

Fitting Attitudes And Essentially Contestable Concepts

Atitudes apropriadas e conceitos essencialmente contestáveis

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Abstract

The issue of Fitting Attitudes inherit the much-discussed ‘wrong kind of reason’ problem (WKR) that afflicts some accounts. The problem remained to attempts to give an account of FA is to specify the right kinds of reasons, to specify the right notion of fittingness. A number of solutions have been proposed to solve WKR. ‘Conceptual thesis’ about attitude formation and the ‘psychological thesis’. The text discusses both of it, raising some questions about them, but also wish to emphasize that the understanding of FA that is supposed to lead to WKR is problematic. An important thing to be brought seems to be that, when applied to essentially contestable concepts, fitting attitude analyses, understood properly (i.e. without unwarranted presuppositions about the very value in dispute) will not result in WKR as conceived in the kinds of examples given earlier. Exploring the issue of Fitting Attitudes and giving to it an alternative account is the main goal of the present paper.

Key words: fitting attitudes, contestable, concepts.

Resumo

A questão das Atitudes Apropriadas (FA) herda o problema muito discutido do “tipo errado de razão” que aflige algumas tentativas de resposta a ela. O problema remanescente para tentativas de dar conta das FA é especificar o tipo correto de razões (WKR), especificar a noção correta de *fittingness* (adequação). Numerosas soluções foram propostas para resolver o problema. Duas delas são a tese conceitual sobre a formação de atitudes e a tese psicológica. O texto discute ambas levantando algumas questões, mas também enfatiza que a compreensão das FA que supostamente leva ao problema das WKR é problemática. Algo importante a ser trazido parece ser o de que, quando aplicada a conceitos essencialmente contestáveis, a análise das FA não resultarão em WKR. Sendo assim, explorar a questão das FA é dar a ela uma abordagem alternativa é o objetivo central do presente texto.

Palavras-chave: atitudes apropriadas, contestável, conceitos.

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Introduction

Fitting Attitude analyses of value (henceforth FA) hold that for something to be valuable is for it to be the fitting object of a pro-attitude, where ‘fittingness’ is to be understood as some kind of normative constraint governing the ‘correct’ way of responding to some object or situation (X); that is, the way that reflects the value of X:

FA: To apply an evaluative concept Φ to an object/situation X is to think it *fitting* to have some particular pro-attitude A towards X. (adapted from D’Arms and Jacobsen, 2000b).

FA inherit the general attractions of buck-passing accounts of value, promising to “demystify values” by avoiding the metaphysical and epistemological difficulties involved in identifying them (see Lang, 2008; Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen, 2004) Moreover, they are supposed to be neutral between realist and anti-realist accounts of value, for the relevant judgements of fittingness can, it seems, be construed cognitively or non-cognitively (D’Arms and Jacobsen, 2000a).

Unfortunately, however, FA also inherit the much-discussed ‘wrong kind of reason’ problem (henceforth WKR) that afflicts buck-passing accounts.² This is the difficulty of providing a noncircular method of distinguishing the reasons that bear on the value of X from those that do not; that is, of distinguishing the attitudes that are (genuinely) fitting – that reveal the value of X – from those that are not. The problem is thus to specify the right kinds of reasons, to specify the right notion of fittingness. The use of examples in setting up this problem, and hence in establishing the ultimate plausibility of FA, is important. Here are two typical cases from the literature:

(1) “Imagine that an evil demon will inflict a severe pain on me unless I prefer this saucer of mud; that makes the saucer well worth preferring. But it would not be plausible to claim that the saucer of mud’s existence is, in itself, valuable”.³

(2) “Imagine that you have a rich and generous but touchy friend. If he suspects you of envying his possessions, he will curtail his largesse. That is a good reason not to envy him... but surely it does not speak to whether his possessions are enviable. Another reason you might think it inappropriate to envy him would be based on moral qualms about being pained at a friend’s good fortune, but this too seems irrelevant to the ascription of the [evaluative] property [= being enviable]” (D’Arms and Jacobsen, 2000b, p. 74).

The first type of example describes a case where we apparently have a reason for a response that does not, however, bear on the value of X – the required response is *in some way* fitting, but not in the right way. The second type of example describes a case where we have a reason to *withhold* a response that does, however, bear on the value of X – a response that is fitting.

I

A number of solutions have been proposed to solve WKR. One type of solution takes the form of defending what I shall call a ‘conceptual thesis’ about attitude formation:

² For further discussion see Blackburn (1998), Dancy (2000), D’Arms and Jacobson (2003, 2006), Gibbard (1990), Hieronymi (2005), Mulligan (1998), Olson (2004), Piller (2006), Stratton-Lake (2005), Stratton-Lake and Hooker (2006), Suikkanen (2004) and Väyrynen (2006).

³ Due to Roger Crisp (2005) and quoted in Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2006, p. 115).

Conceptual Thesis: It is a conceptual truth about pro-attitude A that A is correct in relation to an object O only if O has some property/set of properties P (Persson, 2004; Bykvist, 2009).

The model here is that of belief, which according to some philosophers is logically constrained to be formed only in relation to truth. Belief aims at truth, as the slogan goes. Thus analogously, for example, the concept of admiration requires an acceptance of the correctness conditions for admiration (that we should only admire that which is, say, virtuous, a masterpiece, and so on). The solution to WKR then goes as follows:

- (i) It is *not possible* for any agent to have an attitude A as a direct response to a reason of the wrong kind for A.
- (ii) The attitudes themselves are inherently normative: the relevant norms of correctness are conceptual truths about attitudes.
- (iii) Thus: WKR are not really reasons for the attitude
- (iv) Thus: there are no wrong kinds of reasons and hence no need to give criteria for distinguishing between wrong and right kinds of reasons.

Unfortunately, the limitations of this proposed solution to WKR are quite obvious. What counts as justifying a particular pro-attitude? Do they have equivalents of 'truth of p'? On the one hand it appears that many such evaluative attitudes have no such constraints. When, for example, I admire something, there appear to be *no constraints*, coming from the very nature of the attitude in question, on the kind of features that can form its correctness conditions. That is, it does not seem conceptually impossible to admire anything at all, though we might of course deem some objects unworthy of admiration. But that would itself be a further evaluative (e.g. moral or aesthetic) matter, and not a logical-conceptual one.

On the other hand, however, many of the candidate constraints would themselves be evaluative features. For example, our admiration could/should only be directed at the good, or the beautiful, or the admirable. But then such an FA analysis would be hopelessly circular, analyzing the relevant attitudes in terms of some evaluative features that necessarily constrain them, while purporting to offer an analysis of just these features in terms of the relevant attitudes they warrant. If, however, we aim to appeal to certain non-evaluative features as determining the relevant conceptual constraints on our evaluative attitudes, we quickly run into the problem that often, if not always, it will be essentially contestable just what these features are. That is, the application of certain evaluative concepts is essentially contestable with respect to the non-evaluative features to which they are held to pertain.

Evaluative concepts are essentially contestable where there is room for dispute over their application without one party to the dispute simply being guilty of conceptual confusion about the meaning and extension of the concept. That is, disagreements about value often appear to be legitimate disagreements not only about the *extension* of some concept, but also about the *proper conception* of it (for discussion, see D'Arms, 2005). People may disagree not only over whether particular acts are wrong, beautiful, courageous, or shameful, but also about what features an act needs in order to be justifiably attributed such values. So even if we can give a list of non-evaluative properties at which certain evaluative attitudes may generally, or as a matter of contingent fact always be directed, these cannot be *conceptual constraints* on those attitudes.

These considerations, however, suggest an alternative solution to WKR in

terms what I shall call the 'psychological thesis':

Psychological Thesis: A necessary condition for a consideration's being a reason for an attitude A is that A could be produced directly in agents through recognition of that consideration.

The model here is that of belief, where belief is conceived of as a non-voluntary response that occurs only in relation to evidentiary considerations. Thus, forming a belief on the basis of merely prudential considerations must involve *indirect* methods if it is to be done at all. Arguably, it would be impossible if relying *only* on those considerations, and some philosophers have held that this is not merely a psychological truth about belief, but also a conceptual truth about it. However that may be, the thought is that, analogously, being aware of certain properties of X which make, say, moral or aesthetic admiration 'correct' will tend to (or at least *could*) produce an admiration response, whereas being aware of those properties of X which make such admiration merely prudent could not, as a matter of psychological impossibility, lead me to respond with admiration (Persson, 2004, for discussion; Bykvist, 2009).

So, the general idea is that there are psychological constraints on which attitudes *can* be formed in response to which properties. Being aware of the properties which make moral admiration 'correct' will tend to automatically produce such a response, whereas being aware of those properties of X which make it merely prudent will not automatically lead me to respond with moral admiration. Thus the wrong kind of reasons for responses—strategic, pragmatic, or moral considerations—are not really reasons for those responses because we could not have those responses as a direct, automatic result of being aware of them. However, as some have proposed, they could be reasons for wanting or intending to have the responses (e.g. Skorupski, 1997; Parfit, 2001). In other words, there are no wrong kinds of reasons for the relevant attitudes and thus no need to give criteria for distinguishing between wrong and right kinds of reasons. Instead, the supposed wrong kinds of reasons are merely reasons to want or desire to bring about the attitude.

Note, all that is required here is that A *could* be produced by direct recognition of the relevant properties/reasons, not that it necessarily will be. In any case, the claim is that a consideration can only be a reason for a response if being aware of *that* consideration could directly produce that response. Ought implies Can: How one ought to respond to X – what attitude is fitting – depends on how one *can* respond to X. I could not admire the demon as a direct response to his threat, for this would be psychologically impossible. But I could desire to admire him (or intend to do whatever is possible to get myself to admire him) as a direct response to his threat (Persson, 2004).

So, the wrong kind of reasons for evaluative responses – strategic or pragmatic, for instance – are not really reasons for those responses at all because we could not, as a matter of psychological necessity, have those responses as a direct result of being aware of them. However, they could be reasons for wanting or intending or trying to bring about the responses, because being aware of strategic or pragmatic considerations could directly produce a desire to have the response.

The obvious challenge for such an account is to show that at least some relevant evaluative attitudes are psychologically constrained by some set of non-evaluative properties in the way required for FA to provide a successful analysis of value. I think this challenge cannot be met, primarily because, unlike in the case of belief, there seems to be no one-to-one correspondence between evaluative attitudes and sets of non-evaluative properties that constrain the attitudes in the relevant

way(s). Rather, for any set of non-evaluative properties there may be many incompatible attitudes that are 'fitting' to them. There are two main considerations here:

(i) Where the relevant evaluative attitude involves the application of a *thin* evaluative concept there appear to be *no constraints* on the kind of non-evaluative features that can form the attitude's correctness conditions. There appears to be no set of necessary and sufficient properties something must have in order to be, say, desirable, valuable, preferable, morally or aesthetically admired. Note that this is so even where we can without circularity identify a relevant attitude, but this itself may well be problematic. What, for instance, is the difference in attitude – a difference we can specify without appealing to evaluative properties or concepts like 'good' or 'beautiful' – between moral and aesthetic admiration? Where there do seem to be conditions on the application of such concepts, these will involve further evaluative concepts/properties – e.g. we ought to aesthetically appreciate only the 'beautiful'; we ought to morally approve only of the 'good' – in which case we have an analysis of value in terms of other values, thus rendering the FA account viciously circular.

(ii) Even where the deployment of thick concepts (courageous, garish, shameful, and so on) is involved – with their attendant descriptive, non-evaluative conditions of application – it may be *essentially contestable* whether, in any given case, the relevant non-evaluative features merit the application of the evaluative concept.

Now it may be that some examples of WKR involve cases of psychological impossibility, and perhaps the evil demon is a good candidate. For such cases, this type of solution may well offer a plausible escape from WKR. Otherwise, to deny the demon's admirability in the face of possible responses of admiration would appear to depend on the presupposition that the demon was not in fact *really* admirable. But the key question I want to consider now is this: can FA simply presuppose this? For the range of evaluative concepts that are essentially contestable FA, if it is to remain an informative analysis, the answer must be negative. In particular, what counts as fitting for the application of essentially contestable concepts, and what is psychologically possible, will be fundamentally agent-relative matters.

II

To see this, it is important to see that there is something problematic about the very way in which WKR is supposed to follow from FA via the kinds of examples posed above. Such examples stem from initial 'intuitions' about some value of X. This is puzzling, however, if the purported aim of FA is to analyze the value of X *in terms of* which attitudes are fitting. How can the analysis do this job properly – that is, explicate the notion of 'fittingness' without circularity – if we've already assumed (i.e. begged the question about) the value of X? For what counts as 'fitting' in the examples is pre-determined by the assumed value of X, whereas it should apparently be the other way around: the value of X should be determined by what counts as 'fitting'. In short, our intuitions about the value of X should not be governing what attitudes count as fitting, insofar as the aim of FA is to analyze value in terms of just this notion.

Now one might object that this is too quick. After all, we cannot adequately analyze 'fittingness' without some initial grasp of the value of X and we can only begin, therefore, with some stipulation about this value. FA is designed to capture the intuitive sense that we ought to respond, say, with admiration only to those things that are *really* admirable, whilst recognizing that the admirable can only be

understood with reference to the attitude of admiration. This would be a reasonable response insofar as fittingness is to be understood simply as a kind of placeholder for whatever the correct attitude to X's value should be, where this value is somehow beyond dispute. Perhaps FA should not be thought of as a reductive analysis of value, but merely as an account that aims to shed some light on the connection between values and attitudes (Wiggins, 1987).

While some philosophers have taken this line, however, it is difficult to see what light could possibly be shed once the value of X is no longer being informatively analyzed in terms of fittingness, especially where the value of X is precisely what is in dispute. Note that the problem I am raising here is not the same problem as the potentially vicious circularity inherent in the attempt to identify the relevant attitudes independently of the evaluative concepts that FA employs them to analyze, although that *is* a grave problem. Rather, I wish to emphasize that the understanding of FA that is supposed to lead to WKR is problematic. More specifically, it undermines the ability of FA to deal with evaluative concepts that are *essentially contestable*.

FA cannot, if formulated in the way that is supposed to lead to WKR, account in a non-question-begging way for essentially contestable evaluative concepts, because in such cases it just is *the* value of X that is in dispute and hence what needs to be settled. The relevant value cannot just be presupposed before FA has done its analyzing work. If all or most evaluative concepts turn out to be essentially contestable, the limited scope and informativeness of such an understanding of FA will prove to be deeply unattractive. But the fortunes of any plausible FA should not be constrained to wax or wane according to how many of our evaluative concepts turn out to be essentially contestable.

III

It seems that if we do not already assume a value of X where such a value is essentially contestable, there may be any number of attitudes that are fitting, in the sense that we can provide reasons for them. An urgent question for the proponent of FA is thus this: if in fact someone were able to admire the demon in virtue of the prudential reason confronting her – perhaps there could be people who are able to induce aesthetic or moral admiration in themselves at will, or perhaps there are agents who get their aesthetic or moral thrills from acceding to just this kind of demand – what on the FA analysis would prohibit the value of 'admirable' from accruing to the demon? There seems to be nothing to stop the demon being admirable *relative* to the person for whom there are reasons for having this attitude and who can, as a matter of psychological fact, respond in the relevant way. That is, there is reason to admire the demon, and so in that sense the attitude of admiration will be fitting.

The question becomes more pressing with regard to the enviable friend example. The application of essentially contestable evaluative concepts seems to be in large part an evaluative matter. After all, what counts as admirable, shameful, or enviable, for example, is surely in part a question of *what to admire*, or *what to be ashamed of*. What is *genuinely* enviable other than what one takes to be 'worthy' of envy? Insofar as 'enviable' is a normative, evaluative concept the question about its applicability, and hence the fittingness of envy in some context, surely just does amount to deciding *what one should be* envious of, but this will depend in part on one's (higher-order) values and preferences as well as on the relevant non-evaluative features of the circumstances. If one succeeds in changing one's attitude, changing what one endorses as 'worthy of envy', then the judgement of the 'real' value of

the circumstances will change accordingly. If the value of X amounts to whatever one judges to be the fitting attitudinal response to X, then this value will be a result of whatever responses one endorses as fitting. The decision about what is fitting will itself be an evaluative decision, in the sense that judgements about what one *ought to feel* – about what response(s) to endorse – are a matter of weighing up reasons. But then what counts as a ‘wrong kind of reason’ will be in part *relative* to one’s own further values, attitudes, and interests.

An important implication of these observations seems to be that, when applied to essentially contestable concepts, fitting attitude analyses, understood properly (i.e. without unwarranted presuppositions about the very value in dispute) will not result in WKR as conceived in the kinds of examples given earlier. For deciding which reasons are the wrong/right kind is simply a natural part of the difficulty involved in resolving certain evaluative disputes about the applicability of such concepts. In other words, FA is not directly threatened by WKR in the way philosophers have assumed, although its ability to give any informative analysis of non-essentially contestable concepts remains doubtful.

A further potential implication of these considerations would be some sort of basic value relativism, according to which for any object X and the application to X of any essentially contestable evaluative concept Φ , there may be any number of incompatible attitudinal responses A that are fitting, in the sense that there exist reasons for those responses. More formally:

Value Relativism: X has value ϕ (or the judgement that X is ϕ is true) if and only if a speaker (a) endorses some attitude A to X; (b) can in principle have A to X; (c) can in principle provide reasons for A in terms of the non-evaluative properties of X.

Of course, avoiding this kind of agent-relativism about value just is the problem of finding independent, non-circular grounds for distinguishing the *right* kind of reason, *the* fitting attitude, that reflects the *true* value of X. Unless this can be done, however, it is difficult to see how FA can by itself avoid the menace of relativism, and its ability to avoid this is doubtful since, given the essential contestability of evaluative concepts, there seems to be no non question-begging way of deciding which responses count.

IV

Eschewing relativism, cognitivists and non-cognitivists will give different accounts of what fittingness consists in (D’Arms and Jacobsen, 2000b). The former will claim that judgements of fittingness are not fundamentally evaluative in the way suggested above, but rather cognitive judgements about the real value of X. Even if this were right, however, it seems that the cognitivist could only maintain this position at the cost of rendering FA otiose. For it is hard to see how, given what I argued above, we could determine what the right cognitive judgement was without first presupposing the value of X – that is, by pointing to some evaluative property or other. But once this is done, once this value is presupposed, it is difficult to see what non-vacuous work could be achieved by giving a fitting attitude analysis of it. And again, such presuppositions of value are in tension with the application of FA to essentially evaluative concepts. This suggests, at least, that FA does not sit as comfortably with cognitivist accounts as has been presupposed.

Non-cognitivists need some notion of fittingness in order to explain how one’s first-order evaluative sentiments can come apart from one’s all-things-considered,

fully endorsed evaluative judgements.⁴ But notice that for non-cognitivists, whether *X* is *truly* enviable, shameful, regrettable and so on, will ultimately not be a different question from what one endorses as fitting. As such, non-cognitivists cannot just presuppose some value of *X* for essentially contestable concepts, since locating the attitudes that are genuinely fitting will instead just be the process of engaging in the kind of evaluative disputes typical in cases of applying essentially contestable concepts. For such views, therefore, as just noted above, FA applied to essentially contestable concepts will not result in the WKR examples typically put forward in the literature, because there is no prior assumption of value driving and determining the notion of fittingness. For this reason, adopting a non-cognitivist account of fittingness might be more amenable to holding FA, although this would be an unwelcome result for most proponents of FA.

However, non-cognitivist construals of FA need to address some important issues, perhaps the most pressing of which is to explain cases where even our endorsed response differs from the value we attribute to *X*. Such cases, after all, appear to be relatively commonplace. I endorse (for moral reasons, say) not feeling envy towards my rich friend and yet I might still be inclined not to withhold the judgement that in some sense he is genuinely enviable. Note that such cases are importantly different from those in which, for example, I fail to feel the relevant response. I may fail to feel any aesthetic approbation of a masterpiece even while attributing 'beauty' to it, yet in such cases I will nevertheless endorse feeling the appropriate attitude and the failure to actually feel it may be explained by any number of quite straightforward circumstances e.g. lethargy, bad mood etc. These cases are thus no more or less problematic than the parallel cases of weakness of will for moral motivation.

Given that the point of endorsed responses is that they should become our actual responses and are in virtue of which the value of the object at which they are directed is constituted, where the endorsed response and actual responses persist in coming apart, we should rationally feel a tension, a clash of competing attitudes/values: e.g. envy vs. non-envy or aesthetic pleasure vs. displeasure.

In such an event, what sense can the non-cognitivist make of the judgement that the circumstance is *really* enviable or *really* beautiful? Insofar as we can make judgements that the circumstance is 'really' enviable or beautiful, irrespective of our actual or endorsed responses, this must be due ultimately to the presence of non-evaluative properties that we 'take' to ground the concept. This, I contend, can take two forms.

(i) We have a 'conventional' understanding that these properties constitute (i.e. appropriately give rise to the evaluative attitudes of) envy or aesthetic approbation according to some common norm or convention.

(ii) We recognize that these non-evaluative features are of the type that would normally, and should induce envy or aesthetic pleasure in oneself.

Thus, such cases will result either in clash of reasons and attitudes, where we have to make the fundamentally evaluative decision about whether to give us the currently endorsed response or the value we attribute to the object apparently independently of such a response; or one will find that one's actual endorsement will not be psychologically possible, in which case we will only be able to muster a

⁴ Or whatever one's favoured non-cognitive formulation of value judgement.

desire to have the attitude, an attitude that we see is incompatible with the value we actually do for whatever reasons, currently attribute to the object. In either case, however, there are no wrong kind of reasons as initially conceived. Rather, what appear to be wrong kinds of reasons will really be cases where we find it psychologically impossible to respond in the way that appears to be required of the value we attribute independently to the object, or cases where there are merely conflicting reasons based on the types of fundamentally evaluative considerations discussed.⁵

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