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PHI2015-1609**

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Metaphysics of Value**

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This paper should be cited as follows:

**Doyle, T. (2015). "Hume on the Epistemology and Metaphysics of Value",**  
Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series,  
No: **PHI2015-XXXX**.

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[www.atiner.gr](http://www.atiner.gr)

URL Conference Papers Series: [www.atiner.gr/papers.htm](http://www.atiner.gr/papers.htm)

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ISSN: 2241-2891

28/09/2015

## **Hume on the Epistemology and Metaphysics of Value**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the manner in which Hume challenges the cognitivist and realist intuitions informing our experience of value by identifying values with mind-dependent feelings and by separating facts from values. However, I argue that our cognitivist and realist intuitions can be safeguarded and that the key to so doing lies in Hume's own account, which points, contrary to his initial argument about the irreducibly phenomenal aspects of value experience, to the motivational role of reason and to the identification of values, not with mind-dependent feelings, but with mind-independent dispositions in the object. An examination of the modality of dispositions will show that values occupy a space on the fact side of Hume's fact-value divide, thus dissolving the divide and subjecting our value judgements to an external – realist – constraint.

**Keywords:** Value, Realism, Cognitivism, Disposition.

## Introduction

We are all familiar with the activity of valuing, making value judgements, and finding things valuable. Finding things valuable entails that those states of affairs matter to one in some way, even if not to ourselves individually but to someone. Yet, despite the familiarity of the experience of valuing, it is difficult, when pressed, to say what exactly the activity of valuing entails and where, if anywhere, the so-called value of things and actions resides. The ordinary experience of value suggests a cognitivist and realist answer to this question. That is, our experience of valuing seems to us to have a cognitive intentional structure. We consider that our evaluation is not just directed to a mind-independent object, but that it is merited by that object. I don't just love, but I love *you* in particular; I don't just praise, I praise *something* in particular. Moreover, I love *you* because as the object of my affection you have particular qualities that warrant my affection. Similarly, I praise an object *because* it has qualities that warrant praise. Whether the object is a person, an action or a thing, my evaluative response to it is considered to be merited by the object. However, the cognitivist and realist presuppositions of our ordinary experience of value have been subject to challenge. In this essay, I want to examine the Humean challenge specifically.

Accordingly, I want to focus on two claims that Hume makes about the epistemology and metaphysics of value. The first is his claim that moral and evaluative distinctions are the offspring of sentiment rather than reason. The second pertains to his argument that the metaphysical status of values is the same as that of mind-dependent secondary qualities that reside not in objects but only in the mind. In so doing, Hume challenges the cognitivist and realist intuitions informing our ordinary experience of value by making values and evaluations irreducibly phenomenal and by separating facts from values. Our cognitivist and realist intuitions can be secured only by challenging these fundamental Humean premises. I argue that the key to this challenge lies in Hume's own account, which points, contrary to the initial argument about the irreducibly phenomenal aspects of value experience, to the motivational role of reason and to the identification of values, not with mind-dependent feelings, but with mind-independent dispositions in the object. Further, it will be seen that understanding values as dispositions in the object also serves to undermine the fact-value distinction to which Hume's identification of values with mind-dependent feelings gives rise. It will be concluded that the appeal to values as dispositions, along with the argument for the centrality of judgement in evaluative discernment, ultimately safeguards, contrary to Hume, the cognitivist and realist presuppositions of our ordinary experience of value by subjecting our value judgements to an external – realist – constraint.

## Hume's Argument against Moral Rationalism

Whilst value realism entails the view that value sentences are propositional judgements that are capable of being true or false and that attribute value properties to things, the non-cognitivist account of value entails non-realism about value and holds that value discourse expresses attitudes rather than representational beliefs. Hume's non-cognitivist and non-realist account of morality and value stems from an argument about the epistemology of morality in addition to a further argument about the metaphysical status of moral and value properties. The two arguments are closely intertwined with the latter deriving from the former. The former, in favour of moral sentimentalism, has its roots in his argument against moral rationalism whilst the second draws the conclusion that values are non-representational, mind-dependent, properties. In so doing, Hume initiates a gap between facts, which are discoverable by science and values, which are reducible to phenomenal feelings.

The argument against moral rationalism passes through a number of stages beginning with his argument that morality and value cannot be discovered either like mathematical truths through a process of a priori reasoning or by simply offering an empirical description of the object (Hume, 1989, pp. 463-9). Rather than resulting from demonstrative or probable reasoning, Hume concludes, evaluative and moral distinctions are discerned through feeling. It must be so, he argues, because reason – both a priori deductive reasoning and probable (causal) inferential reasoning – is incapable of motivating action or arousing in us affective responses to objects or actions. The primary explanation for this incapacity of reason is that reason is 'perfectly inert' whereas morality is an 'active principle'. Reason can direct the passions by informing us of the existence of some object of desire or it can be directed by the passions by informing us of the most appropriate way of obtaining the object of our desire. But, by itself, reason cannot induce action. Accordingly, 'Moral distinctions', for Hume, 'are not the offspring of reason' but of passion (Hume, 1989, p. 458).

This disjunction of passion and reason, however, yields the conclusion that passions are non-cognitive affective states of mind. According to Hume, passions, actions and volitions are not truth-apt. Truth and falsity, which is discovered by reason, he argues, 'consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact' (Hume, 1989, p. 458). But, the passions, he claims, are incapable of either agreement with other ideas or to real, mind-independent, existences (Hume, 1989, p. 458). Accordingly, for Hume, the passions are non-representational (Hume, 1989, p. 415). He contends that only ideas represent and, when they do, they do so by agreeing with or copying mind-independent existences (Hume, 1989, p. 448). Since moral values are expressions of non-cognitive emotions for Hume and not judgements about matters of fact, it follows that value sentences express attitudes rather than beliefs about the character of actions and objects. Evaluative 'judgements', therefore, are emotive and reducible to sentiments of approbation or blame. Consequently, whereas the

standard of judgement and truth regarding matters of fact is mind-independent, existing ‘in the nature of things’, and subject to dispute, the ‘standard of sentiment’ is indisputable (Hume, 1988, p. 171). Our evaluative distinctions, or feelings of approval and disapproval, for Hume, are non-inferential and non-propositional experiences similar to the manner in which I feel pain or pleasure without inference or judgement (Hume, 1989, p. 469).<sup>1</sup>

However, from the conclusion that ‘Morality --- is more properly felt than judg’d of’ (Hume, 1989, p. 470), Hume draws a further, metaphysical, one. That is, he argues that not only are passions non-representational, valuing and values are one and the same - they are mind-dependent feelings. Thus, he likens values to secondary qualities, which, he contends are ‘in’ the mind rather than in objects. In so doing, as Peter Kail has argued, Hume adopts a particularly Malebranchian rather than Lockean understanding of the metaphysical status of secondary qualities (Kail, 2010, p. 153), which denies the Lockean view that such qualities are in fact dispositions or powers in the object. For Hume, secondary qualities such as colour and other sensible properties such as value, have a certain phenomenal - what it is like - character that precludes their identification with non-phenomenal properties such as powers. Hume’s account of objectivity in terms of representations that resemble their objects further precludes such identification. Thus, Hume concludes that the phenomenal quality of colour or moral and aesthetic properties resides only in the mind and cannot be understood, from a philosophical point of view, to reside mind-independently in objects.

### **Problems with Hume’s Argument**

If the above conclusions represent Hume’s final verdict about both the epistemology and metaphysics of value, then they are problematic in two respects. The first is that despite his arguments regarding the non-cognitive character of evaluative feelings, the cognitivist and realist presuppositions of the ordinary experience of value prove recalcitrant. That is, our experience of valuing still seems to us to have a cognitive intentional structure such that we feel that our evaluation is not just directed to an object but that it is also merited by that object. The feeling of being merited entails, not just sensations of pleasure and pain, as Hume suggests (Hume, 1989, p. 286), but rather a judgement about qualities in the object that merit the approbatory or disapprobatory feeling. Secondly, the emotivist conclusion that evaluative judgements are *merely* affective attitudes precludes the possibility of there being objectively valid grounds for our evaluations and choices. In the absence of such grounds, our evaluations are rendered immune to criticism and the possibility of reform.

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<sup>1</sup> However, we shall see that tensions emerge in Hume’s argument that point towards cognitivism.

Despite the denial that evaluations are objectively grounded, however, Hume anticipates and formulates a response to both of our concerns. Firstly, although he concedes that our ordinary experience of value is cognitivist and realist, he contends that this ordinary view is erroneous. His identification of values as ‘in the mind’ lies at the heart of his error theory of value. For him, the vulgar or common sense attitude experiences objects in qualitative terms, that is, as colourful or valuable. At the same time, however, these qualities are supposed to be irreducibly phenomenal. Their irreducibly phenomenal character is, according to Hume, fundamentally at odds with the notion that these qualities reside mind-independently in objects.

However, although he holds that our ordinary experience is false, Hume accounts for the fact that our experiences recalcitrantly appear to be about mind-independent objects by appealing to the projection thesis. When adopting the latter view, for example, he maintains that our phenomenological felt experiences – sentiments in the case of value experience – are, in fact, spread onto the world by the mind. Nevertheless, he contends that the knowledge that our values are projections of our sentiments onto the world will make no practical difference to our conduct. The reason for this is that the sentiments themselves that constitute value are the source of our motivation and impel us to act. Theoretical knowledge that our values are not properties in the world but projections of our sentiments can deliver no practical difference to how we act. Hume, therefore, suggests that we remain indifferent to the metaphysical conclusion that values are not mind-independent properties of objects or actions. However, such an indifferentist response can be deemed satisfactory only if he can provide a satisfying response to the second problem that our evaluations are, according to his account, lacking objective validity.

In response to the second problem that his account reduces questions of value to unconstrained expressions of felt attitudes and desires, Hume contends that although reason cannot constrain evaluative choice, such choice can be constrained through the correction of our sentiments. This constraint comes in the guise of the notion of an impartial spectator or what he calls the ‘general view or survey’ (Hume, 1989, p. 475). For example, he contends that we tend to react more strongly – either approbatively or disapprobatively - to actions that are proximate to us than to those that are distant. Or, we tend to disapprove of an action more readily if the action is performed by an enemy rather than a friend (Hume, 1989, p. 581). To correct a sentiment, however, entails considering how we would feel if a matter were considered independently of our particular interest in or relation to it (Hume, 1989, p. 472). Hume supposes that were everyone to adopt the general point of view, we would find a high degree of agreement amongst our sentiments.

Intersubjective agreement amongst our sentiments is Hume’s replacement for objectivity where objectivity is understood in representational terms or in terms of correspondence. However, intersubjective agreement is a poor substitute for genuine objectivity, even if we give up on the notion of objectivity as correspondence, if the correction of our sentiments is an entirely ‘internal’ affair and is unconstrained by mind-independent reality. In the

absence of constraint by the object and in light of Hume's view that values are sentiments that are projected onto objects, this would mean that the same evaluations could be projected indiscriminately onto objects with entirely different features.

Demonstrating a clear awareness of the problem, Hume adds a further ingredient to his argument from intersubjectivity, especially in his discussion of the role of taste, where rather than overcoming the problem of reducing questions of value to unconstrained expressions of wishes, attitudes and desires by appealing to intersubjective agreement alone, Hume now appeals to the correlation between features of the object and our evaluative feelings (Hume, 1989, pp. 581 ff., Hume 1988, p. 394, Hume 1987, pp. 226-252). Here he makes it clear that although our evaluative sentiments are, from a metaphysical point of view, projections to the extent that the phenomenal quality of our sentiments are not to be discovered in mind-independent objects, the sentiments themselves are correlated with non-evaluative features of the object, which are 'fitted by nature to produce these particular feelings' (Hume, 1987, p. 235). Accordingly, Hume argues that when an appropriate sentimental response to an object is missing, it is down to a want of delicacy in the taste of the perceiver. Such a deficiency can be remedied through practice, however, and bolstered by the agreement of the community (Hume, 1987, p. 237). With this, we witness an important element in Hume's intersubjectivity argument, which has been evident from the beginning but which must be brought to the fore now that its implications can be more readily discerned in light of Hume's claim about correlation. Not only does he appeal to objective features of objects with which our evaluative sentiments are generally correlated, he also allows that I may, at any given time, encounter these objects without experiencing the correlated value sentiment. Although he still holds that values are phenomenal and mind-dependent, the absence of the phenomenal evaluative sentiment on any given occasion does not preclude the making of counterfactual judgements about what feelings should be experienced in relation to particular features of objects.

That is, Hume contravenes threats to the cogency and practical feasibility of his intersubjectivity argument by attributing a role to reason and judgement in the discernment of taste. Although reason and judgement are not essential components of taste, he argues that they nonetheless serve the role of keeping in check the influence of prejudice on our capacity to respond, either approbatively or disapprobatively, to features of the object naturally suited to produce those evaluative sentiments (Hume, 1987, p. 241). As a result, the ultimate test of a standard of taste pertains to the agreement amongst our sentiments, supported by the constraint of judgement in determining the non-prejudicial character of our affective responses. The role of judgement is to assist sentiment, alerting us to prejudice in our responses, and to compare sentiments of taste 'in order to perceive the consistence and uniformity of the whole' (Hume, 1987, p.240). Such consistency is discerned and general rules of taste formulated on the basis of inductive reasoning (Hume, 1987, p. 232). These judgements appeal to general rules derived from particular observations



of the actual sentiments that men feel in response to certain objects. In the absence of the ‘proper’ sentiment (Hume, 1987, p. 234) a judgement must be made about what sentiment the person ought to feel were it not for a deficiency in their capacity for aesthetic perception or moral discernment. However, although initially formulated on the basis of the actual feelings that men feel, my judgement about what I ought to feel is now made both in the absence of feeling and on the basis of factual statements about the character of the object. As a result, the appeal to proper aesthetic perception or moral discernment, ascertained by a process of judgement, and derived from statements of fact about features of the object, begins to sound cognitivist in character and rather removed from Hume’s earlier non-cognitivist account.

But, the application of his argument about the role of inductive reasoning to matters of morality poses problems for Hume’s earlier view that moral discernment is intrinsically motivational (Hume, 1989, p. 457) in addition to the view expressed in the taste essay that reason merely assists the sentiments by comparing them and alerting us to prejudice. If Hume is to successfully cater for a constraint to our evaluative feelings in addition to preserving his view that morality is intrinsically motivating in light of the capacity of reason for moral discernment, he needs to allow for a motivational role for reason. And, he needs to allow that normative statements can be legitimately derived from factual ones.

### **The Argument for Cognitivism and Realism**

One might argue that the claim that judgement is capable of moral and aesthetic discernment does not commit Hume to the motivational capacity of such judgement. One might point to, for example, that in the absence of feeling, such motivational capacity is also absent and that Hume holds that even when judgement discerns value, it motivates by prompting the appropriate passion (Hume, 1989, p. 462). But, if he allows that we can become aware of moral distinctions through judgement rather than through directly experienced feeling and that such feeling must be present for the belief to be motivational then the source of motivation becomes extrinsic to our awareness of moral distinctions contrary to his earlier argument that moral discernment (albeit through feeling) is intrinsically motivational (Hume, 1989, p. 457). He must either allow that moral discernment is not intrinsically motivational or hold that belief can motivate in the absence of feeling. Hume is willing to jettison the former claim rather than concede the latter (Hume, 1989, pp. 478-9),<sup>1</sup> despite the fact that his argument for the motivational capacity of feeling over reason

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<sup>1</sup> However, see Hume’s example of the parent who lacks natural parental affection but still recognizes the moral prescription to care for one’s children (Hume, 1989, pp. 478-9). But, even here he argues that where a sense of duty alone leads to action, then the action, in the absence of the moral motive or feeling, cannot be properly deemed morally praiseworthy unless there is some other motivating influence which itself has a moral character. Moral motivation is extrinsic to moral discernment through reason.

rests on a commitment to the view that morality is intrinsically motivational<sup>1</sup> and a presupposition about the executive incapacity of reason. Hume had argued that morality influences action and that reason alone cannot motivate us to act. Therefore, he concluded, moral judgement must be based on feeling as feeling, unlike reason, is motivational (Hume, 1989, p. 457). Since the argument rests on the claim that morality is intrinsically motivating, this claim should be given priority in any subsequent development of the argument. This is especially the case when we consider that, contrary to Hume's denial that judgement alone has the power to motivate, it is not obviously the case that beliefs are non-motivational nor that emotions are non-judgemental. To see that the former is not the case we need to reconsider the analogy that Hume draws between value and moral properties with phenomenal properties such as colour. It is arguably the case that our experience of phenomenal properties does not dispose us to respond or act at all. For our experience of colour, for example, whilst phenomenal, is not dispositional. I experience colour – whether rightly or wrongly – as being in the object rather than as disposing me to act. But, although we may not experience colour dispositionally but rather as intrinsically phenomenal, our experience of value is arguably dispositional and only derivatively phenomenal. This can be discerned, as Jonathan Dancy points out, by the fact that the experience of value properties is directly related to the will. According to Dancy, we experience objects of value 'such as to' elicit a certain response (Dancy, 1993, p. 161). Contrary to Hume's view that the will is a feeling that we are conscious of (Hume, 1989, p. 12), the 'experience' of value or the relation of value properties to the will, for Dancy, is closer to the form of a judgement than to the experience of phenomenal colour (Dancy, 1993, p. 162). The judgement responds to and sees the situation as demanding a particular form of action. The phenomenal experience of colour is not prescriptive whereas the experience of value is. This is not to deny that evaluative judgements may have or be accompanied by a certain phenomenal feel but it is to say that it is not the feel that individuates and identifies the value. The source of motivation is not the emotion but rather the judgement that the situation calls for a particular response.<sup>2</sup>

The above epistemic result calls for a revision of Hume's verdict on the metaphysical status of our values. That is, if value judgements are irreducible to phenomenal feelings, then, moral and value properties are no longer existentially dependent on the mind. Rather, they must be mind-independent intentional objects of our value judgements. Moreover, if the judgement is a response to features of a situation demanding a particular response, then those features demanding the response must have a dispositional nature. Moral and

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<sup>1</sup> See Coleman, 1992, p. 332 and Mackie, 1980, chapter four.

<sup>2</sup> For an argument that emotions are judgements of value, see Foot, 2002, Nussbaum, 2003 and Solomon, 2004.

value properties must, therefore, be dispositions in the object of our evaluative appraisal that elicit the appraisal.<sup>1</sup>

The significance of holding to a dispositional account of value has a far reaching consequence for Hume's account of the epistemology and metaphysics of value. That is, the view that values are experienced judgementally as dispositions in the object demanding a particular response and that value judgements are acknowledgements of such demands actually serves to undermine the fact-value distinction upon which Hume's challenge to our ordinary experience of value is founded. This is because by understanding values as mind-independent dispositions in objects, we allow for what Hume's fact-value distinction cannot: that normativity can be explained as continuous with natural causal processes rather than being separate from them. The reason that such an application is possible is because, as Anjum, Lie and Mumford demonstrate, values, understood as dispositions, share the same modal structure as natural causal processes.<sup>2</sup> To see that this is the case requires a reconsideration of Hume's argument that the modality of natural causal processes entails either complete necessity or complete contingency, in favour of understanding these processes as operating according to a dispositional modality that appeals to natural tendencies involving neither necessity nor contingency.

Hume denies that there are causal powers in nature on the basis that if there were such powers their necessary causal influence could not be prevented. He writes that a legitimate appeal to causal powers 'would imply the absolute impossibility for the one object not to follow, or to be conceiv'd not to follow upon the other' (Hume, 1989, pp. 161-2). However, in the absence of an impression of necessary connection, he claims that cause and effect, understood in terms of spatial contiguity and temporal succession, are conceivably separable from one another. Such separability allows that preventive conditions may obtain that interfere with the production of an effect by its cause. Since causal influence can be thus prevented, he denies that causal powers obtain in nature, arguing instead that 'All events seem entirely loose and separate; but we never can observe any tie between them. They seem *conjoined* but never *connected*.' (Hume, 1988, p. 74) Consequently, for him, 'tis impossible to admit of any medium betwixt chance and necessity.' (Hume, 1989, p. 171)

However, contrary to Hume, the modality of natural causal processes is dispositional where dispositions are best described as tending towards their outcomes but where the outcomes are not necessitated. The modality of dispositions is such that dispositional properties are more than purely contingent but less than necessary. For example, if I drop a glass, the glass

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike Sturgeon's cognitivist subjectivist interpretation that appeals to truth-apt judgements about mental states (Sturgeon 2008), I argue that the logic of Hume's argument implies that values should be identified with mind-independent dispositions.

<sup>2</sup> In this and the explanation of dispositional modality that follows, I draw heavily on the argument of Anjum et al., 2013, pp. 234-5.

tends to break. But, it doesn't always break and its breaking cannot be guaranteed. In cases where breaking occurs, we can still say that had some preventive condition obtained, such as its landing on a soft surface, it need not have broken. Nevertheless, despite not necessitating its outcome, the power or disposition is a power to do a delimited range of things and so its outcomes are not purely contingent but stem from the nature of the thing and its capacities to do a certain range of things in different circumstances. That is, to say that something is disposed to do something, such that the glass is fragile and disposed to breaking if dropped, is to say that the dispositional property of fragility is more than a merely contingent one. There is a delimited range of things that the glass is disposed to do. Its disposition to break, if dropped, is intimately tied in with its nature. Given this nature, we can say that it is disposed to break but not disposed to turning into a rabbit (Anjum *et al.* 2013, p. 235).

That normativity has a dispositional nature can be discerned from the fact that it exhibits a 'structurally parallel' modality to the modality of natural causal processes (Anjum *et al.* 2013, p. 242). This is evident from the phenomena of moral ennui, frailty and immoralism, cases where knowledge of moral facts and that a particular situation demands a particular response does not necessitate the appropriate action.<sup>1</sup> That is, we often fail to do as we ought despite knowing what we ought to do. Any convincing account of moral behaviour must be able to account for such phenomena. The dispositional view can account for such phenomena by allowing that moral facts are intrinsically motivating, but not necessarily so. We hold on to the idea, contrary to Hume, that moral judgements are intrinsically motivating whilst also accounting for those cases where we are not actually motivated due to the influence of some extrinsic factor. In this way, we account for immorality and human frailty, not by denying the intrinsic motivational character of moral properties but rather by arguing that these moral properties do not always manifest in moral action as a result, for example, of other overriding influences on my actions. That is, 'That one ought to do X does not necessitate X'. Yet, although normativity does not necessitate an outcome, it is not mere contingency. This is because the normative fact delimits what ought to be done and demarcates it from the non-selective range of things that *could* be done but which lack genuine prescriptiveness. To say that I ought to do something is to say more than that it is merely possible for me to do it. That is, whilst there are many things that I *could* do, only a selective range of these things are things that I *ought* to do (Anjum *et al.* 2013, p. 242). The structural parallel between the modality of dispositions such as fragility and that of normativity allows us to place

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<sup>1</sup> Hume's separation of moral knowledge from moral action in passages where he considers moral motivation to be extrinsic to moral awareness demands such an explanation. See his account of the sensible knave (Hume, 1988, pp. 282-4). A dispositional view can do this without foregoing the intrinsic motivational capacity of morality. Accordingly, the dispositional view renders debates about internalism and externalism in Hume redundant. For a discussion of these issues, see Coleman 1992.

normativity on the fact side of Hume's fact-value dichotomy, thus dissolving the dichotomy itself.

As we can see, much follows if we abandon Hume's view that evaluation and values are irreducibly phenomenal. Such an abandonment is made possible by the internal tension within the Hume's challenge to our ordinary – realist and cognitive – experience of value and by the fact that he cannot achieve what he wants to achieve – intersubjective agreement – within the confines of non-cognitivism and non-realism.

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