THE MANY FACES OF TRUTH: A RESPONSE TO SOME CRITICS

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INTRODUCTION
In Truth as One and Many, (hereafter TOAM) I argue that truth is best defined as a functional property. To define truth functionally is to define it by way of its connections to other related concepts. These connections are embodied in certain common truisms that have played a central role in the historical discussions over truth. Three of these truisms are as follows.¹ For every proposition $P$,

- **Objectivity**: $P$ is true if and only if were $P$ to be believed, things would be as they are believed to be.

- **Norm of Belief**: It is prima facie correct to believe $P$ if and only if $P$ is true.

- **End of Inquiry**: Other things being equal, if $P$ is true, then believing $P$ is a worthy goal of inquiry.

The idea is that these truisms, or ones very much like them, together with certain obvious platitudes connecting truth with validity, knowledge and the like, jointly pick out conceptually essential features of the truth property. We might put it like this: truth just is the property that has these features essentially. Having that property is what constitutes a proposition’s being true. It is in this sense that the functionalist thinks that truth is one.

¹ There are a variety of ways one can state these truisms. Here I follow Pedersen’s (xxx) regimentation of my more informal presentation in TOAM.
Truth’s being a functional property is consistent with what is sometimes called truth pluralism, or the idea that there is more than one property in virtue of which propositions are true. That is, it is consistent with the idea that whether a given proposition is true is determined by its having some other, ontologically distinct property – perhaps a representational property, like correspondence, or perhaps an epistemically constrained property like superwarrant. According to the functionalist, we can pick out a property that determines whether a proposition is true by seeing whether it plays the truth-role. Such properties should not be confused with truth itself, but they could be described as properties that, under certain conditions, and for certain kinds of content, realize truth. TOAM presents a theory of the kind of realization in question: what I call manifestation. If truth is a functional property, then truth is open to multiple manifestation. It is in this sense that truth is many.

Functionalism about truth opens the door to some interesting new solutions to old problems. For example: in some domains, we are inclined to think both that (a) beliefs in that domain are capable of being true; but (b) such beliefs don’t represent reality. The domain of moral beliefs is a plausible—if controversial—example. On the one hand, we tend to think that at least some of our moral beliefs can be true. We can have reasons for such beliefs, and we can have moral knowledge. On the other hand, it is difficult to see our beliefs as representing distinctive moral properties of actions. If we adopt functionalism about truth, it seems possible to accommodate both intuitions. We can allow that some beliefs (and their contents) are true, but not true by virtue of representing anything. And that in turn allows us to explain how we can have, e.g. moral knowledge without needing recourse to representation or ontologically suspicious moral properties.

In this paper, I respond to some objections to these views, recently published in this journal by Benjamin Jarvis, Douglas Edwards, Nikolaj Pedersen and Niall Connelly.

**Response to Edwards and Jarvis**

Douglas Edwards and Benjamin Jarvis offer criticisms that—while differing in certain details—run largely parallel. Consequently, I’ll discuss their papers together.

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2 Early statements of this view can be found in Crispin Wright (1992) and in Lynch 2001.
Edwards and Jarvis are, in varying respects, sympathetic with idea that truth could be plural. And they each note that the functionalist version of this idea has some affinity with standard deflationary views of truth. After all, functionalists and deflationists agree that truth itself can be defined in terms of its function. This distinguishes both functionalism and deflationism from more traditional theories of truth. But the standard deflationist takes that function to be exhausted by truth’s expressive role. According to the deflationist, truth’s sole point is to act as a logical device for generalization, and therefore it can be defined solely in terms of a single truism: the equivalence principle or T-schema. In my view, and in the view of Edwards and Jarvis, this conception of truth is too limited: truth also acts as the norm of belief and as a goal of inquiry. Consequently, the concept has normative content. As Jarvis puts it, this means (among other things) that to believe that it is true that roses are red commits one to the correct believability of the content that roses are red (xx). By holding that truth has a normative dimension in this way, functionalism goes beyond the standard deflationary account of the concept. Moreover, as Jarvis and Edwards also agree, it also goes beyond the standard deflationary account of the property of truth as well. For the functionalist, as noted above, truth can be plurally manifested.

But how plural is plural? In the book, I entertain two theories of properties that might manifest truth. One is a successor theory of sorts to correspondence theories of old. The other is a successor to traditional epistemic theories of truth, such as the coherence or pragmatist accounts. Both Edwards and Jarvis think that there are far more properties that can play the truth-role than these two. As Jarvis puts it, if truth is plural, it is “maniacally plural”. There is not just more than one manifesting property. Rather, there are as many as there are propositions. Consequently, functionalism is far more deflationary in spirit than I’ve allowed.

Edwards and Jarvis offer slightly different arguments for this claim. According to Edwards, I commit myself to a more deflationary view merely by holding that truth can be defined functionally.

As I noted above, to define truth functionally is to define it by the sum of those relational features picked out by the truisms Objective, Norm of Belief and End of Inquiry. Call the features so picked out the truish features. Thus propositions are true when they have a property that plays the truth-role. And a property T plays that role just when it has the truish features, or is, as we might say, truish.
In TOAM (p. 72), I point out that this commits one to thinking that, (where “TR” stands for a property that plays the truth-role):

(S) P is TR if, and only if, where P is believed, things are as they are believed to be iff P is TR; other things being equal, it is a worthy goal of inquiry to believe P if P is TR; and it is correct to believe P iff P is TR.

Edwards notes that if we put together (S) with the relevant instance of (ES)

(ES) P is true if and only if P,

we can infer, via substitution, for any arbitrary proposition P,

(SW) P is TR if and only if, where P is believed, things are as they are believed to be iff P; it is a worthy goal of inquiry to believe P if P; it is correct to believe P iff P.\(^3\)

The question is what this shows. Edwards takes it to show that “for every single proposition, there will be a different manifestation of truth” (Edwards, xx). I am not so sure.

One reason to doubt is that, so far, we don’t actually have any rival candidate properties on the table. In order for that to be the case, we’d have to follow something like Jarvis’s suggestion, and say that the truth manifesting property for the proposition that grass is green is the property of \textit{being such that grass is green}, and the truth manifesting property for the proposition that snow is white is \textit{being such that snow is white} and so on. The thought is that for each proposition, there is a different property that could play the truth-role: it is a property of the form: \textit{being such that} \(p\). Call this a Jarvis-property. Some will raise their eyebrows at Jarvis-properties. And well they might. Much hangs on how one reads the “being such that”. Suppose we ask: what is it, \textit{in general}, for a proposition to be such that the world is a certain way? That seems a-lot like asking what it is for a proposition to be \textit{true}. So Jarvis properties don’t seem to get us very far. \(^4\)

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\(^3\) In order to secure the inference, we’d need to consider substitution instances. But the point remains the same.

\(^4\) Of course, Jarvis might say that there is no general answer to the above question—that is, after all, just the deflationist’s point. But then why do we need recourse to Jarvis properties to make it?
But put that aside; I’ll grant the existence of Jarvis-properties. Let’s think about whether the functionalist should feel any more pressure here from Edwards’ argument. Note that a very similar point might be made against other substantive theories of truth. Consider, for example, a correspondence theory that holds that for every proposition \( P \),

\[
(CT) \text{ P is true if and only if P corresponds to the facts.}
\]

Here \emph{correspondence} is understood as a metaphysically rich relation. Now presumably our advocate of \( (CT) \) also accepts \( (ES) \). If so, then it seems for any arbitrary proposition \( P \), we can infer

\[
P \text{ corresponds to the facts if and only if } P.
\]

Would this by itself show that this version of the correspondence theory is maniacally plural or deflationary? Well, in a trivial sense it would. After all, \emph{which} fact a proposition must correspond to in order to be true depends on the proposition it is. But this would presumably not concern our imaginary correspondence theorist very much. Nor should it. They needn’t \emph{deny} \( (ES) \) or its consequences. Their point is that this truism doesn’t exhaust all the important facts about truth. Indeed, they think that an appeal to a general property of correspondence is required to explain that truism. \emph{That is what makes the view “substantive”}. The thought is that correspondence is the property that all truths have in common, and it is the having of this property that explains why true propositions objective, correct to believe, a worthy aim of inquiry and, of course, \( (ES) \).

In the same vein, it is not part of my view to deny \( (SW) \) and its cousins. \( (SW) \), as I’ve noted, follows directly from our functional definition of truth in terms of the truisms together with \( (ES) \). The real question is whether, for certain sorts of propositions, there must be a further property, distinct from truth, the having of which makes it the case that this propositions satisfies the truisms – that explains, in short, why the proposition is true. That this is so is a key part of the functionalist view. Suppose there really are Jarvis properties and some of the propositions I believe are lucky to have them. That is, suppose that the (true) proposition that snow is white

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\(^5\) Why not mention \( (ES) \) as one of the core truisms about truth? In TOAM, I argue that it is entailed by \emph{Objectivity} along with some obvious premises about what bears content (see TOAM, 9).
has the property of \textit{being such that snow is white}. Would the fact that this belief of mine has this property explain \textit{why} it is correct to believe, objective and so on? I see no sense of “explanation” in which it would. Put another way, the question at hand is whether the functionalist must accept that that a true belief’s Jarvis-property is the property that manifests truth, or whether it only has its Jarvis-property in virtue of having some more substantive property. Edwards argument is consistent with either hypothesis.

Now if one has deflationist sympathies, it won’t matter whether a proposition or belief’s Jarvis-property is explanatory or not. Deflationists don’t think there is anything to explain about truth other than its role as an expressive device. But whether deflationism is true is not the issue here. The issue here is whether, even if we grant that each true proposition has a Jarvis-property, the functionalist must accept that a true belief’s Jarvis-property is a property that manifests or \textit{determines} whether that belief is true, or whether, like any robust theorist of truth, she can insist there is more to say.

Jarvis acknowledges that some philosophers think there is more to say, and advocates of robust correspondence views (of \textit{correspondence} that is) are among them. But, he says, there is no general, non-trivial theory of correspondence to appeal to. In TOAM, I agree that traditional correspondence theories like (CT) above are not very plausible. They either end up being mere platitudes (not explanations) or they require there to be sentence-shaped facts in the world. But that doesn’t mean we must give up on the basic correspondence intuition. In TOAM, I argued that there are promising successors to the traditional correspondence theories. These theories are the product of the representational theories of mind and language found in cognitive science.

The most plausible extent theories that build on the correspondence platitude are composed of three elements. First, they take the target of explanation to be true beliefs.\textsuperscript{6} This does not, surprisingly, require them to deny the thought that propositions can be true or false, nor need they deny the thought that propositions are the contents of attitudes like beliefs (see TOAM, 28-29 for an argument) What they are committed to is he idea that what our theories of truth should be trying to explain is how propositions we believe are true. The second element reduces the truth of a belief to the representational relations (or referential relations) of its

\textsuperscript{6} Or true sentences. Early versions of the views I’m discussing here are found in Devitt *1997) and Field (1972).
component concepts. The third element of any such view, obviously, is a theory of what representation is. The most common, and I think, most reasonable theories of representation hold that facts about representation are identical to, or supervene on, natural facts. The guiding metaphor is the map: our beliefs represent the world as maps represent the environment. Here is a toy version:

**REPRESENT**: The belief that a is F is true if and only if the object causally mapped by “a” has the property causally mapped by “F”.

Some might say that theories like this are “really” theories of content determination, not theories of truth. Jarvis wisely demurs, noting that, “the theory of truth is just whatever the theory of attitude, content and truth conditions needs it to be” (xx). In Jarvis’s, mine and Davidson’s view, what determines a given theoretical element is properly considered an element of a theory of truth depends on whether we need to appeal to that theoretical element to do the work we need a theory of truth to do: that is, to help us explain the nature of content, attitudes and truth conditions. On this way of looking at it, representational theories that imply something like **REPRESENT** are theories of truth and content.

So Jarvis agrees that theories like **REPRESENT** are theories of truth. But he objects that they are not substantive. Why? Because a view like **REPRESENT** is just a recipe: “it depends on what we substitute in for the schematic ‘a’s’ and ‘F’s’”; and so “what representational correspondence is “just depends on the content-type just as maniacal pluralism says that it does.”

Jarvis is certainly right that **REPRESENT**, as stated, is not a generalization. In order to quantify over it, we’d need a substitutional quantifier or functionally similar device; that of course could be done. But why do we need to? Why should the fact that **REPRESENT** is a recipe preclude us from thinking that there is a general account of representation or correspondence in the offing? After all, **REPRESENT** itself isn’t meant as a theory of what representation is; that will be given by a substantive account of how mental states causally map objects in the environment. Indeed, such theories—being as they are, theories of how mental states relate to the world—will presumably be partly empirical in nature, best developed in conjunction with cognitive science.

Put differently, **REPRESENT** is meant as a theory of what makes a belief true. But that theory claims that there is a dependence relation between a belief’s being true and how the
parts of a belief causally map the world. That is, \textit{represent},
while a biconditional, is to be read “Socratically”. What makes
beliefs true is that they causally map the world as it is; they
don’t map the world as it is because they are true. Such views
may be false. They might be misguided. But they are certainly
substantive, precisely because it is a substantive question what
causal mapping consists in.

Edwards also makes a further argument. The view he
calls deflationary pluralism is superior to the more substantive
version because it avoids the problem of “mixed compounds”.
This is the problem of how, if truth is in some way plural, to
understand the truth of a proposition like:

MIX: Murder is wrong and grass is green.

Suppose that the property that manifests truth for moral
propositions is distinct from the property that manifests truth
for propositions concerning the physical world. Now ask: what
manifests truth for MIX itself?

A variety of answers to this problem have been
proposed. \textsuperscript{7} In TOAM, I argue that a simple answer the problem
drops right out of my theory of manifestation. I won’t rehearse
that answer here, however. Edwards’ thought is that what he
calls deflationary pluralism is superior to other forms not
because it has a better answer, but because it needs no answer.

According to deflationary pluralism, each compound
proposition, mixed or not, will specify its own manifestation of
truth. What manifests truth for MIX is its Jarvis-property: being
such that murder is wrong and grass is green. Consequently,
there is no puzzle about which property manifests truth for a
mixed compound.

I have two points to make in reply. The first is that the
problem of mixed compounds isn’t just a problem specific to
functionalist or pluralist theories of truth, or theories of truth
generally. It is simply one aspect of a larger problem – what
I’ve call in TOAM the problem of the universality of reason.
This larger problem arises for \textit{any} view which (a) takes there
to be distinctive kinds of content (say normative and
descriptive); and (b) takes it that some contents are not true in
virtue of the representational relations those contents (and the

\textsuperscript{7} A sampling of the literature here includes Williamson, 1994; Tappolet
mental states directed at them) bear to the world. Any view like this—such as expressivism, for example—must say how it is that we can reason and make inferences across different types of content. Consequently, the above point---that theories of content and theories of truth travel in tandem---comes into play here as well. To avoid the problem of mixed compounds, one needs not just a deflated theory of truth, but a deflated theory of content – one which does not distinguish between different kinds of content.

Hence, my second point. Perhaps the deflationary pluralist adopts a deflated theory of truth and content. If they do, then I agree: there is no puzzle about mixed compounds on such a view. Indeed, there is no puzzle about how reason can be universal either. But it does so only at the cost of adopting a bloodless quietism and ignoring the real differences between our thoughts.

**Reply to Pedersen**

Where Jarvis and Edwards aim at my account of the properties that play the truth-role or determine truth, N. J. L. L. Pedersen aims at my view of the property of truth itself.

What is that view? How do the properties in virtue of which propositions are true relate to the property of truth itself. In TOAM, I give the following answer. Recall that a property plays the truth-role just when it has the truish features. For some propositions, an epistemic property like superwarrant plays the truth-role. When it does, it has the truish features. But superwarrant doesn’t play the truth-role for every kind of proposition. So superwarrant, if it has the truish features, has them accidentally (TOAM, 78). Consequently, superwarrant isn’t truth. The property of truth itself is the property that has the truish features essentially or which plays the truth-role as such. It is the property that is, essentially, had by believed contents just when things are as they are believed to be; had by propositions believed at the end of inquiry and which makes propositions correct to believe.

Pedersen argues that this account of the metaphysics of truth is consistent with holding that truth is actually a disjunctive property.

Suppose that some propositions are true when they are superwarranted and all other propositions are true when they represent things as they are. If so, then we might say that the functional concept of truth just picks out the a property defined like this:
An atomic proposition is true\(_D\) just when it is either superwarranted or represents things are they are.

Is the property of being true\(_D\) a candidate for being the property of truth itself? Pedersen presents an ingeniously simple argument intended to show that it is by lights of the metaphysical picture given above. The argument hinges on a principle that Pedersen ascribes to me:

(SAT): The domain-specific (or local) properties T1,...,TN satisfy the truisms (Pedersen, p. x).

The argument has two parts. The first part: Take some proposition P, and suppose it is true\(_D\). If so, then we know it will also be true in some specific way: say it is superwarranted. If superwarrant plays the truth-role, we know, by (SAT) that propositions which have that property are correct to believe. So P is correct to believe. So if P is true\(_D\), it is correct believe.

Second part: Assume that P is correct to believe. (SAT), Pedersen claims, entails that P is superwarranted if, and only if, P is correct to believe. It follows from this and our assumption that P is superwarranted. But if P is superwarranted, P is true\(_D\). So if P is correct to believe, P is true\(_D\).

Put the two parts together, Pedersen claims, and we get: For any P, P is true\(_D\) if and only if P is correct to believe, and thus our disjunctive property satisfies one of the truisms. Put differently, P’s makes it have the truish feature of being correct to believe.

Pedersen rightly notes that similar arguments can be made for each of the other truisms. And, he argues, because such arguments only rely on the definition of the disjunctive property, basic logical inference—and (SAT), which he takes to be a necessary truth, he concludes that the disjunctive property should be regarded by me as an equally viable candidate for the referent of “truth”.

I disagree, for two reasons. First, as I argue in TOAM, and as Pedersen notes, the disjunctive view has a particularly hard time dealing with the problem of mixed compounds. Consider a mixed conjunction like MIX above. Again, the question is what makes the conjunction itself true. And the conjunction itself is surely not true because it has the property of, say, being either superwarranted or representing the facts. For that to be the case MIX must have one of the “disjunct properties”; but it is not clear what property that would be. The proposition that grass is green might represent some fact (or object/property pair). It is far from clear that the
proposition that grass is green and murder is wrong itself represents any fact.

Pedersen argues that this point should be seen as supplemental. It rules out the disjunctive property view by virtue of points separate from my own account of what truth is. As such, he thinks I now must say that truth just is the non-disjunctive property that has the truish features essentially. And that, he says, makes my view “impure”. Perhaps it does (it would not be the first time my lack of purity has been noted). But I think we can put that point aside. For Pedersen’s argument can be resisted. I don’t think it shows that \textit{being true}_D is a viable candidate for being the the property of truth by my own theory’s lights.

Here’s why. Pedersen claims that I am committed to the necessary truth of (SAT). But just what does (SAT) mean? It claims that any property that plays the truth-role satisfies the truisms. As I noted above, this amounts to saying that the properties that play the truth-role are truish. But we must be careful about how we parse this claim modally speaking. There are least two interpretations:

\begin{enumerate}
  \item [(DAT)]  Necessarily, if a property manifests truth, then it is truish.
  \item [(WAT)]  If a property manifests truth, then it is necessarily truish.
\end{enumerate}

But necessity \textit{de de dicto} is distinct from necessity \textit{de re}. And thus the above claim is distinct from:

\begin{enumerate}
  \item [(DAT)]\textit{de dicto} is true on my view. But (WAT), which concerns whether a property has the truish features essentially, is simply false. As I noted above, it is not part of my view that properties like superwarrant are essentially truish. They only have the truish features accidentally: that is when possessed by propositions for which they play the truth-role.
  \item [(DAT)]\textit{de dicto} is true on my view. But (WAT), which concerns whether a property has the truish features essentially, is simply false. As I noted above, it is not part of my view that properties like superwarrant are essentially truish. They only have the truish features accidentally: that is when possessed by propositions for which they play the truth-role.
\end{enumerate}

The problem here is that it seems like Pedersen’s argument would require the truth of (WAT). That is, in order to show that the disjunctive property is an equally good candidate for being the property of truth, Pedersen has to show that the property of being \textit{true}_D is essentially truish. But his argument does not show that. Indeed, it is not clear how it could. The fact that it is necessary that “P corresponds or is superwarranted” is truish doesn’t entail that it “P corresponds or is superwarranted” is necessarily truish. Indeed, If A is not necessarily F, and B is not necessarily F, then how could the
property of being either A or B be necessarily F?

Response to Connolly

In his paper, Niall Connolly focuses on this second aspect of alethic functionalism that I mentioned in my introductory remarks: the thought that an appeal to truth's multiple manifestation allows for the possibility of non-representational truth. He raises a number of interesting points, two of which strike me as central. I'll take them in order.

Connolly's first point is that, in his view, I "fail to establish" that some version of the correspondence theory doesn't explain the truth of all of our (true) beliefs (p. xx). If by "establish" we mean, "prove" then of course that is right. As I see it, determining the best theory of truth for any domain of inquiry is going to be a matter of best explanation. As is so often the case, settling on the best philosophical theory is a matter of weighing costs and benefits. Conceived of in that way, I still think it is fairly clear that the correspondence theory is not the best explanation of what truth in general consists in because, as I noted above, the best current theories of correspondence are built out of theories of representation, and the best theories of representation are naturalist.

Of course that is debatable. But it is a dominant assumption of contemporary cognitive science that something like this is correct. If it is, then it places constraints on what our minds can represent. As Connolly concedes, these constraints are not implausible. Rejecting them requires supplying a theory of representation that allows our mental states to represent things that are not possible objects of causal interaction. But if we think our mental states either are, or supervene on our brain states, it is not clear how this could be the case.

Connolly himself does not wish to quarrel with the representational theory per se. Instead, he wonders, where we find ourselves unable to explain how a kind of content bears a naturalistic representational relation to the world—say in the case of morality, or mathematics—why not simply say that beliefs with such contents are simply in error? The error theorist, it seems to me, faces three burdens. The first burden lies in convincing us that we can even make sense of the idea that a broad swath of our thought—such as those about morality—are really just false. The second task is to explain the persistence of practices that employ such thoughts, despite their pervasive error. And the third, conceptually prior to the first two, is to provide a reason for thinking that in forming
beliefs with the target kind of content, we actually do aim at representing the world.

Connolly is no doubt aware of these burdens. But he thinks that the alternative offered in TOAM – that at least some of our beliefs are true but not true in virtue of representing the world—is implausible. In particular, he is concerned to argue that what I call *concordance* is not a plausible theory of moral truth.

Connolly’s objection against concordance as a possible manifestation of moral truth is that it is too permissive: it doesn’t rule out a pernicious form of moral relativism being true.

In TOAM, I acknowledge that if concordance manifests truth for our moral judgments, then the truth of such judgments might be relative in a certain sense. I don’t think this straightaway entails that the relativism is pernicious, however. Nor do I think that a theory of truth is going to save us from the sensible knaves and Thrasymacuses of the world, as I’ll now explain.

Whether a moral belief is concordant depends on two factors. First, the belief must supercoheres with a framework of moral and nonmoral beliefs—where the nonmoral beliefs are true by virtue of representing how the world is. In short, it is not enough for a moral judgment to be true for it to be a member of a supercoherent framework of beliefs. It also has to supercohere with the non‐moral facts, as it were. Consequently, the fact that there could be two inconsistent but equally coherent (or even supercoherent) sets of moral beliefs is not itself sufficient to make the beliefs which compose the framework “equally true” Moral truth is constrained by the nonmoral truth.

Of course, as Connolly point out, this depends on whether we can make sense of a nonmoral belief lending evidential support of some kind to some moral beliefs rather than others. I don’t see this as difficult myself, nor do I take my view to be unusual in this respect.

As I see it, a nonmoral belief evidentially supports a moral belief in conjunction with further moral beliefs. One form such evidential support can take is entailment. But nonmoral beliefs can also be epistemically relevant to moral beliefs in other ways: by playing a role in comparative reasoning between cases. Comparative reasoning of this sort is common in practical reasoning: one notices (or thinks one notices) comparisons, and then, on the principle that like cases be treated alike, draws some normative conclusion (correctly or incorrectly). I see no reason to think that these all such
inferences must be formally tractable (that is, it needn't be a mater of logical consequence). But they can surely be evidential, or perceived to be such.

To see how these points relate to concordance, consider the 19th century white slave-owner who claims that his African slaves are not human, and on that basis, together with the moral claim that it is permissible to enslave non-humans, argues that is permissible to enslave Africans. Here we have a case where a nonmoral judgment, together with a moral principle, entails a further moral judgment. The slave-owner’s position is false because it is not concordant. One reason it is not concordant is that it is false that Africans aren’t human; that misrepresents the biological facts. But now consider that our slaveowner may also believe it is permissible to treat his wife as property. And he may hold various false nonmoral beliefs about women concerning, e.g. their relative average intelligence to men, their similarities to children etc. These judgments may well (in conjunction with other premises) entail further false moral beliefs about women. But these false nonmoral beliefs about women may also be part of the grounds on which he bases his views about the permissibility of slavery, simply because on their basis he draws comparisons between the moral status of women and slaves taken from Africa. Thus his moral beliefs will not be concordant: not only are they of dubious internal coherence in and of themselves, they are not supercoherent with the nonmoral facts.

Connolly argues that this constraint on moral truth is too weak. He asks us to consider two supercoherent frameworks F and F* such that every moral belief contained in F has its negation contained in F*. Could these systems be equally concordant as well? If so, then moral beliefs B and ~B would have to be equally supercoherent not just with other moral truths, with any possible nonmoral truth that could become a member of either system. Connolly thinks this is very possible, indeed, he seems to suggest that for any moral moral belief B, both it and its negation could be supercoherent with the very same nonmoral truths. His reasoning is this. Suppose F contains the beliefs that humans should be treated better than squid and that more intelligent beings should be treated better than less intelligent beings. Suppose F* contains the beliefs that it is not the case that human beings are to be treated better than squid and it is not the case that intelligent beings should be treated better than unintelligent beings. Both frameworks, he says, are presumably equally coherent with the fact that human beings are more intelligent that squid. Hence
supercoherence with nonmoral facts does nothing to constrain which moral frameworks are plausibly thought to be true.

I don't think it is as easy for rival moral systems – let alone contradictory ones!—to be equally supercoherent, or even coherent, with all the same nonmoral facts. Take the example just cited. It is true that “human beings should be treated worse than squid” is consistent with “human beings are more intelligent than squid”. But is it coherent, let alone supercoherent with other relevant nonmoral truths? Is the idea that human beings should be treated worse than squid coherently believable in conjunction with what is known about their relative capacities for pain? Consider what one might have to believe about the world in order to actually hold such a view. Perhaps one might believe that a squid is a supernatural being. But that of course would require other nonmoral beliefs: that, e.g. there are supernatural beings. And so on. Moreover, consider what other practically rational decisions would be engendered by sincerely believing that unintelligent beings should be treated better than intelligent ones. Could one coherently apply that to oneself? Perhaps, but it is hard to shake the thought doing so would require believing that the world is certain ways it is not.

A much better example for Connelly’s purposes is the intelligent, consistent egoist – the Thrasyymachus of Plato or the sensible knave of Hume. Such characters certainly seem possible. Moreover, in imagining them we needn’t conceive of them as holding the negation of all our moral judgments. So Connelly asks: might it be possible that the knave’s moral judgments are concordant? That is: would they remain coherent with all further increases of information, moral and nonmoral?

Before you answer this question, think about this: suppose you think that moral truth is a matter of correspondence with reality. You are a moral realist. Now suppose you also think that the knave’s views are false. Presumably you must say why you think this is the case. It will not be sufficient to say they fail to correspond to the facts, for to say that would be to simply repeat your view that they are false. Whatever evidence you cite, whatever failure of coherence or mistake you note the knave to make, that very evidence will be available to the friend of concordance to cite as well. The realist will take it to be evidence that the knave’s judgments fail to correspond; the constructivist will take it as evidence for thinking that the knave’s judgments fail to be concordant.
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The relevance of this point is this. Our constructivist might well grant that it is logically possible that there are incompatible moral judgments each of which is concordant with a distinct framework. But it is a further point to grant that the knave’s view is, or could be concordant in this way. To show that, it would need to be the case that the knave’s position will NEVER suffer a rational defeat of any kind, no matter how much new information and experiences come down the pike. If that dreadful possibility turns out to be realized, then it is not clear to me what edge the realist has gained. She will be able to say that the knave’s view could still be false, but won’t be able to say why we should think so. The realist and the constructivist will both be in the same boat, rationally speaking: forced to confront him, both will find that reasons have fled, save the five that one has in one’s right hand.\(^8\)

References

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