentence in the foreign tongue. But as I have indicated above, there are at least two ways of understanding a foreign word that has no direct equivalent in your own language. The first way is to go native, and come to understand the foreign word from within the foreign language. The second way is to employ a long, discursive definition of the sort employed by Evans-Pritchard. Both of these methods allow us to understand, and indeed translate, in a way that does not involve correlating sentences held-to-be-true with sentences held-to-be-true. Both of these methods allow us to construct sentences in our native language that we hold to be false, but that are equivalent to some sentence in the foreign language: the first method allows this by employing a foreign borrowing, and the second by employing a discursive translation.

There is one last, related argument one might use in an attempt to show that there has, in fact, been no disagreement between us and the Martians, and hence no real relativism. One might argue that we didn't have any disagreement with the Martians in the first place, since Φ wasn't really a moral concept. Since Φ wasn't really a moral concept, then incommensurability doesn't lead to relativism; it merely leads to the alien concept not being a moral concept in the first place.

But the problem will not go away so easily. For even if we decide that Φ is not a moral concept (and that there is hence no strictly *moral* disagreement between us and the Martians), an important

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disagreement still exists—disagreement over what action I *ought* to perform. 'Should I kill my mother or not?' is a question that remains unresolved.

Nor is this 'ought' strictly a moral 'ought'. (If it were, then one might still say that we and the aliens aren't, in fact, disagreeing over what ought to be done, since their reasons aren't, strictly speaking, moral reasons, and their 'ought' is hence not a moral 'ought'.) There is a general, all-things-considered 'ought' that concerns which action is to be done, once all reasons have been taken into account. For example, suppose that after a bit of practical reasoning, I conclude that I ought to recruit volunteers to participate in a double-blind study of a medication. This 'ought' is not merely a moral ought—it reflects all relevant reasons (moral, epistemic, and so forth). For example, one might think of the action I ought to perform as a vector, determined by the particular confluence of epistemic norms (only if I perform a study can I know whether the drug is effective), moral norms (I may think that studies in nature are immoral, and that even though they are epistemically sound, they are less morally sound than double-blind studies involving informed volunteers), prudential norms (I don't want myself or my company to be sued if we put a dangerous or ineffective drug on the market; nor do I want the bad publicity that has in the past accompanied various studies in nature), etc. My action may even be shaped by mystical or religious reasons, and so forth. Since this general 'ought' is not specifically moral, we and the aliens can in fact disagree over which action ought to be done (in the most general sense of the word 'ought'). Further, even if you and I disagree over what kinds of reasons go into determining what ought, in this general sense, to be done, we still might disagree over what ought to be done, because we still mean the same thing by 'ought'. For example, I may think that prudential reasons are relevant and religious reasons are not, whereas you think that religious reasons are relevant and prudential reasons are not. The fact that we can then argue over whether moral or prudential reasons affect what ought to be done demonstrates that we are both still using this general 'ought' in the same sense, even though we disagree over what sort of reasons determine what ought to be done.

I don't think any philosophers really disagree with this last point. We have many sorts of disagreements—over what actions are free, what 'meaning' means, what is morally right, and so forth—where we philosophers argue over the extension and meaning of a term, while taking ourselves to be genuinely disagreeing. We can disagree on how a term (including the term 'ought') ought to be used while still using the term to express the same concept. Thus, we and the

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aliens really do disagree over what ought to be done, in the most general sense of the word 'ought'.[33]

It thus seems, then, that Davidsonian arguments cannot rule out rational incommensurability. As I have already argued, though, rational incommensurability is compatible both with realism and anti-realism; it does not determine one or the other. So, as I pointed out earlier, a distinct argument is needed to establish anti-realism. And I hope that so far, I have shown how several of these arguments fail.

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed incommensurability worries raised by the epistemic role the emotions play in morality. I argued that incommensurability does not in itself entail relativism; another argument is needed to establish that moral truths are relative. In any case, in our dissection of McDowell's argument, and through the example of the amoralist, we found no reason to suppose that one must share our emotions and concerns to be able to apply our moral concepts successfully. That is to say, the epistemic role played by the emotions in morality need not lead to incommensurability. Finally, we briefly investigated whether the moral realist can seek aid and comfort from Davidsonian arguments to the effect that incommensurability in ethics is in principle impossible. We decided that these arguments are not successful. I conclude that the epistemic role our emotions play in moral discourse does not relativize morality.[34]

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[33] For more on how two parties can use a term to mean the same thing while disagreeing on the norms that ought to govern use of that term, see Mark Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne, *The Grammar of Meaning: An Exploration of the Normative Character of Semantic Discourse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

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