

Metaethics: Intuitionism, emotivism and prescriptivism

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Moral realism is perhaps the ‘common sense’ position on ethics for many people. Many people believe that things really are right or wrong; it is not our views that make them right or wrong. The moral realist believes that statements like ‘Euthanasia is not wrong’ are expressions of beliefs, which can be true or false. On this view, moral language – words like ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ – is factual. These words pick out properties. Whether such statements as ‘euthanasia is not wrong’ are true or false depends on the way that the world is, on what properties an action, person, or situation actually has. They must ‘fit the facts’.

Moore’ intuitionism

But if there are facts about right and wrong, what sort of facts are they? G. E. Moore argued that they cannot be, or be like, natural facts. Moore called the attempt to equate goodness to any natural property the *naturalistic fallacy*. Goodness, he claimed, is a simple and unanalysable property. It cannot be defined in terms of anything else.

Colours are similar. Blue is a simple property, and no one can explain what blue is, you have to see it for yourself to understand what blue is. But unlike colours, goodness is a *non-natural* property. It is not part of the natural world, the world of science; but it is part of reality. Because these facts are not natural facts, we come to know them in an unusual way, through a faculty of ‘intuition’.

Moore’s main argument for believing that it is a fallacy – a mistake – to identify goodness with a natural property is the ‘open question’ argument. If goodness just is happiness, then it wouldn’t make sense to ask ‘Is it good to make people happy?’. This would be like asking ‘Does what makes people happy make people happy?’. This second question isn’t a real question (the answer has to be ‘yes’), but ‘Is it good to make people happy?’ is a real question – the answer can logically be ‘yes’ or ‘no’. And so goodness cannot be happiness, or any other property. ‘Is x good?’ is always a real question while ‘Is x x?’ is not. And so goodness cannot be any other property.

Rejecting the naturalistic fallacy

This argument doesn’t work. Here is a similar argument. ‘The property of being water cannot be any property in the world, such as the property of being H₂O. If it was then the question ‘Is water H₂O?’ would not make sense – it would be like asking ‘Is H₂O H₂O?’. So water is a simple, unanalysable property.’ This is not right, as water *just is* H₂O.

The reason the argument doesn’t work is because it confuses *concepts* and *properties*. Two different concepts – water and H₂O – can pick out the same property in the world. You knew about water before you knew it was H₂O – during this time, you had the concept of water, but not the concept of H₂O. So they are different concepts, but they both refer to the same thing. Likewise, the concept ‘goodness’ is a different concept from ‘happiness’, but perhaps they are exactly the same property in the world. We may doubt this for other reasons, but the point is that the open question argument does not show that they are different.

Intuition'

Nevertheless, perhaps Moore is right that goodness is a non-natural property. After all, for something to be good or right is quite different from its being heavy or 'over there' (see next section). If values are non-natural properties, how do we know about them? Moore's answer is 'intuition'. Basic judgements about what is good, e.g. pleasure, beauty, etc., are intuitions. They are self-evident judgments.

A self-evident judgement has no other evidence or proof but its own plausibility. This doesn't necessarily mean that everyone can immediately see that it is true. 'Self-evident' is not the same as 'obvious'. Our ability to make these judgements needs to develop first, and we need to consider the question very carefully.

The difficulty with 'self-evident' judgements is that people disagree about whether they are true or not. Moore thought it was self-evident that pleasure is good and that maximizing the good is right. W. D. Ross, another intuitionist, thought it was self-evident that there are times when it is wrong to maximize pleasure. The problem is, because the judgements are supposed to be self-evident, we cannot give any further reasons for believing them.

But this doesn't mean we can reject the idea of self-evidence. Suppose we *could* give reasons for thinking that pleasure is good, e.g. because it forms part of a flourishing life for human beings. Is it self-evident that being part of a flourishing life makes something good? If not, we need to give a further reason for this judgement. And we can ask the same question of any further reason we give. And so on, forever. It seems that if judgements about what is good are not self-evident, then judgements about what counts as a reason for thinking something is good must be.

Objecting to intuitionism and motivating emotivism

When two people disagree over a matter of fact, we normally know how we could prove the matter one way or the other. Facts are things that can be shown to be true. But if two people agree over all the natural facts about abortion, say, but still disagree about whether it is right, we cannot appeal to any more 'facts' in the same way. What we would call 'the facts' seem to be *all* agreed, but the dispute about values remains. Value judgements always go beyond the facts. Appealing to 'intuition' doesn't help, since we can't 'investigate' the truth of intuitions!

A. J. Ayer argues the moral judgment, the 'intuition', doesn't pick out a fact, it expresses a feeling, which is why you can't reach moral agreement just by discussing the facts. Disagreeing about values seems to be quite different from disagreeing about facts. So values aren't facts, and moral words are not factual. They have some other function or meaning.

Hume notes that there always seems to be a leap in moral reasoning. We describe the facts of the case, and then we suddenly say 'he ought not to have done that': 'this *ought*...expresses some new relation [of which it] seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it'. This is known as the 'is-ought' gap.

Note also that moral judgements guide our behaviour. If I think pleasure is good, I aim to bring about pleasure. If I think abortion is wrong, I will not commit or encourage others to commit abortion. But a fact, in and of itself, doesn't lead to action. It seems that I need to *care* about the fact, and then the motivating force comes from the caring. If a fact could motivate me, just by itself, how strange would that be? Moral judgements seem to be motivating in their own right; but that must mean they are like desires or emotions, they express what we care about. On this view, moral language is not factual, but expressive.

Ayer's emotivism

Ayer argued that only two kinds of statement can be (literally) meaningful: analytic statements and empirically verifiable statements. An analytic statement is true (or false) just in virtue of the meanings of the words. For instance, 'a bachelor is an unmarried man' is analytically true, while 'a square has three sides' is analytically false. A statement is empirically verifiable if empirical evidence would go towards establishing that the statement is true or false. For example, if I say 'the moon is made of green cheese', we can check this by scientific investigation. If I say 'the universe has 600 trillion planets', we can't check this by scientific investigation in practice, but we can do so *in principle*. We know how to show whether it is true or false, so it is 'verifiable' even though we can't actually verify it.

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*. 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'. Our 'intuitions', as Moore would describe them, 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 we do not need the principle of verification to support Ayer's theory. Charles Stevenson argues that moral words have *emotive* meanings. 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. When we use the terms 'good' and 'right', we express our approval. The whole point of ethics is to influence how we behave. We use moral judgements to express our feelings and to influence the feelings and actions of other people. Words with emotive meaning do just that. Emotivism connects caring, approving, disapproving, with the very meaning of ethical words.

Objecting to emotivism

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' do have a descriptive meaning. If so, emotivism has confused the emotional *use* of moral terms for their meaning.

One of the most powerful objections to emotivism is that it seems to entail an unsatisfactory view of 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’. This is just like cheering for our own team – there is no *discussion*, no *reasoning*, going on at all. 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 thought this objection partly false, partly true. It is false because emotivists claim that there is a lot more to ethical discussion – 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. In fact, says Ayer, *all* the discussion is about the facts. If we both agree on the facts, but still disagree morally, there is no more discussion that can take place. And this is why the objection is true – but not an objection. When all the facts are in, there is nothing left to discuss.

The disagreement that remains, Stevenson argues, is a disagreement in attitude. It is 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’. These *can* be discussed, because people do not have feelings or make choices in isolation. The attitudes we adopt have implications for other attitudes and mental states. If I disapprove of an action, practically speaking, 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 feelings that we have. For example, deciding whether abortion is right or wrong is complicated because there are many feelings involved, sympathy towards the mother, sympathy towards the foetus, feelings about human life, death, and parenthood. It is difficult to work out how these feelings can all be acted upon, and that is why people disagree.

But we may still object that a sense of people’s *rationality* in weighing up which feelings or 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.

Prescriptivism

R. M. Hare argued that moral words are not *emotive* in meaning; they are *prescriptive*. This difference, he claimed, allows a greater role for reason in moral discussion.

Prescriptive meaning works like commands, also known as imperatives. If I say ‘Leave the room’, I am telling you to do something. Hare argued that if I say ‘Eating meat is wrong’, I am saying ‘Don’t eat meat’.

We use the idea of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to command. We use the word ‘good’, says Hare, when we want to *commend* something to someone. There is a difference of emphasis between ‘good action’ and ‘right action’: ‘good action’ *commends* the action without necessarily *commanding* it – we are saying it should be praised, but not necessarily that you *have* to do it to be a good person. If we say an action is the ‘right action’, then we are commanding it – it is a guideline for behaviour that people should follow.

We can talk about good chocolate, good teachers, and good people. In each case, we are saying the chocolate, teacher, or person is praiseworthy in some way. In each case, there is a *set of standards* that we are implicitly relying on. Good chocolate is rich in the taste of cocoa. Good

teachers can explain new ideas clearly and create enthusiasm in their students. A good person – well, a good person is someone who is the way we should try to be as people.

When we use ‘good’ to mean ‘morally good’, we are appealing to a set of standards that apply to someone as a person. If we say that an action is a good action or a right action, we mean it is an action that complies with the standards for how someone should act to be a good person.

So the prescriptive meaning of good relates to the fact that it commends. What about its descriptive meaning? This comes from the set of standards that is being assumed. Its descriptive meaning picks up on the qualities that the something must have to be a good ... (chocolate, teacher, person, whatever).

However, the descriptive and prescriptive meanings are distinct. We don’t *have* to prescribe what matches up to the standard ‘good’. For example, there is nothing about what it is to be honest (i.e. telling the truth: descriptive meaning) that can make me commend honesty (telling the truth is how to behave: prescriptive). More generally, nothing about the facts can entail a moral judgment. We are *free* in the prescriptions that we make.

Universalization

However, Hare argues that this freedom is rationally constrained. As we saw, prescriptions relate to a set of standards. Whenever we apply a standard, we are committed to making the same judgement of two things that match the standard in the same way. If I say this chocolate is good but that chocolate is not, I must think that there is some *relevant difference* between the two. Likewise, we can choose what standards we live by, but the standards apply universally. If I think that it is wrong for you to steal from me, because it infringes my rights of ownership, then I must think that it is wrong for me to steal from you, because it infringes your rights of ownership – unless I can say that there is some relevant difference between the two cases.

Prescriptivism and Emotivism

Emotivists thought that the only role for reason in ethical discussion is establishing the facts. Hare has developed three more ways in which reason is part of ethical discourse.

First, there is a difference between commanding someone to do something, or commending an action to them, and trying to get them to act that way. We saw that emotivism is open to the objection that it makes ethical discussion a matter of manipulation. Hare’s theory sees the ‘guiding’ aspect of ethics as a matter of prescription, rather than a matter of influencing someone through emotion. This makes ethical discussion more straightforward and rational.

Second, we can argue about consistency and relevance. For example, Peter Singer claims there is *no relevant difference* between the suffering of people and the suffering of animals. If we are going to say that causing the suffering of people is wrong, we are committed to saying the suffering of animals is wrong – unless we can find a relevant difference. Moral disagreements can be about the consistency in applying certain standards, and reason can help resolve this.

Third, we can infer prescriptions from other prescriptions. A famous argument against abortion says ‘Taking an innocent human life is wrong. Abortion is the taking of an innocent human life. Therefore abortion is wrong.’ This is a valid argument, even if we rephrase it as Hare would understand it: ‘Do not take innocent human life. Abortion is the taking of an innocent human life. Therefore, do not commit abortion.’ To disagree with the conclusion, we must disagree with at least one premise. And so our prescriptions are logically related to one another. So we can use reason to discuss these relations.

Objections

Two further objections to both emotivism and prescriptivism challenge their subjectivism. Both theories say that Values are a reflection of our value judgements. But if values depend entirely on our will, it seems we could value anything we chose to. The first objection is that this is difficult to make sense of. Outside certain limits, we would consider people mad rather than thinking that they just had a different set of values to us. We have to presuppose certain ideas about moral values in order to understand feelings or choices as moral at all. It is not just a matter of the form of the judgement. What counts as moral is factually constrained.

Non-cognitivists can agree that we can't value just anything, and it is precisely because human beings have certain needs, have a particular nature, that we do not value things that are not related to human (animal, etc.) welfare. And this is just a natural fact about human beings. 'Valuing' is an activity of the will, but the will is guided by its nature. But there is no *logical* restriction on possible 'moralities', there is just a considerable *factual* one. We are all set up, by evolution perhaps, to value actions and people in particular, familiar sorts of ways. This is why we call only particular sets of feelings or principles 'moral'. The objection doesn't prove that there are facts about morality that our feelings or choices must answer to. It only shows that a common human nature underlies our feelings and choices. But it is still these feelings and choices that create morality.

Second, if values depend on our will, there are no objective values, so anything goes. If morality is the product of my feelings and choices, then morality has no authority over me. I can do whatever I like, as long as I don't get caught. 'Morality' becomes no more than a matter of taste.

But emotivists and projectivists argue that this is either an unfair simplification of their theories or a straightforward misunderstanding. The view that there are no values is itself a choice or expression of feeling, and one that moral people will disapprove of morally. The theory that moral values are a reflection of our feelings does not imply that we should stop having moral feelings. We should disapprove of anyone who advocates that morality doesn't matter or is just a matter of taste.