

Emotivism

AYER AND THE PRINCIPLE OF VERIFICATION

In the 1930s, a school of philosophy arose called logical positivism. The cornerstone of their beliefs was the principle of verification. This claims that a statement only has meaning if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable. It entails that statements about right and wrong are meaningless. They are neither true nor false, because they do not actually state anything. If I say ‘murder is wrong’, this is not analytic, nor can any empirical investigation show this. We can show that murder causes grief and pain, or that it is often done out of anger. But we cannot demonstrate, in the same way, that it is wrong.

But if ethical statements don’t state truths, and are therefore literally meaningless, what do they do? A. J. Ayer argued that ethical judgements express feelings: If I say to someone, “You acted wrongly in stealing that money”...I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, “You stole that money,” in a peculiar tone of horror’. (*Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 146) This theory is ‘emotivism’.

Moore would agree that moral judgements are neither analytic nor empirically verifiable. But he believed that they are nevertheless true or false, because they are about non-natural properties. But Ayer responds that our ‘intuitions’ are simply our feelings of approval or disapproval. Feelings are not cognitions of value, and value does not exist independently of our feelings.

The main difficulty with logical positivism is that according to the principle of verification, the principle of verification itself is meaningless. The claim that ‘a statement only has meaning if it is analytic or can be verified empirically’ is not analytic and cannot be verified empirically. But if the principle of verification is meaningless, then what it claims cannot be true. So it does not give us any reason to believe that the claims of ethics are meaningless.

STEVENSON’S THEORY

But emotivism does not depend on the principle of verification. Charles Stevenson argued that moral words have emotive meanings, which are neither descriptive nor analytic. (*Facts and Values*, Ch. 1) The sentence ‘You stole that money’ has a purely descriptive meaning, viz. that you took money that did not belong to you without permission from the owner. But it can be used with an emotive meaning (‘You stole that money!’), a meaning that expresses disapproval. Many moral terms (‘steal’, ‘honesty’, ‘respect’) have both descriptive and emotive meanings. The central ones, though, ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘good’, and ‘bad’ only have emotive meanings.

Stevenson analyses emotive meaning by connecting meaning to use. The purpose of moral judgements is not to state facts, but to influence how we behave through expressions of approval and disapproval. Words with emotive meaning do just that. If moral language is just descriptive, how can moral truths motivate us? Emotivism, by

contrast, connects caring, approving, disapproving, with the very meaning of ethical words.

But, we can object, the key moral terms 'good', 'right', 'wrong', and 'bad', aren't particularly or necessarily emotive. They may arouse emotions in others or express ours, but this depends on context, as it does with 'steal' and 'honesty'. yet if their meaning is emotive, then the connection should be stronger than that. So perhaps like 'steal' and 'honesty', 'good' and 'right' have a descriptive meaning as well, related to moral facts, e.g. facts about what we have most reason to do. If so, emotivism has confused the emotional use of moral terms for their meaning.

EMOTIVISM AND MORAL DISAGREEMENT

One of the most powerful objections to emotivism is that it oversimplifies ethical discussion. If I say 'abortion is wrong' and you say 'abortion is right', I am just expressing my disapproval of it and you are expressing your approval. I'm just saying 'Boo! to abortion' and you're saying 'Hurrah! for abortion'. But about this there can be no discussion, no reasoning. Even worse, emotivism claims that we are trying to influence other people's feelings and actions. But trying to influence people without reasoning is just a form of manipulation.

Ayer responded that ethical discussion is about the facts. When arguing over animal rights, say, we are constantly drawing facts to each other's attention. I point out how much animals suffer in factory farms. You point out how much more sophisticated human beings are than animals. And so on. If we both agree on the facts, but still disagree morally, there is nothing left to discuss.

Stevenson rejects this. The moral disagreement that remains is a disagreement in attitude, a practical disagreement – no one can live both by the attitude that 'eating meat is wrong' and by the attitude that 'eating meat is right'. Attitudes can be discussed, because people do not have feelings or make choices in isolation. Any attitude has implications for other attitudes. If I disapprove of an action, I must also have similar feelings about similar actions, or my attitudes will not provide consistent guidance about how to live. Moral disagreement, then, can be about the relations between different attitudes. For example, deciding whether abortion is right or wrong is complicated because there are many attitudes involved, sympathy towards the mother, sympathy towards the foetus, feelings about human life, death, and parenthood. It is difficult to work out how these attitudes can all be acted upon, and that is why people disagree.

We may still object that rationality in weighing up which attitudes to give up, which to keep, is still missing. We have no sense of one set of attitudes being part of a 'better life' than any other.

Further objections to emotivism are discussed in the handout 'The denial of moral truth: objections'.