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Chapter 17
A Realist-Friendly Argument for Moral Fictionalism: Perhaps You'd Better Not Believe It

Christopher Jay

Abstract We don't have to choose between fictionalism and realism. There would, perhaps, be something good about our acceptance of moral claims – our moral commitments – being nondoxastic, i.e., amounting to some form of acceptance other than belief, even though the moral claims accepted are apt to be believed (i.e. their semantic content is fully representational), and even if they are *true*. I present an argument to this conclusion which does not rely upon any non-realist assumptions, and which is in fact strengthened by making some realist assumptions. As well as being an independently interesting argument, then, it shows that realists might have reasons to be fictionalists too.

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17.1 Introduction

Whatever moral facts or truths are or would be, they presumably don't depend upon the existence of distinctively moral *objects* in the way that mathematical facts might be thought to depend upon the existence of objects such as numbers or sets. So, the issues which are in play when it comes to moral fictionalism are slightly different from the issues in play when it comes to mathematical fictionalism, or fictionalism about possible worlds or composite objects etc., and this chapter therefore does not deal with abstract objects as such. It does, however, touch on moral realism and its relation to fictionalism. Most discussions of fictionalism start from the rejection of realism about some domain and progress to a discussion of the attitudes appropriate in light of that rejection, and most discussions of moral fictionalism start accordingly from the rejection of moral realism. But this chapter presents an argument for moral

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fictionalism which is available to a moral realist. A moral fictionalist need not be against moral realism, and a moral realist need not reject moral fictionalism.

This is an essay on the ethics of *nondoxastic commitment*, in the tradition of discussions of the ethics of belief such as the one famously offered by W. D. Clifford.[1] Our beliefs are of moral concern at least in part because they are action guiding. And that feature of beliefs is shared with other sorts of commitments. Just as our moral beliefs, and our beliefs about the non-moral facts, inform our deliberation and decision with respect to action, so our *nondoxastic* moral, political and religious commitments play much the same roles, or at least they do if we have any.[2] So an ethics of commitment which only has something to say about beliefs is incomplete.

Nondoxastic commitments are psychological states which involve *accepting* some proposition but not *believing* it. Commonly this possibility is illustrated by pointing out that a great many people accept that Sherlock Holmes was a detective without, strictly speaking, believing it: they are willing to say that Sherlock Holmes was a detective, for example, but they know very well that he was not, since Sherlock Holmes did not exist, and (as they well know) nothing which did not exist could have actually been a detective.[3] In the philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of science, philosophy of religion and metaethics, arguments have been advanced which appeal to the idea that we can accept some proposition without believing it for various pragmatic reasons, and it is sometimes argued that whether or not this is what we do as things stand, it is what we *ought* to do. Fictionalism is the view that our commitments in some domain are or ought to be (or, as I'll argue below, might well be) nondoxastic, although – and this is what distinguishes it from canonical non-cognitivism (see Kalderon (2005a, b) – fictionalists agree with traditional realist cognitivists that the *semantic content* of what is accepted is fully representational, and should be taken literally: fictionalism (as I understand it here) does not reinterpret its target claims; it adopts a perfectly 'standard' non-expressivist

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[1] See Clifford (1876–7). Clifford would not, however, agree with much of what I go on to say in this chapter, which might usefully be read alongside Adams (1995).

[2] This claim is not uncontroversial, but I think it is true and will assume it here. Some philosophers doubt that the *rationality* of action can be explained (even in part, apparently) by appeal to nondoxastic commitments, but suffice it for now to point out that plenty of appealing theories of action and rationality allow a role for 'acceptance' which is nondoxastic: see, e.g., Bratman (1992) (though the sort of nondoxastic acceptance I have in mind is, as will emerge, rather different from the sort Bratman has in mind), or Velleman (2000). See also Joyce (2005).

[3] You might think that in fact what is going on is that they are just believing a proposition about what some stories say, rather than nondoxastically accepting the (different) proposition that Sherlock Holmes was a detective. But see Joyce (2005) for good reasons not to think that. As it happens, I think the fiction analogy is unhelpful in some ways – see Jay (2012: Chap. 1) for discussion – but I employ it here for convenience since my purpose is not to provide a full-blooded discussion of all aspects of fictionalist positions (see Jay (2012: Part 1) for more).

and literal account of their meaning, but insists on the fact that belief is not the only propositional attitude which can be adopted in accepting claims with that sort of meaning.[4]

Fictionalists who argue that we ought to have nondoxastic moral commitments argue that there is something *good* about our having nondoxastic commitments. But all sorts of things are good in some respect, without it following that we ought to do or have them, and having identified something good about nondoxastic commitments there remains work to be done. The fictionalist who thinks that our commitments *ought* to be nondoxastic must establish (or rely upon the independent plausibility of) two distinct claims: firstly, that having *some* commitments with respect to the relevant domain is better than having *none*; and, secondly, that it is better to have *nondoxastic* commitments with respect to that domain than to have (just) *beliefs*.[5]

A good example of this strategy in metaethics is Richard Joyce's argument for moral fictionalism. (See Joyce 2001: Chaps. 7 and 8; 2005.) Joyce argues that our moral commitments are extremely valuable bolsters to our resolve, allowing us to do things which we are not immediately inclined to do, and to resist weakness of will. To have some moral commitments, then, is better than to have none. But Joyce also thinks that the moral claims we accept in having moral commitments – which for most of us as things stand are moral beliefs – are systematically untrue, for Joyce is an error theorist. So, given that it is bad to have untrue beliefs, it is better to have *nondoxastic* moral commitments than moral beliefs, for there is nothing necessarily bad about having untrue nondoxastic commitments. The upshot, then, is that there is good reason for us to have nondoxastic moral commitments as opposed to either moral beliefs or no moral commitments at all.[6]

[4]This sense of 'fictionalism' and its cognates (which Kalderon describes as 'non-cognitivism without non-factualism') is not the only one in circulation. Rosen's (1990) fictionalism, for example, is rather different: as I am thinking of it, fictionalism does not involve a view of its target claims as involving any sort of tacit *according to...* operator. The issue here relates to that discussed in the previous footnote. See Joyce (2005), or my (2012: pp. 48–51). For a similar understanding of fictionalism (though a different understanding of 'realism' from the one relied upon here), see e.g. Kroon (2011: p. 787).

[5]Of course, it does not immediately follow even from this that we *ought* to have nondoxastic commitments rather than beliefs, or that we ought to have nondoxastic commitments at all: it might be that, as things stand, there are more or less (or completely) insuperable practical obstacles, or unacceptable practical costs, to shifting from belief to nondoxastic acceptance (if beliefs about the relevant domain are what we currently have). This is why (as I argue in my (2014: §2)) thinking of fictionalism as either *hermeneutic* (claiming that our commitments actually are nondoxastic) or *revolutionary* (claiming that out commitments are not but ought to be nondoxastic) is too simplistic. The argument I give in this paper will be for what I call *evaluative* fictionalism, claiming that nondoxastic commitment would be *good*. This does not entail the *normative* conclusion of revolutionary fictionalism, and it is silent with respect to the *descriptive* claim of hermeneutic fictionalism.

[6]The structure of this argument is similar to Field's (1980, 1989) argument for mathematical fictionalism, and to an argument which, I argue, is recoverable from Kant's work on the theological postulates (see my (2014)).

In what follows, I will develop an argument with the same structure, to the conclusion that there is something particularly good about nondoxastic moral commitment. I do not go so far as claiming that we ought to have nondoxastic moral commitments as opposed to moral beliefs, because I will not consider the *dis*advantages. The point of presenting my argument is not to settle that issue, but to suggest that there is something to be said for nondoxastic moral commitment the force of which has not been acknowledged so far in the debate but which deserves to be.

The good in the nondoxastic which I will be highlighting is interesting because it is a good which might persuade a moral *realist* to embrace fictionalism. As I said above, it is generally assumed that fictionalism is a position which might appeal only to non-realists.[7] In my intended sense, a moral realist is someone who thinks not only that our moral claims are truth-*apt* but also that a significant class of moral propositions are in fact *true*.[8] Non-realists, then, fall into two classes: those who *deny* that a significant class of moral propositions are true (because they take moral claims either to fail of truth-aptness or to be false); and those who think that we are merely in no position to assert that they are true (though they also think we are in no position to assert that they are false or (less likely) that they fail of truth-aptness). Fictionalists in various domains are split between the 'atheists' (e.g. Field (1980, 1989) and Leng (2010) with respect to mathematical objects) and the 'agnostics' (e.g. van Fraassen (1980) with respect to scientific unobservables), and in each case it is easy to see why, being unwilling to embrace realism, they are drawn to a view which approves of nondoxastic commitments which promise to retain what is good about commitment with respect to that domain whilst avoiding untrue – or at least unwarranted – beliefs.

It is often assumed that even if fictionalism is *compatible* with realism, the realist has no *reason* to embrace fictionalism, since if beliefs are available and respectable in virtue of their being true, they will presumably be able to do whatever nondoxastic commitments can do, and probably do it better.[9] But if the argument I present below is along the right lines, this assumption is unjustified, for there might very well be some good which our nondoxastic moral commitments are in a position to secure and our moral beliefs are not (at least to the same extent).

[7] I present realist arguments for *religious* fictionalism in my (2014) and (2016).

[8] The 'significant class' qualification is intended to rule out counting as a moral realist in virtue of thinking that just the *negative* moral claims (e.g. *gratitude is not wrong*) are true, and true *vacuously* (because *nothing* is wrong).

[9] For discussion of the *formal compatibility* of realism with fictionalism, see my (2012: Part 1, esp. chs1, 2). That realism is at least formally compatible with fictionalism has been acknowledge more or less in passing by Brock (2002), Nolan (2005), Yablo (2002: esp. fn1 and sec.12; 2005: fn), and, perhaps, Kalderon (2005a) who says '[m]oral fictionalism is consistent with the existence of moral facts' (p. 179).

17.2 Subjective Warrant and Action

Epistemic warrant, as I will understand it, is that which speaks in favour of believing that *p*. (That which *epistemically* speaks in favour of believing that *p*, that is: not that which, for example, pragmatically speaks in favour of doing so.) It does not follow straight from the definition of epistemic warrant that an *un*warranted belief is *defective*: it might be that there is not necessarily anything defective about a belief of which nothing speaks in favour (so long as nothing speaks *against* it).[10]

Whether or not there is objective epistemic warrant for a belief is a matter of whether or not what is supposed to speak in favour of that belief is in fact the case (whether a believer has some evidence, for example). But a person can *take there to be* objective epistemic warrant when there is in fact none, as when, for example, I think that there is evidence that *p* but the facts I have in mind do not stand in the evidential relation to *p*, or when the putative facts I have in mind which would stand in that relation do not obtain.

A person's *taking there to be* objective warrant for their belief is their having *subjective* epistemic warrant: objective epistemic warrant is what epistemically grounds a belief (or, perhaps better, a person's believing), and a person's subjective epistemic warrant for that belief is their thinking that they have those grounds.

Note that degree of subjective warrant is a matter of one's confidence in the *grounds* of one's belief, not a matter of the *credence* associated with that belief. As I am thinking of these issues, a person can *fully* believe that *p* despite their lacking confidence in the well-groundedness of that belief. It is, of course, a further matter whether it is ever *rational* for someone to be in this state. The 'can' in the claim I have made is the 'can' of psychological possibility, not the 'can' of rational permissibility, and I take this psychological claim to be plausible according to at least some conceptions of the nature of belief.

Having isolated a notion of subjective epistemic warrant for beliefs, I want to now broaden the notion of subjective warrant to cover commitments more generally. Warrant – subjective and objective – for beliefs is *epistemic* just because of the way beliefs are truth or evidence normed: the grounds for belief, which speak in favour of believing, are going to be connected to truth or to truth-related notions such as evidence. The warrant for nondoxastic commitments will not typically be epistemic, though, for nondoxastic commitments are not typically truth or evidence normed.

What counts as objective warrant for some nondoxastic commitment depends upon what in fact amounts to appropriate grounds for that type of commitment. I think nondoxastic commitments come in many varieties, and they are appropriately grounded in different ways. For now, let's call the appropriate grounds for some commitment – the grounds which confer objective warrant – *C*. Whether some commitment is objectively warranted is just a matter of whether *C* obtains. Whether a person, *A*, has subjective warrant for some commitment will then be just a matter of whether *A* believes with some confidence that *C* obtains.

[10] See Harman (1986, 1999).

With this characterisation of subjective warrant in hand, we are ready to make the point I will rely on in my fictionalist argument. It is a point about the relation between subjective warrant and action.

Even though our beliefs are sensitive to the available evidence in the ideal case, we often have dogmatic beliefs. And as well as dogmatic belief, which refuses to budge despite the evidence, there is what I'll call *hyper-enkratic* belief. Hyper-enkratic beliefs are those which are not only dogmatically maintained but which a person is also willing to *act on* (to form intentions based on) despite their lack of evidence (objective warrant). Someone who maintains beliefs about the rights and wrongs of something despite good reasons to abandon or at least suspend those beliefs further to reconsidering the available evidence is dogmatic. Someone who goes further and acts on – or intends to act on – their dogmatic beliefs is hyper-enkratic.

I do not want to underplay the prevalence of hyper-enkratic action. But I also want to suggest that there is a converse condition, the condition of *sub-enkratic* belief, which consists in a person not acting on fully held beliefs and in their failing to act on them for a very particular reason: the sub-enkratic person fails to form an intention to act on their belief (despite their fully believing) *because they lack subjective warrant* for that belief.[11]

Consider, for example, the following case. Alf knows that Betty is having an affair with George, behind her husband Wilfred's back. Alf and Betty are friends, whereas Alf and Wilfred have got along well enough without ever really becoming close. Alf (fully) believes that what he ought to do is tell Wilfred about Betty's shenanigans, because he (fully) believes that a chap has a right to know that he is cuckolded and that, regardless of personal loyalties, anyone in possession of the relevant information is under an obligation to give the cuckold his due, namely the truth. But Alf knows that he believes this because he was brought up in a time when sexual and marital ethics were very different from what they are now, and he thinks that if he were a young man *now*, he would doubtless have a different view and would probably be inclined to put his loyalty to his friend, Betty, ahead of what he currently thinks of as his duty to his mere acquaintance Wilfred. Whilst this knowledge does not make him believe what he believes any less, it does make him seriously wonder whether his grounds for those beliefs are as good as they might be.

In some cases, Alf is willing to put his doubts about the grounds of his moral beliefs aside and act on them nonetheless, because for all their faults they are at least his genuine moral convictions. So, he is willing to tell children off in the street

[11] I reserve the term 'sub-enkratic' and its cognates for this particular phenomenon in this paper. But it is probably as well to call any beliefs which do not issue in the intentions they typically would, for whatever reason (including reasons which are nothing to do with lack of subjective warrant) 'sub-enkratic' in other contexts.

for swearing and jumping bus queues, even though he strongly suspects that his moral attitudes towards these things are more a product of his stiff pseudo-Victorian upbringing than anything else (and even though those very attitudes embarrass him slightly), because good old fashioned moral attitudes like those are part of what make him *him*, and because the stakes are low. On the other hand, when what is at stake is the happiness and wellbeing of both his friend, Betty, and two other people it would be quite understandable if Alf's resolve to act on his moral beliefs were to falter. Without ever feeling less confident that telling Wilfred of Betty's antics is the right thing to do, Alf might very well decide, no doubt with great anguish, that that belief is just too ill-grounded to be the basis for his intervention. Were Alf's confidence in the grounds of his belief to be restored, or were he to discover new and impressive grounds for believing what he already believes, then we must suppose that he would decide that Wilfred must be told, because Alf takes morality very seriously, and it was never the strength, but only the grounds, of his moral beliefs which were in doubt. He would, of course, still regret the harm done to Betty and the others by telling Wilfred all, but it is not *this* concern which stays his hand as things stand. It is rather the simple fact that he lacks subjective warrant for his moral beliefs.

If, as I think, the story of Alf is at all psychologically plausible, it suggests that in our high-stakes deliberations about what to do the *strength* and *content* of our moral beliefs are not the only salient considerations: there is also our *confidence in their grounds*.

It might be argued that it is *irrational* to take one's belief that p to be ill-grounded – or to suspect it of being so – but to fail to revise or abandon it. But, firstly, it is not obviously irrational to maintain a belief for which one has lost (or never had) subjective warrant: perhaps it is irrational to fully uphold it by intending to *act* on it; but it might not be irrational to believe that p on (what one takes to be) *no* good grounds, so long as there are no better grounds for believing that *not-p*.[12] And, secondly, even if it is the case that it would be irrational to maintain a belief for which one has lost (or never had) subjective warrant, it most certainly does not follow that maintaining such beliefs is never something we do: we are,

[12]There is a substantial literature concerned with so-called 'higher order evidence', and the epistemology of self-doubt and the rational response to reasons for self-doubt more generally (See Roush 2017). It might be supposed that the plausibility of my argument depends upon what the right thing to think is about the rational permissibility of so-called 'level splitting', in which a person continues to believe p when they (knowingly or believingly) have higher order evidence or other reasons for thinking that their evidence for or reasons for believing p are less reliable than their belief in p requires. The literature on higher order evidence and related issues in the epistemology of self-doubt is far from unanimous in its judgement here. That at least some cases of such level splitting would be rationally permissible is allowed by several prominent participants in the debate: see Roush (2017: esp. §3), citing e.g. Williamson (2011), Weatherson (2008), Coates (2012) and Wedgwood (2011). But see the next point in the main text, which explains why it doesn't really matter who is right about the *rationality* issue for the purposes of my argument.

unfortunately, all too prone to fall short of the demands of rationality, and if we *do* continue to fully believe what we lack subjective warrant for (albeit irrationally), the issue I am interested in – about the relation between subjective warrant and action – arises.[13]

I do not claim that lack of subjective warrant for a moral belief *necessarily* or *always* undermines that belief's role in forming intentions even in high stakes situations, for I am aware that hyper-enkratic action is common. We can all think of cases where we suspect that someone has acted on a belief for which they lack even subjective warrant, perhaps because saving face requires following through with a plan despite losing confidence in its merits, or perhaps because of a sincere belief that some action is better than none, and this is the only thing they can think of doing however worried they are about their reasons. Whether it turns out that people ever fail to form intentions based on full beliefs because of lack of subjective warrant is, surely, an empirical question, and so we must not overreach ourselves. But I hope that the case I have just presented makes it plausible that at least some moral beliefs *are* sub-enkratic. There is no reason to think that human psychology is so neatly ordered that we only make one type of mistake: sometimes we are too quick to act; sometimes too reticent.

Before moving on to the next plank of my argument, I want to emphasise that nothing I have said about the relationship between subjective warrant and action rests on whether a person's reasons for doubting the grounds of their beliefs are good or not. So, when faced with Alf's story, you might think that Alf's doubts about the grounds of his beliefs are rather silly, so you might be saddened by Alf's loss of resolve. But you will have no reason thereby to doubt that what I have claimed about the relationship between subjective warrant and action is true. I will return to the fact that loss of subjective warrant can itself be (objectively) unwarranted in what follows.

[13] Note that the literature on higher order evidence and related issues in the epistemology of self-doubt is more or less entirely concerned with the *rationality* of 'level splitting' or the rational way to respond to self-doubt; it is more or less silent, as far as I can tell, on the question of whether it is *psychologically possible* to be self-doubting in the way I have described. Harman (1986: Chap. 4) argues that it is 'incoherent to believe both *P* and also that all one's reasons for believing *P* relied crucially on false assumptions'. There is a sense in which one's beliefs, in such a case, obviously do not cohere: there is clearly a tension. But if 'incoherent' is supposed to mean anything stronger than that, and in particular if the suggestion is that it is incoherent to suggest that we are sometimes in such a state, we should, I think, be sceptical of this claim. See Roush (2017: esp. §1), however, for discussion of some views according to which strict consistency and coherence requirements might condemn the kind of self-doubt we are concerned with here. Once again, though, these views are concerned with the *rationality*, not the possibility, of being or remaining in such a self-doubting situation; so even if correct, they do not undermine the crucial point relied upon here.

17.3 Scepticism and Other Threats to Subjective Warrant

We have seen, in the story of Alf, one way of losing subjective warrant for one's strongly held moral beliefs. In Alf's case, it was the worry – Alf's own worry, which may or may not be reasonable – that, though his moral beliefs are unshakable and strong, his reasons for believing what he does are no better than the reasons others have for believing very different and incompatible things. Alf's attitude to the grounds of his moral beliefs is not informed by clever arguments or high-flown theories. He simply notices that others are very different from him in what they believe about morality, and he can think of nothing to reassure himself that they have not got it at least as right as he has, though he is far too committed to his existing beliefs to abandon them. Alf is simply *modest*.[14]

But you do not have to be modest in the way Alf is to lose subjective warrant for your moral beliefs. You might be convinced by a clever *argument* instead that you lack objective warrant for your moral beliefs (whilst retaining those beliefs nonetheless). The arguments I have in mind are those which purport to show (in decreasing order of strength) that there is nothing in the way of moral truth (of an interestingly robust sort) for there to be knowledge *of*, and/or that we have no such knowledge, and/or that we at least have no objective warrant for our moral beliefs, and/or that at least we are in no position to take ourselves to have such objective warrant. As is familiar, there are all sorts of arguments which purport to establish such conclusions.[15] And to become convinced by such arguments is, if one

[14] For a philosophical presentation of this sort of modesty worry about 'nurtured beliefs', see Cohen (2000: Ch. 1).

[15] It might be worth noting that some sceptical arguments (of what I'll call the *anthropological* and *genealogical* types) amount to philosophical responses to the sort of sensitivity to contingency which is at the root of the modesty view I have also mentioned, thus bridging the gap between what I have described as two sources for loss of subjective epistemic warrant. Anthropological arguments (such as the 'argument from relativity' which Mackie (1977: Ch1, §8) suggests but does not ultimately rely on) use the supposed fact that there is pervasive moral disagreement (between individuals or, more seriously, between cultures or times), or the use of radically different moral concepts (as in Williams [1975]), to argue that it is at least unlikely, if not unintelligible, that there is an objective truth in the vicinity, or that we are grasping it. Genealogical arguments do not rely on there in fact being any variation in moral judgement, but instead appeal to the supposedly non-truth-tracking nature of how we came to form moral judgements to argue that we are, at best, lucky if they are veridical and perhaps even that we *could not* form veridical moral judgements on the basis of the sorts of processes which have got us to where we are. A classic genealogical argument is in Nietzsche [1887], according to a popular reading of that text (offered by, for example, Sinhababu (2007)) at least. Recently, genealogical debunking arguments have tended to appeal to evolutionary psychology – see, e.g., Joyce (2006), Street (2006), and Kahane (2011) for discussion. As I said, I mention these sorts of arguments because they (like the argument discussed by Cohen, cited in the previous footnote) are philosophical reflections of the sort of ordinary modesty I have also appealed to; I do not mean to suggest that these are the most promising sorts of sceptical arguments, much less that they are successful. For a good collection of essays, which is it useful to compare with my argument here, exploring what the right philosophical response might be to genealogical arguments which show that morality is a mere 'ideology' see Harcourt (2000).

is rational, to take oneself to lack objective warrant for any moral beliefs which one has, or, in the terminology I have been employing, to lose subjective warrant for those beliefs.

Again, the argument I am developing does not require me to take a stand on whether these arguments are good. The point is just that however things stand with respect to the quality of such arguments, those who are convinced by them do not always give up – or even weaken – their first-order moral beliefs. Again, lack of subjective warrant does not *destroy* belief, even if it casts particular beliefs in a dubious rational light. Many people who come under the spell of sceptical arguments simply retain their beliefs, and adopt an error theory with respect to them, taking them to be lacking warrant even as they inform their deliberation and action, and this is as true with respect to beliefs about causation, the external world and aesthetic qualities which are condemned by sceptical arguments as it is with respect to beliefs about goodness, duty or virtue.

There are, then, various ways of (or reasons for) coming to lack subjective warrant for our moral beliefs. If the claim I defended in the previous section is true, then coming to lack subjective warrant for those beliefs might undermine our forming intentions based on them as we ordinarily would – if not in all contexts, then at least in some high stakes situations. It is an upshot of this that certain forms of modesty or sympathy towards sceptical arguments might lead us, in a distinctive way, to fail to act as we ought to.

17.4 The Problem with Belief, and the Fictionalist Fix

Certain forms of modesty and sympathy towards sceptical arguments might lead us to fail to act as we ought to in a *distinctive* way because it is not, as is so often the case, that the explanation for our failure is either (i) lack of insight or (ii) weakness of will. These are often sufficient explanations of our moral failings. But the person who has simply lost confidence in the *grounds* of their moral belief might have the *right* belief (so might not lack insight), and it might take considerable strength of will *not* to act on it (as when allowing something goes against everything one stands for).

The reason this is the basis for a fictionalist argument is that whilst lack of subjective warrant is undermining with respect to the action guiding role of any moral commitment, modesty and scepticism threaten the subjective warrant only of *beliefs*. It is subjective *epistemic* warrant that is undermined by reflecting upon the (supposed) fact that others with commitments which are inconsistent with your own have reasons for their commitments which are just as good as your reasons for yours, or by thinking that one's commitments fail to track the truth. If our moral commitments were such as to require no subjective *epistemic* warrant for their being fully upheld as the source of intentions, then modesty and scepticism

would not affect them in the way they affect belief (for which, by definition, warrant is epistemic). And nondoxastic attitudes towards morality, in which moral claims are *accepted* but *not believed*, are exactly what moral fictionalists think our moral attitudes might consist in.

But isn't that just to say that our moral commitments might amount to wishful thinking? I think not, or at least not in any pejorative sense of 'wishful thinking'. The pejorative sense of 'wishful thinking' is the sense in which wishful thinking amounts to *believing* based on our desire to believe, or based on our desire for something to be true. Wishful thinking in this sense is different from nondoxastic moral commitment in that belief lacks warrant if what speaks in its favour is just that we would like to believe, or that we would like something to be true. That is part of what it is for belief to be governed by epistemic norms: *wanting* to believe *p* or *wanting p* to be true are not evidence that *p*, so there is something wrong with *believing* on the basis of wanting to believe or on the basis of wanting something to be true. But wanting to have some other sorts of commitments, and embracing those commitments for that reason, is not necessarily wrong at all. It is not even necessarily wrong if I know that those commitments involve accepting untrue or epistemically unwarranted claims. That is what it means to say that the norms of those commitments are non-epistemic, but rather pragmatic, aesthetic or whatever.

It often matters, morally, if we fail to do what we ought to do. So, on the assumption that a person who lacks *all* moral commitments is unlikely to act well (perhaps because acting well just *is* (perhaps *inter alia*) acting guided by moral considerations, or perhaps just because it is very unlikely that a person with no moral commitments would chance upon the right choice, in hard cases at least), it matters, morally, that we have some moral commitments rather than none. The claim that it matters that we have some moral commitments rather than none is, you will recall, one of the claims that the fictionalist needs to establish. And I take it to be plausible not just on the grounds which I have already mentioned (to do with the likelihood of *acting* well in the absence of moral commitments) but also perhaps because a person without moral commitments is deficient in a morally important way regardless of what their lack of moral commitments means for their actions. Plausibly, it matters whether a person recognises any moral constraints on their will, or any moral claims upon them, whether or not their failing to recognise such things would undermine their acting in the right ways. So, I take it there are various good reasons to think that if moral beliefs turn out to be problematic in some way, it is preferable to have some nondoxastic moral commitments rather than none, for at least nondoxastic commitments are commitments.

Some philosophers doubt that nondoxastic commitments could play a morally valuable action-guiding role. This might be because they assume that nondoxastic commitments are bound to be *flimsy*, which is to say that they are too liable to be given up when the going gets tough to be reliably action guiding. But it is implausible that nondoxastic commitments are flimsy just in virtue of being nondoxastic. Think, for example, of a person's nondoxastic commitment to Sherlock Holmes

being a detective.[16] It seems very unlikely that they would be talked, cajoled or tricked into replacing that commitment with the commitment that Sherlock Holmes was *not* a detective, or into abandoning their commitment. Perhaps if it came to light that there is a Conan Doyle story featuring Sherlock Holmes in which it is made clear that this Holmes figure is merely masquerading as a detective, and is in fact a dreadful villain playing a confidence trick on the hapless Watson, they would nondoxastically accept that he is not a detective after all. But to the extent that the emergence of *new grounds* is liable to undermine what one accepts, belief is no less flimsy than nondoxastic forms of commitment: new evidence is liable to get someone to change their beliefs in just the same way. I do not mean to say that there is no possibility of nondoxastic moral commitment being flimsier than belief; but I do mean to put the burden of argument on those who assume that it is, for it is not a *general* truth about nondoxastic forms of commitment that they are flimsier than beliefs.

Another reason why some philosophers think of nondoxastic commitments as deficient in respect of their action guiding roles might be that they worry about their *motivational strength*. The motivational strength worry is that whilst a person might have very stable nondoxastic commitments, those commitments are not going to get a person to act in the way belief can. Perhaps the thought is that it is one thing to act because you believe that what you are doing is right, but quite another to act just because you nondoxastically accept that what you are doing is right, just as it is one thing to go to the Palace to see the Queen because you believe she is there, but quite another to go to Baker Street to see Sherlock Holmes because you merely nondoxastically accept that he lives there: the former is intelligible (if over-optimistic), whilst the latter is completely silly. Again, though, I think this worry is too quick. On some models of nondoxastic commitment, accepting a moral claim is not much like accepting a fictional claim in the way distinctive of our engagement with fiction. Acting based on a commitment which is of the sort we have concerning Sherlock Holmes would, indeed, be rationally unintelligible. But acting based on some moral principle which I accept because, for example, I value being the sort of person who (as it seems to me) is bound to accept that principle is perfectly rationally intelligible: my *acting on* that principle is just as important to my own conception of what is required to be the sort of person I want to be as my *accepting* it is, and to fail to act in accordance with it would, from my point of view, be a failure. Thus, our acting on our nondoxastic moral commitments is not only rationally intelligible but also psychologically plausible, for our self-conception and our concern for living up to our ideals are surely plausible psychological motors. The mistake made by those who doubt the motivational efficacy of nondoxastic

[16]The fact that I use examples involving fiction should not distract from the fact that I am *not* thinking of nondoxastic *moral* commitment as involving quite the same sorts of attitudes as we have towards fiction. I use fiction examples because they are relatively uncontroversial. I am thinking of nondoxastic moral commitment as irreducible to other types of nondoxastic commitment, but I must use examples of different nondoxastic attitudes if I am to avoid simply begging the question. The point of using the examples, of course, is that they are *relevantly similar*.

moral commitments is to assume, without justification, that those commitments must be like the relatively (and *only* relatively) motivationally inert commitments we have concerning fictional characters.

So, I take it that we are entitled to assume that nondoxastic moral commitments are typically better than no moral commitments at all, at least to the extent that they are *good* moral commitments and not bad or misguided ones.

It is not only moral realists who are entitled to say that there is a way we ought to act and that moral beliefs might not be up to the task of getting us to act that way when it matters most. Non-realists are entitled to distinguish good moral commitments from bad ones, if only on the basis of the *instrumental* non-moral goods associated with some moral commitments as opposed to others. So, non-realists are able to avail themselves of the argument I am giving just as much as realists are. But we can also interpret the talk of goodness in this argument as referring to *moral* goodness, if we are realists. And doing so might well strengthen the argument, if moral goods are particularly important, as a realist might well maintain.

Bringing the strands together, the argument is as follows. It is morally better to have some good moral commitments rather than none. But it would be morally best in at least one respect if those commitments were nondoxastic. The argument for that claim goes like this:

1. Subjective warrant for *beliefs* depends upon one's confidence in the *epistemic* grounds one has;
2. If our moral commitments amount to *beliefs*, then in at least some circumstances we will fail to act on our moral commitments (including our *good* moral commitments, acting on which is acting *well*) if we lack confidence in our epistemic grounds [from our discussion of subjective warrant and action, and (1)];
3. In at least some circumstances, some of us *do* lack confidence in our epistemic grounds for moral beliefs [from our discussion of modesty and scepticism];
4. So [from (2) and (3)] if our moral commitments amount to *beliefs*, then in at least some circumstances we will fail to act on our good moral commitments, i.e. *we will fail to act well*.
5. Subjective warrant for *nondoxastic commitments* does **not** depend upon one's confidence in the *epistemic* grounds one has;
6. So [I take it this follows from (5)], if our moral commitments are *nondoxastic*, then lack of confidence in our *epistemic* grounds need not undermine our fully upholding them in any circumstances, i.e. need not mean that we fail to *act well*.
7. Therefore [from (4) and (6)], it is morally better – in so far as acting well is concerned – if our moral commitments are *nondoxastic* rather than amounting to moral *beliefs*.

This argument is concerned only with our *good* moral commitments. It might turn out that when thinking about our *bad* moral commitments it seems much better that moral commitments are doxastic rather than nondoxastic. Because I have not addressed this issue, I do not take myself to have presented an argument to the

conclusion that our moral commitments *ought* to be nondoxastic. My conclusion is evaluative and not normative precisely because the good – and especially the good *in some respect* – does not entail the right, and indeed the good in some respect does not even entail the all-things-considered good. We should take bad moral commitments – doxastic and nondoxastic – very seriously, and I will not try to settle any issues surrounding them here. But given that belief can be dogmatic and hyper-enkratic, it is certainly not clear that bad moral beliefs are less morally dangerous that bad nondoxastic moral commitments.

Thinking it good that our moral commitments be nondoxastic does not by any means commit us to thinking it good that our moral commitments are somehow immune to debate, reason and revision. There is no reason to think that nondoxastic moral commitments are *groundless*, and if they are admitted to have grounds it makes sense to debate, learn about, revise and improve them. If nondoxastic moral commitment is more choice-like than belief-like, that only commits us to thinking of such commitments as immune from rational reflection if we think of choice and preference as immune from such reflection. In fact, it seems that we can and do reflect upon and debate the appropriateness of choices and preferences, without thinking that those choices and preferences are disguised beliefs.[17]

Some philosophers do not understand why I think that realists should consider endorsing nondoxastic acceptance as a response to the moral dangers of sub-enkrasia. They acknowledge that it might well be morally bad that people do not act on their moral commitments, when those commitments are morally good. But since a realist thinks that those commitments are morally good in virtue of expressing moral *truths*, they could simply point out that if someone lacks subjective warrant for *belief* in those moral truths that person ought to inquire further to knowingly acquire sufficient objective warrant. (This might not be a matter of acquiring new or improved grounds for their belief as such, so much as uncovering the mistake in the sceptical argument they were convinced by, or coming to see that epistemic modesty requires less than they thought.) For a realist, according to this line of thought, the natural response to (unjustified) loss of subjective warrant is a call for further or better inquiry, *not* a call to give up on moral beliefs and embrace nondoxastic commitment instead.

Some go even further: it is *morally bad*, they say, to act on commitments which fall short of (well grounded) moral beliefs. If a person does the right thing but does it based on some commitment which is not a belief, they do the right thing for the *wrong reason*, and whilst it might be good that they do the right thing, it would be

[17] It is crucial to recall that this way of putting things does not mean that the fictionalist is embracing any sort of *expressivism*: expressivists make a great deal of how choice- or preference-like moral attitudes are, and they also point out the degree to which our choices and preferences are not beyond the purview of rational reflection. But they do this in support of a *semantic* thesis about the *content* of moral attitudes and language, and the fictionalist rejects this semantic thesis in favour of a standard *representationalist* semantics. See Kalderon (2005a, 2008)

better if they did it for the right reason. So, the realistic fictionalism I have tried to motivate is really a council of moral despair.[18]

Well, sometimes the moral situation is desperate; and when it is, despair seems like an appropriate response and a council of despair the most realistic advice. That makes things sound worse than I think they are, but the idea that what realists should do is *just* recommend or require further enquiry unto confidence in the grounds of one's moral beliefs strikes me as Pollyanna-ish. As I said in the Introduction, the argument I am presenting is to do with the ethics of commitment, and ethics should be sensitive to how things are. Asking, motivating and cajoling people into further enquiry will not, as a matter of fact, free them from the sceptical and modest doubts about the grounds of their moral beliefs which I adverted to above. So even if it is right that acting based on (true) well-grounded moral beliefs is better than acting based on (true) nondoxastic moral commitments, the best is made the enemy of the good if we say that only true, well-grounded moral beliefs are worth aiming for (and not true nondoxastic moral commitments).

Brainwashing might do the trick: widespread inculcation of beliefs which everybody is brought up to think of as indubitably supported by all the available evidence, and active discouragement of reflective inquiry into the grounds of those beliefs, might more or less eliminate the sorts of threats to subjective warrant that I adverted to. But if that is how widespread subjective warrant sufficient to eliminate sub-enkrasia is achieved, it is surely not worth having.[19] I'm sure nobody resistant to my argument on the grounds suggested above would say that brainwashing is what the moral realist should endorse. But morality being as it is, serious reflection breeds scepticism and modesty-induced sub-enkrasia, so they make the best the enemy of the good if they insist always upon open reflection and nothing short of action on the basis of beliefs. How much more *morally* attractive is the alternative I have proposed, in which moral commitments are not constrained evidentially, but are adopted on serious grounds which are open to reflection and challenge and which, perhaps, amount to choices about the sorts of people we want to be?

In any case, it is questionable whether doing the right thing *for the right reasons* requires acting based on beliefs, however well supported they are. As Arpaly (2002: Ch. 3) has shown, there is a perfectly intelligible characterisation of moral worth which does not require that a person has any beliefs about what makes their action right, or even about the rightness of their action. It might, even according to this characterisation, be *best* to act under the motivation of well-grounded (or even not well-grounded) moral beliefs, in which case my point above about the best being the enemy of the good comes into play. But it might well be that according to this or a similar characterisation it is not even better to act under such motivation, as opposed

[18]This objection was pressed by an anonymous referee, who pointed out quite correctly that Clifford would have almost certainly made this reply to my argument. For a strident Kantian defence of the Cliffordian view underlying this objection, see Wood (2003).

[19]Certainly, nobody sympathetic to the Kantian view about the moral desirability of Cliffordian requirements to have properly grounded beliefs expressed by Wood (2003) would think this sort of subjective warrant for beliefs worth having.

to simply doing the right thing *in response to* the right reasons, where 'in response to' is cashed out as not requiring the involvement of any sort of representational mental states, including beliefs (and, of course, nondoxastic moral commitments). Then, the only salient question in the debate about whether beliefs or nondoxastic commitments are best for moral purposes would be about which motivates better, in the epistemic and psychological circumstances. The question of which would be the morally better motivation (over and above the moral goodness of getting us to do the right thing) would not arise here, for *no* sort of belief- or nondoxastic commitment-like mental state would be better than any other (so long as they motivate to the same extent).

But one might worry that the argument I presented is too quick: surely the best thing for a moral realist to recommend, considering the danger of sub-enkrasia I highlighted, is for us to form *plans of action* rather than non-doxastic attitudes of acceptance. I might worry about whether my moral beliefs are well grounded, but so long as I have formulated a plan for myself (to not shield cuckolds from the truth, for example) my adopting that plan will be ample motivation for me to act, regardless of the motivational oomph of my beliefs (about the rights of cuckolds).[20]

It is true that plans will serve to regulate my actions once I have adopted them. (See Bratman (1987) for discussion.) But plans are also apt for revision, and in circumstances where the moral stakes are highest it seems plausible that our resolution to stick to the plan (where the alternative is not to ignore it, but to revise it) depends upon our moral commitments: if I cannot endorse the moral principle or consideration which would justify my going on as planned, I have every reason to revise or abandon that plan, at least if going on as planned risks some moral cost. Therefore, adopting plans or policies for action cannot *replace* adopting first-order moral commitments, and lack of subjective warrant is as threatening to our carrying out good moral plans as it is to acting well in general.

17.5 Conclusion

I hope to have shown that there is an argument for fictionalism – not yet full-blown, normative, *revolutionary* fictionalism which says that we *ought* to make our moral commitments nondoxastic, but a weaker, *evaluative* fictionalism which says that there is at least some important respect in which it would be good to do so (if they are not already) – which is not only compatible with moral realism but which a realist is in the best position to advance. Realists have no need to be embarrassed about saying that some moral commitments are ones we *ought to have*, perhaps because they are *true*. And they perhaps have the most reason to think that it is *morally bad* to have moral commitments which we are unlikely to act on in the most morally crucial situations (when those commitments are the right ones).

[20] I thank an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

I said that this would be an essay on the ethics of nondoxastic acceptance. What I have argued is that it is not necessarily *epistemically* bad in any way to have moral beliefs as opposed to nondoxastic moral commitments, but that it is plausibly *morally* bad. That is a conclusion concerning the ethics of commitment in the most authentic sense, the sense in which Clifford felt it an affront to morality, and not just to epistemic norms, to fail in one's epistemic duty. If what I have said is right, fictionalism can be motivated without relying on any contentious meta-ethical views about the metaphysical or epistemological status of moral facts. It can be motivated from within a first-order moral debate about the ethics of commitment.[21]

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[21] Just as non-realist fictionalists employ (non-moral) normative or evaluative claims to complete their arguments for their views (e.g. Joyce appeals to *prudential* goodness), I employ a moral claim to complete mine. Without such appeals to normative or evaluative claims, neither I nor any other evaluative or revolutionary fictionalist could argue not only that one *might* accept but not believe moral claims, but that it would be good to do so. In this respect, then, my argument is novel in so far as it appeals to *moral* claims, but it no more elides the distinction between first-order ethics and meta-ethics than Joyce's argument elides the distinction between prudence and meta-ethics.

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