1 Introduction

Disagreement in ethics abounds. This has led some philosophers to argue that there is an irreducible plurality of moral values, duties, obligations, rights, etc., and that there is no universally valid way of balancing them. This kind of moral pluralism in combination with the absence of determinate rankings of values, duties, obligations, rights, etc., has been thought by some to imply that some cases of disagreement in ethics are rationally irresolvable, which in its turn, explains why disagreement in ethics abounds and remains pervasive.1

It is a striking fact that in metaethics too, disagreement abounds.2 This raises the methodological question of how to respond to disagreement in metaethics. Recently, some metaethicists have suggested versions of pluralism in metaethics that parallel pluralist accounts in normative ethics. One leading thought is that disagreement in metaethics is best explained by metaethical pluralism, in analogy to how disagreement in normative ethics has been thought to be best explained by moral pluralism.

Metaethical pluralists typically hold that there is no single metaethical theory that provides the best analysis of all of our moral thought and discourse. In some contexts, a cognitivist analysis of moral thought and discourse might be more plausible than a non-cognitivist analysis, while in other contexts it might be the other way around. The same kind of variation across contexts may occur regarding internalism and externalism about motivation, and about absolutist and relativist analyses of moral claims. There may also be variation among speakers. Some speakers’ use of moral terms might be best viewed as non-cognitivist, while others’ may be best viewed as cognitivist.

In this paper we scrutinize different versions of pluralism in metaethics, as well as related accounts according to which ordinary moral concepts are not coherent or determinate enough to render any traditional metaethical analysis plausible.
2 Pluralism I: moral motivation pluralism

We begin by considering a theory recently proposed by Ragnar Francén Olinder, ‘moral motivation pluralism’. As the label suggests, the main idea is that, contrary to what is ordinarily assumed, there is no single concept of moral opinions at play in the debate on the connection between moral opinions and motivation; rather, different people express different concepts with ‘moral opinion’ and related terms.

According to motivational internalism, there is a conceptually necessary connection between moral opinions and motivation. On the standard version of this view (the one we shall focus on here), it is conceptually necessary that if a person has a moral opinion, then he is to some extent motivated to act in accordance with this opinion. According to motivational externalism, by contrast, there is no such conceptually necessary connection between moral opinions and motivation: it is conceptually possible to have a moral opinion in the absence of any accompanying motivation. Francén Olinder says that internalists and externalists have diverging intuitions about various key cases. For instance, internalists tend to have the intuition that a person who has no motivation to perform or promote actions he calls ‘good’ cannot be expressing opinions about goodness with the term ‘good’; externalists tend to have the intuition that he can. According to Francén Olinder, this divergence in intuitions indicates that these different theorist mean different things by the term ‘moral opinion’ (as well as related terms, such as ‘the opinion that the action is good’): it expresses different concepts when used by people with different intuitions. When used by someone with internalist intuitions, the term expresses a concept for which internalism holds: he says something true when he says, ‘it is impossible to have a moral opinion in the absence of any accompanying motivation’. When used by someone with externalist intuitions, it expresses a concept for which externalism holds: he says something true when he says, ‘it is possible to have a moral opinion in the absence of any accompanying motivation’.

How does the divergence in intuitions give rise to this kind of conceptual relativity? Though Francén Olinder stresses that his general approach is compatible with several different answers to this question, he is inclined to appeal to dispositions to apply the relevant terms in actual and hypothetical scenarios. The differences in intuitions, he suggests, correspond to differences in such linguistic dispositions, and a person’s dispositions to apply the term ‘moral opinion’ determine which concept it expresses when she uses it.

One merit of Francén Olinder’s pluralist view is that it explains why both internalism and externalism continue to be attractive. The explanation is simply that internalism is the correct view of some speakers’ concepts and use of the term ‘moral opinion’, while externalism is the correct view of other speakers’ concepts and use of the term ‘moral opinion’.