Disagreement and Conflict: How Moral and Taste Judgements Do *Not* Differ

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Abstract

Eriksson thinks that moral disagreements are intuitively faulty whereas disagreements about taste are intuitively faultless. He attempts to account for this difference by arguing, first, that moral judgements and taste judgements differ with regard to the presence of a disposition to challenge conflicting judgements and, second, that the intuition that a judgement is mistaken consists in the disposition to challenge it. In this article, I focus on the reasons given to support the first claim and argue that they are not sufficient. First, I assess the thesis that a taste judgement is only contingently connected with a disposition to challenge conflicting judgements. Second, I focus on the claim that a moral judgement is in part a disposition to challenge conflicting judgements. In both cases, I argue that the reasons given fail to disclose any substantial difference between the two domains.

1

According to Eriksson 2016, moral judgements that conflict with our own are intuitively mistaken, whereas taste judgements we disagree with are not.[1] Many have voiced this idea or very similar ones. Timmons 1998 (p. 142), for example, claims that a moral judgement, unlike a taste judgement, is "categorical" and therefore "we categorically deny conflicting moral views rather than regard them as true or correct for those individuals who sincerely hold them". According to Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009 (p. 114), "the phenomenology of 'no-fault disagreement' is not even *prima facie* present in

[1] In this article, I use 'judgements' to refer to mental states.

the moral cases".[2]

For Eriksson, if you think that stealing is wrong, then you will intuitively take to be at fault anyone who thinks that stealing is not wrong. More generally, according to him, moral disagreements are intuitively not faultless. By contrast, if you think that bacon is tasty, you will not usually think that someone who thinks that bacon is not tasty is at fault. More generally, taste disagreements are intuitively faultless.

Eriksson attempts to account for this intuitive difference between the two domains. His explanation is grounded in two claims. The first of these claims is that moral and taste judgements differ with regard to their "attitudinal complexity":

> A taste judgment consists in a simple attitude. To think that chocolate is delicious is, roughly, to be disposed to have certain pleasurable sensations upon tasting chocolate. A moral judgment, by contrast, consists of a more complex attitude. For example, to think that stealing is wrong is to be disposed to disapprove of stealing, but also to be disposed to call conflicting judgments into question. (Eriksson 2016, p. 785)

Within the non-cognitivist tradition, Stevenson and Gibbard have already claimed that moral utterances express something akin to a desire that the hearers agree with what the speaker says (Stevenson 1944; Stevenson 1963; Gibbard 1990; see Ridge 2003 for a discussion). Eriksson, however, argues that a similar element is present not only at the level of moral *language*, but also at the level of moral *thought*, and that such an element is absent from the domain of taste. This claim echoes Blackburn's (Blackburn 1998, pp. 8-14) idea according to which we usually tolerate differences in simple preferences, whereas moral dissent is considered "beyond the pale". Timmons 1998 (p. 142) similarly claims that a moral stance, unlike a taste, involves a "sort of commitment that typically manifests itself in being disposed, for example, to assert and uphold one's stance over and against the conflicting stances of others".

The thesis that a moral judgement is in part a disposition to challenge conflicting judgements, whereas a taste judgement is not, is combined by Eriksson with the following further claim:

> To be disposed to call into question the attitude of the other is what the intuition that the other party is mistaken consists in

[2] For considerations along these lines see also Carritt 1938 (p. 147), Blackburn 1998 (pp. 8–14), Loeb 2003 (p. 31), Burgess 2007 (pp. 429, 432), Rosenkranz 2008 (pp. 233–234), Harold 2008 (p. 296), Strandberg 2010 and Stojanovic 2019 (p. 30)

> ... Lacking such a disposition is what the intuition that neither party is mistaken consists in. (Eriksson 2016, p. 786)

It is perhaps worth remarking here that Eriksson does not argue for this latter claim. He does not say why an intuition that a conflicting judgement is mistaken consists in one's disposition to call it into question. We only know that "consists in" should be understood in the sense that "the disposition to challenge conflicting judgments is projected as a mistake inherent in those very judgments" (Eriksson 2016, p. 791)

According to Eriksson, since moral judgements and taste judgements differ precisely in whether or not they are partly a disposition to call into question conflicting judgements, and this disposition is what the intuition of a mistake consists in, we intuitively take conflicting judgements to be mistaken in the moral domain, but not in the taste domain. More generally, he argues, moral disagreement is intuitively not faultless and taste disagreement is intuitively faultless, because the two different attitudes involved give rise to two different senses of disagreement:

> Disagreement in attitude 1: Two parties disagree if they have opposed attitudes (although neither has a disposition for altering or calling into question the attitude of the other).
>
> Disagreement in attitude 2: Two parties disagree if they have opposed attitudes and at least one of them has a disposition for altering or calling into question the attitude of the other. (Eriksson 2016, p. 786)

One can therefore account for both moral and taste disagreement in terms of Stevenson's "disagreement in attitude", even if one is intuitively faultless, whereas the other is not (Cf. Stevenson 1944; Stevenson 1963).

For the sake of the argument, I am currently assuming, with Eriksson, that our intuitions tell us that, on the one hand, conflicting moral judgements are mistaken and moral disagreements are not faultless and, on the other hand, conflicting taste judgements are not mistaken and taste disagreements are faultless. I shall be concerned with the truth of this assumption later on. For now, I focus instead on the extent to which Eriksson's arguments, which are intended to explain the alleged intuitive difference between the two domains, succeed in tracking a substantial difference between taste judgements and moral judgements with regard to the presence of a disposition to alter or call into question conflicting judgements. I shall argue that none of his arguments succeeds in revealing such a difference.

2

Some concerns about Eriksson's account immediately arise.

> On the one hand, it may seem that not all moral disagreements involve either party calling the conflicting judgment into question. For example, although you disagree with someone who thinks that telling white lies is forbidden, you may not challenge his or her judgment. On the other hand, it may seem that some taste disagreements involve either party calling the other party's judgment into question. For example, if you were to encounter someone who claims that putrid meat is tasty, you may be inclined to challenge the claim. (Eriksson 2016, p. 787)

Eriksson's examples here seem to suggest that taste judgements and moral judgements do not differ with respect to involving a disposition to challenge conflicting judgements. So a worry arises: how can one reconcile these examples with Eriksson's general claim that there is a difference between the moral and the taste domains?

Eriksson notes that the challenging of conflicting judgements is *less common* in the taste domain. However, this is not sufficient for answering the worry, since even if conflicting judgements are challenged more frequently in the case of morality, this may be due to reasons that have nothing to do with the attitudinal complexity of the judgements.

In fact, Eriksson does not give much weight to this consideration and immediately proceeds to provide a further argument which, as he himself subsequently acknowledges, is not sufficient either. He argues that, in the taste domain, we seem to challenge a judgement because we suspect that the person who expresses it does not really endorse it, whereas, in morality, we seem to challenge a judgement simply because it conflicts with our own. If you claim, say, that putrid meat is tasty, then I might challenge your judgement, because I suspect that you do not really have the relevant attitude (i.e., being disposed to get a pleasant feeling from eating putrid meat).

However, Eriksson ends up recognizing that there are cases where we challenge taste judgements for other reasons than the one just suggested. He argues that taste and moral judgements, even in these latter situations, still differ, and they do so with regard to the presence of a disposition to alter or call into question conflicting judgements.

3

3.1

One reason why we may challenge taste judgements is that they give rise, as do moral judgements, to practical problems. Eriksson invites us to consider a case where A and B are trying to decide what to have for dinner. A claims that putrid meat is delicious and B disagrees. In a case of this type it seems plausible that B would challenge A's judgement, even without suspecting that A does not really have the relevant attitude (cf. Eriksson, 2016, p. 789). However, Eriksson still maintains that this case is different from a moral one, in that the pressure to challenge is *external*, or contingent. That is, B is not inclined to challenge A's judgement *just because* it conflicts with hers, but rather for another, external reason, that is, because she wants to have something other than putrid meat for dinner. That the disposition is external, he claims, is suggested by the fact that, if dinner plans are called off, then B would seem no longer to have any reason to challenge A's judgement. This is supposed to contrast with moral cases, where "it is much more plausible to hold that, if your judgment conflicts with mine, then I am *necessarily* disposed to challenge it, and that this disposition is *part of the judgment itself*" (Eriksson 2016, p. 789; emphasis added).

However, it is not clear that, if dinner plans are called off, then B would no longer have any reason to challenge A's judgement. There are, in fact, cases where we naturally challenge conflicting taste judgements without trying to solve any practical problem. Suppose A and B are at a restaurant. A orders a horse steak.

A: I love the horse steak. It's delicious.
B: I tried it last time I came here. It's disgusting!

B challenges A's judgement in a perfectly natural way. And B is not trying to solve any practical problem.

Nonetheless, Eriksson might be taken to suggest that, even if B's challenge is not aimed at solving a practical problem, it is still due to an external pressure, that is, a pressure that is not part of the judgement that horse meat is disgusting: "there may be tons of other reasons for me to want to challenge your judgment. It is not cool to like [horse] meat and I really want you to be cool. Hence, I want you to agree with me that [horse] meat is not tasty. However, this is not part of the taste judgment, but contingent" (Eriksson 2016, p. 789). Eriksson can then be taken to claim implicitly that, if any external pressure — be it a practical problem or not — is removed, then we would no longer be disposed to challenge a taste judgement.

What reasons do we have to think that this is true — and that things are

different in the moral case? As I said, Eriksson does not address the issue in these terms explicitly. It is plausible that when we challenge taste judgements external pressures are present. But this cannot ground an asymmetry with the moral case, because it seems even more plausible to think that such pressures are present when a moral judgement is challenged. Suppose that C and D are at a restaurant. C orders a horse steak and claims that there is nothing wrong with eating horse meat. D disagrees and challenges C's judgement. It seems very plausible to think that several external pressures — pressures that are not part of the judgement that eating horse meat is wrong — are present: she does not want certain food industries to get support, she does not want horses to be killed, she thinks that eating meat is unhealthy and wants her friend to be healthy, etc. It seems that, usually, we have more reasons to challenge conflicting moral judgements than conflicting taste judgements. (In fact, this difference may explain, although perhaps only in part, why some people have the intuition that morality is necessarily linked with a disposition to challenge conflicting judgements, whereas taste is not.) However, this is not a substantial asymmetry. Such external reasons to challenge conflicting judgements are present in both domains, even if, plausibly, in different measures.

How can one then argue that, if any possible external pressure was removed, then we would no longer be disposed to challenge a conflicting taste judgement? I think it is far from clear — both in taste and in morality — how to assess which dispositions to challenge conflicting judgements one would have in such an artificial scenario — in which no external pressure whatsoever is present. In the reasons Eriksson mentions for challenging contrasting judgements in the case of taste, then, I do not find enough support for vindicating an asymmetry with the case of morality. And my criticism is independent from whether, at the end of the day, Eriksson's claim that a disposition to challenge is external to a taste judgement turns out to be true or false. In the next section, I focus on how Eriksson offers positive support for his claim that a disposition to challenge is internal to a moral thought and, in section 3.3, on how he defends this claim from a family of reasonable objections.

3.2

Eriksson offers two positive reasons for thinking that a disposition to challenge conflicting thoughts is internal to a moral judgement. The first of these appeals to cooperation:

> Moral thought and talk evolved in order to help us reap the ben-

> efits of cooperation. This requires that we coordinate our attitudes. However, coordination doesn't happen by itself. We therefore need some mechanism by which it is achieved. Simply having conflicting attitudes is consistent with indifference to other parties' attitudes (as often is the case in matters of taste). Having a disposition to challenge conflicting judgments seems to be a way around this problem. Of course, challenging a conflicting moral judgment doesn't by itself bring about agreement, but it is what triggers normative discussion. Nevertheless, by building this disposition into moral judgments evolution found a way for us to move towards consensus and thereby helped us disentangle practical problems, i.e., questions concerning how to live. Hence, to endorse a moral judgment is, in part, to be disposed to challenge conflicting judgments. This is why we cannot really turn the coordinating function off. (Eriksson 2016, p. 789)

However, both taste and moral judgements — indeed, any type of judgement — may give rise to coordination problems. In some cases, problems arise from conflicting moral judgements, as in a case where two people need to decide whether a certain action should be carried out or not, and one of those people morally disapproves of the action's predicted consequences, while the other morally approves of them. In other cases, problems are posed by conflicting taste judgements, as in a case where two people need to decide what to eat, and one of those people thinks that meat is delicious, while the other thinks that meat is disgusting.[3] In other cases, problems arise from conflicting descriptive beliefs, as in a case where two people have the same end, but disagree about the best means to achieve it. It is plausible to think that *if*, via evolution, we have developed a mechanism that prompts us to solve problems of coordination, as depicted by Eriksson, *then* this mechanism would aim to solve problems not only in those cases where coordination is hindered by conflicting moral judgements, but also in those cases where coordination is hindered by other types of judgements as well. Again, Eriksson's argument does not seem to isolate any distinctive feature of moral judgements, with respect to the presence of a disposition to challenge, that taste judgements plausibly lack. And again, my criticism here is independent from whether, at the end of the day, Eriksson's claim that a disposition to challenge is internal to a moral judgement turns out to be true or false.

[3] Cf. Marques 2015 (pp. 15–18), who claims that our preference for certain converging taste dispositions and our aversion for certain diverging taste dispositions is to be explained in terms of evolutionary processes that have equipped us for the solution of coordination problems.

I now turn my attention to the second positive reason that Eriksson 2016 (p. 789) offers to support internality in the moral domain: "thinking that, e.g., stealing is wrong, seems sufficient for thinking that conflicting judgments are mistaken". As far as I can see, this consideration can support the claim that a moral judgement is partly a disposition to challenge a conflicting judgement only insofar as we accept the thesis that any intuition that a judgement is mistaken "consists in" one's disposition to challenge it. Yet the latter thesis, as I said earlier, has not been argued for in any way. Besides, the claim that we intuitively take conflicting moral judgements to be mistaken is highly controversial in the light of evidence provided by some recent studies in social psychology and experimental philosophy. I will mention just a couple of them. Sarkissian et al. 2011 report six experiments that support the thesis that the more different the culture and way of life under consideration, the more relativist people's intuitions are. Fisher et al. 2017 provide evidence to the effect that when people assume a cooperative mindset, they are less inclined towards objectivism than when they are in a competitive mindset. In short, this family of studies have increasingly undermined the idea, often taken for granted by analytic philosophers in recent decades, that people ordinarily take moral issues to have objective answers.[4]

Eriksson is well aware of such findings — he refers explicitly to Sarkissian et al. 2011 — and he tries, at the end of his paper, to square them with his account:

> Part of the function of moral thought and talk is to achieve coordination. Such a function, it seems, is essential for us to move towards consensus via discussion. However, the need for, and indeed conceivability of, coordination depends on the context. The closer someone is to me, the more urgent coordination is likely to be. The more urgent coordination is, the more likely it is that my disposition to challenge conflicting judgments will become occurrent. When this disposition becomes occurrent, I am more likely to think that the other party is mistaken. By contrast, unless coordination is in the offing, it seems less likely that the disposition to challenge the judgment will become occurrent. If it doesn't become occurrent, then I am more likely to think that the other party is not mistaken. Applied to taste, one explanation of why some people have more objectivist intuitions is because of features external to the taste judgment itself. A food critic, for example, may want everyone to share his or her attitude, which disposes

[4] Such studies are not free of concerns. See, for example, Pölzler 2018.

> him or her to challenge conflicting judgments. This, in turn, explains why he or she will think that conflicting judgments are mistaken. According to the suggestion outlined here, however, features external to the taste judgment explain this. The critic, doesn't think that the other party is mistaken because other judgments are in conflict with his or hers. The disagreement, in itself, is therefore still faultless. (Eriksson 2016, p. 792)

Remember that I was assessing Eriksson's second reason to think that a moral judgement is in part a disposition to challenge judgements that conflict with it. That reason was that making a moral judgement seems sufficient for thinking that judgements that conflict with it are mistaken. However, as the quotation above shows, Eriksson, in the attempt to reconcile certain experimental findings with his account, seems to defeat this line of argument, for he ends up recognizing that, in certain contexts, we do not think that conflicting moral judgements are mistaken. Furthermore, Eriksson admits that even conflicting judgements of taste may sometimes be taken as mistaken. According to this picture, both in the moral and in the taste domain, we would project a mistake when a disposition to challenge conflicting judgements is made occurrent by the contextual circumstances. Why then thinking that the disposition is internal in the moral case but external in the case of taste?

3.3

I now turn to consider Eriksson's answer to a family of objections that cast doubt on the claim that a moral thought is partly constituted by a disposition to challenge conflicting judgements.

There are situations, as we have already mentioned, where it may seem that someone is not disposed to challenge conflicting moral judgements. Take, for example, someone who takes herself to have insufficient authority to make a certain moral judgement, or as having insufficient justification for it. According to Ridge 2003 (p. 570), this makes it "implausible to suppose that thinking some- thing is morally good (or morally bad) must be partially constituted by a desire that others approve of it". Or, alternatively, take someone who is "content to survey life with passive detachment" or "too timid, too aloof, or too economical of their time to make an issue of the matter" Stevenson 1944 (p. 111). Again, one may claim that, in this case, the person in question is not disposed to make other people converge with her moral judgements.

Eriksson 2016 (pp. 790–791) argues that these examples fail to falsify the claim that the disposition to challenge is part of a moral judgement. It is true

that the depicted circumstances — say, lacking justification or being timid — may interfere with the disposition manifesting itself, namely, producing its response (challenging the conflicting judgement). But this does not entail that the disposition "is not there". In other words, these examples only show that, in the cases considered, there is no *sufficient* disposition for altering or calling into question conflicting judgements, rather than showing that there is *no* disposition.

Regardless of whether Eriksson's argument succeeds in disarming such objections, it should be recognized that arguments of the same type can be given for analogous situations in the taste domain. If, with regard to cases where a conflicting moral judgement is not challenged, it can be said that the disposition "is there" but does not manifest itself, then the same can be said about cases where a conflicting taste judgement is not challenged. So, as before, this type of argument does not disclose any difference between the domains of morality and taste with respect to a disposition to alter or call into question conflicting judgements.

4

This article has focused on Eriksson's attempt to argue that moral judgements and judgements of taste differ in their attitudinal complexity, the former necessarily involving a disposition to challenge conflicting judgements that the latter do not necessarily involve. The project of positively stating what, if anything, makes moral judgements and judgements of taste substantially different, as fascinating as it may be, goes beyond the scope of this article. For now, I content myself with a modest conclusion, but one that I think is worth making. If it is to be shown that moral judgements and taste judgements differ with regard to the presence of a disposition to challenge conflicting judgements, then arguments other than Eriksson's are needed.

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