

**The Virtues of a ‘Straight’ Solution to Cian Dorr’s Puzzle about Non-Cognitivism and Wishful Thinking:
Comments on Mabrito’s Response***

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Cian Dorr has argued that even if there is a solution to the Frege-Geach problem, non-cognitivism is still incompatible with the rationality of some obviously rational inferences. Dorr’s argument turns on a case in which a subject, Edgar, begins (at time t1) by accepting P1 in the argument below but neither P2 nor C, then (at t2) he comes to accept P2 as a result of reflection on his moral views, and then (at t3) he infers C by modus ponens on the basis of P1 and P2:

- P1 If lying is wrong, the souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife.
- P2 Lying is wrong.
- C The souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife.

As Dorr notes, Edgar’s inference could easily be rational in such a case; however, Dorr claims that non-cognitivism mistakenly implies that such an inference must be irrational:

According to the non-cognitivist, all that happened when he came to accept P2 was a change in his non-cognitive attitudes. He acquired no new evidence or other beliefs relevant to the question of the fate of liars in the afterlife. ... So if believing C would have been irrational for Edgar before he came to accept P2, it was irrational for him afterwards as well.¹

* Thanks to Robert Mabrito for helpful discussion of these issues at the 2011 Pacific APA in San Diego, California.

¹ Cian Dorr, “Non-cognitivism and Wishful Thinking”, pg. 99. (*Nous*, 2002).

If Dorr's argument here is sound, then non-cognitivism is false regardless of whether there is a solution to the Frege-Geach problem. As a result, Dorr has identified an important new argument against non-cognitivism.

In light of this argument against non-cognitivism, Robert Mabrito explains what we need to do to evaluate whether it is sound: in Mabrito's words: "Making the case for [Dorr's conclusion] requires

(i) specifying a condition that must be satisfied if it is rational at t3 for Edgar to believe [C], and

(ii) arguing that [a non-cognitivist] interpretation of the [argument above] precludes the satisfaction of this purported necessary condition".²

As Mabrito notes regarding (i), it is not immediately clear from Dorr's paper what condition Dorr has in mind as the relevant condition that must be satisfied if Edgar's inference is rational. After careful examination of Dorr's discussion, I agree with Mabrito that we can interpret Dorr as having essentially the following condition in mind:

SUFFICIENT JUSTIFICATION PRINCIPLE: Edgar's conclusion at t3 is rational only if Edgar has *sufficient justification* for that conclusion at t3.

And regarding (ii), I agree with Mabrito that the following is an accurate representation of Dorr's argument:

PREMISE 1: Edgar lacks justification for believing his ultimate conclusion at t1. (This is supposed to follow from the description of the case.)

PREMISE 2: If non-cognitivism is true, Edgar does not get any new evidence after t1, nor is there any change in Edgar's cognitive states between t1 and t3. (This is supposed to follow from the description of the case.)

² Robert Mabrito, "[Are expressivists guilty of wishful thinking?](#)", pg. 3 (of preprint, as with all references to follow) (*Philosophical Studies*, forthcoming).

PREMISE 3: DORR'S CONSTRAINT: "One moves from a situation in which one lacks justification for believing that p—a state in which it is irrational for one to so believe—to a state in which one possesses such a justification—a state in which it is rational for one to so believe—only if there is a change in one's cognitive states or one's evidence".³ (As Mabrito notes, this is Dorr's crucial claim.)

CONCLUSION 1: If non-cognitivism is true, Edgar lacks sufficient justification for his ultimate conclusion at t3. (From the three premises above.)

CONCLUSION 2: If non-cognitivism is true, Edgar's ultimate conclusion is irrational. (From the conclusion immediately above and the SUFFICIENT JUSTIFICATION PRINCIPLE.)

Although I agree with Mabrito this is an accurate representation of Dorr's argument, I don't believe that Dorr's argument is as straightforward as it initially appears. In particular, there is a subtle but crucial ambiguity in Dorr's argument, and once the ambiguity is brought to light it becomes clear that the argument fails in a straightforward way, with the upshot that there is no need for non-cognitivists to provide an idiosyncratic or controversial explanation of cases like Edgar's, contrary to what Dorr assumes. My main criticism of Mabrito's paper is that it ignores the ambiguity in Dorr's argument and thus ignores the possibility of a 'straight' response to Dorr's argument of the kind I offer, and as a result it mistakenly assumes that a non-cognitivist response to Dorr's argument must be grounded in idiosyncratic or at least unnecessarily controversial principles – just as other commentators have assumed.⁴

Having said that, I also believe that when the ambiguity in Dorr's argument is brought to light, it shows that Mabrito's criticism of DORR'S CONSTRAINT has to be correct, and so my criticism is friendly to Mabrito's discussion in the sense that it points the way toward more decisive arguments for many of his conclusions. At the same time, as I argue below, careful attention to the ambiguity also reveals a way of improving the principle that Mabrito ultimately argues that non-cognitivists ought to defend in response to Dorr's argument, because it points the way toward a principle that does the same work as Mabrito's principle but without making any controversial claims.

³ Mabrito, [pg. 4](#). Mabrito's interpretation is based on Dorr, [pg. 99](#).

⁴ Other commentators seem to think that Dorr's objection to non-cognitivism requires an epistemologically idiosyncratic response: for example, James Lenman, "Noncognitivism and Wishfulness"; David Enoch, "How Noncognitivism can Avoid Wishful Thinking"; Mark Schroeder, "Epistemology: wishful thinking", in his *Noncognitivism in Ethics*; Mark Schroeder, "How Not to Avoid Wishful Thinking"; Mark van Roojen, "Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism" – and of course, Cian Dorr, "Non-cognitivism and Wishful Thinking". Mabrito might also be seen as thinking that an idiosyncratic response is required, given that his EXPRESSIVIST CONSTRAINT might appear to be an idiosyncratic principle.

To see the important ambiguity in Dorr’s argument, focus on the use of “justification”, and note that there are two different but equally legitimate things that a philosopher might mean when she says that a person “lacks sufficient justification for believing p”. To illustrate these two things, imagine a case in which Jones is presented with conclusive evidence that p, but Jones completely ignores this evidence and instead forms his belief about p based on tea leaves: Jones takes the tea leaves to indicate that p, so Jones believes that p on that basis alone. Regarding this case, one philosopher might say that Jones *has sufficient justification for believing p*, while another philosopher might say that Jones *lacks sufficient justification for believing p*. Both of these philosophers might be speaking truly, because they might be making different claims – in particular, the first philosopher might be making the true claim that Jones’s *total evidence* for p is sufficient to ground a justified belief that p (which is true, after all, because Jones has decisive evidence for p), while the second philosopher might be making the true claim that Jones’s *actual basis* for believing is insufficient for a justified belief that p (which is also true, because his actual basis is merely tea leaves). Epistemologists sometime call the first sense “propositional justification” and the second “doxastic justification”, but for our purposes this terminology doesn’t matter. What does matter is that this example shows that even if a person’s *actual basis* for believing p is insufficient for a justified belief that p, that person might still have *empirical evidence* that is sufficient to ground a justified belief that p.

With this in hand, we can note that several claims in Dorr’s argument are ambiguous between these two importantly different readings of “justification”. So, to properly evaluate the argument, we should consider both readings of “justification” in turn, keeping in mind that the occurrences of “justification” must be understood in the same way throughout the argument in order for the argument to be valid. I claim that Dorr’s argument has a false premise on either reading of “justification” and is therefore unsound – more precisely, here is a chart previewing exactly what I claim:

Two Readings of “Justification”		
	First Reading: Propositional Justification	Second Reading: Doxastic Justification
PREMISE 1	False	True
PREMISE 3: DORR’S CONSTRAINT	True	False

On the first reading of “justification”, *having sufficient justification for believing p* means that *one’s total evidence for p is sufficient to ground a justified belief that p*. On this reading, DORR’S CONSTRAINT is true, because the only way one can move from a state in which one lacks sufficient total evidence to ground a justified belief in p to a state in which one has sufficient such evidence is via a change in one’s evidence. This explains the prima facie plausibility of DORR’S CONSTRAINT, because on this reading of “justification” that constraint is true. However, at the same time, on this reading of “justification” PREMISE 1 is false. To see why, note that even if *cognitivism* is true Edgar does not get any new evidence after t1, because all of his inferences and activities after t1 are the result of a priori reasoning.⁵ As a result, if PREMISE 1 were true on this reading and thus Edgar had insufficient evidence for his ultimate conclusion at t1, it would follow that Edgar still had insufficient evidence for that conclusion even at t3 even if cognitivism is true, and thus that his ultimate conclusion is irrational even if cognitivism is true. However, this contradicts the description of the case. As a result, PREMISE 1 is false on this reading of “justification”, which means that at t1 Edgar has sufficient total evidence to ground a justified belief in his ultimate conclusion that the souls of liars will be punished. Importantly, this shows that even if non-cognitivism is true Edgar has sufficient evidence for his ultimate conclusion, because, as we’ve just seen, it must be granted that Edgar has sufficient evidence for that conclusion right from the beginning of the story if cognitivism is true, and there is no difference regarding what evidence Edgar has at the beginning of the story regardless of whether cognitivism or non-cognitivism is assumed. In my judgment, this is enough to undermine Dorr’s argument all by itself, because once it is clear that even if non-cognitivism is true Edgar has sufficient evidence for his ultimate conclusion, then it is hard to see how non-cognitivism could be *inconsistent* with the rationality of inferring that conclusion. In any event, this shows that the argument is unsound on this reading of “justification”, because PREMISE 1 is false on this reading.

We’ve just seen that Dorr’s argument is unsound on the first reading of “justification”. Now let’s consider the second reading, according to which *having sufficient justification for believing p* means that *the basis upon which one believes or would believe p is sufficient for a justified belief that p*. On this reading, PREMISE 1 is true, because if Edgar were to infer his ultimate conclusion straightaway at t1, his belief in that conclusion would be unjustified, because his basis for that belief would be insufficient. However, this is perfectly consistent with the fact, noted above, that Edgar nonetheless has sufficient evidence for his ultimate conclusion already at t1. How are these things consistent? The explanation is that Edgar has sufficient evidence for his ultimate conclusion already at t1, but he is not yet in a position to rationally infer that conclusion at t1, because he is not yet in a position to properly base that conclusion on that evidence – and the way in which Edgar comes to be in a position to properly base that conclusion on that evidence is via the reasoning that takes place between t1 and t3. This shows that

⁵ In Budolfson 2011 (especially pp. 249-250), I explain why the case must be understood in this way given Dorr’s argumentative goals.

Edgar's case is analogous to a case in which a detective has interviewed all the witnesses and gathered all the available evidence, but is not yet in a position to infer who the murderer is. The detective retires to her armchair, lights a pipe, closes her eyes and begins to reflect. She makes no progress for a minute, until finally, in a flash, she realizes that the murderer must have been Jones. ("Eureka!", she exclaims.) We can suppose that her inference is rational, which means that she had all the evidence she needed for inferring that Jones is the murder even before sitting down in the armchair and engaging in reasoning (because she does not get any new evidence after sitting down in the armchair), but at the same time she is not in a position to rationally infer that Jones is the murderer straightaway at the beginning of the story – instead, she must first engage in reasoning, which allows her to properly base that conclusion on her evidence.

The case just described is a counterexample to the second reading of DORR'S CONSTRAINT—which is the reading the Mabrito is most interested in—because on that reading of "justification" the detective moves from a situation in which she lacks justification for believing that p —a state in which it would be irrational for her to so believe—to a state in which she possesses such a justification—a state in which it is rational for her to so believe—without a change in her cognitive states or her evidence. That's because it would be irrational for the detective to believe that Jones is the murder at the beginning of the story, but yet it is rational for her to reach that conclusion at the end of the story, even though there is no change in her evidence or her cognitive states in the meantime. This amounts to a general counterexample to DORR'S CONSTRAINT on the second reading of "justification", and therefore shows that the argument is unsound on the second reading.⁶

So, that's my diagnosis of what's wrong with Dorr's argument, which is summarized by the chart at the beginning of the discussion above. The explanation is that the most natural reading of DORR'S CONSTRAINT and the most natural reading of PREMISE 1 make those premises true, which explains why Dorr's argument seems so compelling and why DORR'S CONSTRAINT can seem irresistible despite Mabrito's objections; however, at the same time there is a less salient reading of both of those premises on which they are false – and there is no disambiguation of "justification" that makes both premises true and the argument valid, which means that Dorr's argument is ultimately unsound.⁷ I think that because Mabrito does not address the ambiguity in "justification", he misses an opportunity to explain why Dorr's argument seems so compelling and why DORR'S CONSTRAINT might seem irresistible to some even in the face of Mabrito's objections.⁸

⁶ In fact, this seems more decisive than Mabrito's arguments against the principle – in particular, this shows that the principle is clearly false for more general reasons having nothing to do with (potentially controversial claims about) desires.

⁷ All of this is complicated by the fact that the notion of 'evidence' can also be ambiguous in an important way. I discuss this at great length in Budolfson 2011, where I also address a number of other complications and worries.

⁸ I discuss this at length in Budolfson 2011, where I cast Dorr's argument in terms of "evidence" rather than in terms of "justification", based on my desire to remain as close to Dorr's own words as possible. For example, in

Having suggested a way of removing resistance to some of Mabrito's conclusions, I now want to raise an objection to his positive view. As just explained, I agree with Mabrito that we should reject DORR'S CONSTRAINT. After rejecting that principle, Mabrito offers an alternative principle that he calls the

ENTAILMENT CONSTRAINT: "Agents move from a situation in which they lack [sufficient] justification for believing that *p* to a situation in which they have such justification only if they come to accept claims that entail *p* or acquire evidence that supports *p*", where "justification" is understood in the second sense above (i.e., *doxastic justification*).⁹

However, there is a serious *prima facie* problem with the ENTAILMENT CONSTRAINT: on its most natural reading, it is subject to the same counterexample that I raised against DORR'S CONSTRAINT above. In particular, because it understands the notion of *justification* in the second sense above of *doxastic justification*, it follows that in the story described above *the detective moves from a situation in which she lacks justification for believing that p to a situation in which she has such a justification without coming to accept claims that entail p or acquiring evidence that supports p* – which is just to say that on its most natural reading the ENTAILMENT CONSTRAINT is subject to the same counterexample as DORR'S CONSTRAINT.

In light of this problem with the ENTAILMENT CONSTRAINT, I cautiously propose that we endorse the following principle instead:

NEW CONSTRAINT: Agents move from a situation in which they lack [sufficient] justification for believing that *p* to a situation in which they have such justification only if

that paper I attribute to Dorr reliance on the following principle involving a slightly different formulation than the SUFFICIENT JUSTIFICATION PRINCIPLE:

SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE PRINCIPLE: Edgar's conclusion at *t*₃ is rational only if Edgar has sufficient *evidence* for that conclusion at *t*₃.

In that paper, I noted that the notion of *evidence* is ambiguous, and I used that ambiguity to explain why Dorr's argument fails. In this paper I note an analogous ambiguity in the notion of *justification*, and I use that ambiguity to explain why Dorr's argument fails if his argument is cast in terms of *justification* rather than *evidence*. In light of this, the interested reader might note that my evaluation of Dorr's argument in this commentary is essentially the same as in my earlier paper. As far as I can tell, the fact that Dorr's argument fails in the same way regardless of whether it is cast in terms of *justification* or *evidence* provides further confirmation of my diagnosis of the problem with the argument.

⁹ Mabrito, pg. 7.

they acquire evidence that supports p or *there is a change in the basis for which they would believe p* , where “justification” is understood in the second sense above of *doxastic justification*.

As far as I can tell, this principle is uncontroversial and does the work we want it to do without falling victim to the sort of problems noted above. (As an added bonus, we no longer have to appeal to a notion of entailment in formulating such a principle, which Mabrito acknowledges leads to complications.¹⁰)

At this point, I’ve tried to provide some helpful distinctions and objections, all of which are friendly to Mabrito’s main ideas. Although I haven’t discussed it, I think that Mabrito’s discussion of the notion of *guaranteeing the truth of* near the end of his paper does much to move the debate forward by clarifying what someone would need to do in order to advance a convincing Dorr-style argument against non-cognitivism – and I agree with Mabrito that there is no way of doing this.

At the same time, I am tempted to think that although Mabrito’s main conclusions are true, the most clear and compelling case for those conclusions is made by the ambiguity diagnosis of Dorr’s argument that I prefer and that I outlined above. In particular, the ambiguity diagnosis provides an explanation of why the premises of Dorr’s argument are true and obvious in a sense even though the argument is ultimately unsound.

I am also inclined to think that with the ambiguity diagnosis of Dorr’s argument in hand, there are no important residual problems left to solve. That’s because the ambiguity diagnosis reveals that Edgar has all of the empirical evidence he needs for his conclusion even if non-cognitivism is true, and it is also true that there is no reason to think that non-cognitivism is inconsistent with Edgar’s basing that conclusion properly on his evidence even if non-cognitivism is true.¹¹ As a result, there is no reason to think that non-cognitivism is inconsistent with the correct explanation of Edgar’s case or any other case of rational inference.

In sum, non-cognitivists can legitimately endorse the same account of the epistemology of the cases Dorr discusses as cognitivists should endorse, at least on the assumption that the Frege-Geach

¹⁰ Mabrito, pg. 7 fn 6.

¹¹ The fact that Edgar forms a desire-like state when he comes to accept P2 is merely a distracting feature of the process which, more importantly, results in Edgar basing his conclusion properly on his evidence – and as just noted, there is no reason to think that non-cognitivism is inconsistent with the relevant rationalizing facts about basing.

problem can be solved, and so there is no need for non-cognitivists to offer an idiosyncratic account of the epistemology of such cases, in contrast to what other commentators suggest.¹²

[END]

References

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¹² Again, other commentators seem to think that Dorr's objection to non-cognitivism requires an epistemologically idiosyncratic response: for example, James Lenman, "Noncognitivism and Wishfulness"; David Enoch, "How Noncognitivism can Avoid Wishful Thinking"; Mark Schroeder, "Epistemology: wishful thinking", in his *Noncognitivism in Ethics*; Mark Schroeder, "How Not to Avoid Wishful Thinking"; Mark van Roojen, "Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism" – and of course, Cian Dorr, "Non-cognitivism and Wishful Thinking". Mabruto might also be seen as thinking that an idiosyncratic response is required, given that his EXPRESSIVIST CONSTRAINT might appear to be an idiosyncratic principle.