

The non-cognitivist's (moral) progress
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Non-cognitivism maintains that there is no ethical knowledge, because ethical judgements are not statements which can be true or false. In this way, non-cognitivists draw a sharp distinction between facts and values.

Origins: emotivism

So if ethical statements don't state truths, what do they do? In his book *Language, Truth and Logic*, the logical positivist 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' (142). The feelings they express are feelings of approval or disapproval. Feelings are not cognitions of value, and value does not exist independently of our feelings. In his book *Ethics and Language*, Stevenson developed the theory further, arguing that this role of words can be understood as a distinct kind of meaning they can have. 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.

One of the most powerful objections to emotivism is that it seems to entail a very unsatisfactory view of ethical discussion. First, it suggests that there is really no such thing as *ethical* disagreement. Either we have different moral opinions because we disagree about some matter of fact (e.g. do foetuses feel pain?); or we aren't really disagreeing at all because there is no matter of fact we disagree about. 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*, and no disagreement 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.

Stevenson replies that there is a genuine disagreement here. It 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'. And this allows us to see that there is a type of reasoning going on in ethical debate. 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, I must also have certain beliefs about it (my reasons for disapproving, such as that it causes pain) and certain desires towards it (such as wanting to prevent it), and to be consistent, I must have similar feelings about similar actions. 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.

Non-cognitivism and morality

A second objection is that emotivism, and non-cognitivism generally, doesn't give us a good theory of *morality*. I could approve or disapprove of *anything*. But surely not any set of attitudes of approval would count as morality. Morality is about harm, justice, well-being, kindness, those kinds of things. If none of these featured in my set of attitudes, it would be strange to say that my disapproval was *moral*.

One way non-cognitivists can respond is by making use of those facts about human beings that limit our idea of morality. It is precisely because human beings have certain needs, have a particular nature, that we value things that are 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. In truth, there is no *logical* restriction on possible 'moralities', but there is 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.

The objection can be pressed, though. How can the non-cognitivist draw a distinction between *moral* approval and disapproval and, say, *aesthetic* approval and disapproval? Both involve what people value, and we might be set up to value aesthetically just as much as morally. Given that 'approval' is the central concept in a non-cognitivist theory of morality, we really need an account of what makes approval moral or not moral.

Toleration and relativism

Many people think that non-cognitivism implies a certain kind of tolerance. If morality is a reflection of our choices or feelings, and my choices or feelings are different from yours, then who are you to tell me that my morality is wrong? Non-cognitivism implies tolerance, they claim, because no one can correct anyone else. This can become an objection to the theory, since although tolerance can appear to be a virtue, it can also be a vice. Should we tolerate every view, including racism, sexism, female circumcision...? Doesn't morality require that we 'take a stand' against what is wrong? Can non-cognitivism allow for this?

The objection is based on a mistake, because non-cognitivism does not entail tolerance for two reasons. First, tolerance is itself a moral value. 'You ought to tolerate other people's values, because there are no moral values' is self-contradictory. If there are no moral values, then there is nothing I 'ought' to do. We only ought to be tolerant if tolerance is a good or right thing to be. So, turning the tables, who are you to tell someone else to be tolerant? This is no different then saying they ought not to eat meat or ought not to be racist. It is a moral claim. Non-cognitivism doesn't entail that we ought to be tolerant or that we ought not to be tolerant.

Second, if my morality is different from yours, then not only will I disagree with you about whether a particular action is right or wrong, I may also disapprove of people who disagree with me and try to persuade them to change their mind. This follows from Stevenson's observation that our attitudes don't exist on their own. Disapproving of abortion is more consistent with disapproving of people who approve of abortion than it is with not doing so. Non-cognitivism doesn't mean I can't form attitudes towards other people's attitudes. In fact, it suggests I will. To what extent I do this depends on how important I think tolerance is. I might feel that tolerance is a moral value, but this tolerance

will have its limits. Very few people think that tolerance is a more important value than preventing a racist murder, say.

For these same reasons, non-cognitivism does not imply relativism. A recent, sophisticated form of non-cognitivism developed by Simon Blackburn maintains that to claim that moral judgements can be right for you and wrong for me because we have different cultures *is itself a moral claim*. Relativism is not a *metaethical* theory, it is an *ethical* theory; and, Blackburn argues, not a very good one. Again, if I feel approval towards a particular action, I may disapprove of people who behave as if the action is wrong. How tolerant I am of other cultures depends entirely on whether I think such tolerance is a good thing.

But can I really justify interfering with how other people behave just because their actions don't accord with my feelings or choices? This seems very petty. But this isn't the reason I am interfering, claims the non-cognitivist. It is not because it offends me, but because they are being racist or cruel or cowardly or whatever. If I tried to stop someone from doing something because it offends me, I would be expressing (practically) the attitude that offending me is wrong. But this isn't my attitude; my attitude is that doing that action is wrong, because of what the action is.

Moral progress

A final objection to non-cognitivism is that it does not allow for the idea of moral progress, whether of individuals or of societies. If there is no moral reality, then our moral beliefs or feelings cannot become better or worse. Obviously, they have changed – people used to believe that slavery was morally acceptable and now they do not. But how can non-cognitivism say that this is *progress*? There are two responses non-cognitivists can give.

First, non-cognitivists can claim that there can be improvements in people's moral views if they become more rational. People may come to know certain facts that they didn't know before. In the case of slavery, people believed many things about slaves that were not true (one popular false belief was that they were stupid). Moral progress here means basing one's moral feelings or principles on the facts, not mistakes. Second, people can become more consistent, more willing to universalize their principles. Some utilitarians, such as Peter Singer, argue that if we were consistent in our feelings about preventing suffering, we would not eat meat. If he is right, then this would be moral progress. Third, people can become more coherent in their moral judgements. Many of us have moral feelings that come into conflict with each other, e.g. over abortion. Moral progress here would be a matter of working out the implications of our views, and making them coherent. Because people are ignorant, do not always think logically, and have not resolved the conflicts between their different feelings, the non-cognitivist can say that there is plenty of room for moral progress

But isn't moral progress also becoming more 'correct' in our moral judgements? Non-cognitivists can accommodate this, too: If I disapprove of the moral principles of past societies and approve of the moral principles of society in the present, then I will also say that we have made moral progress. Society has moved from moral principles that were bad (i.e. principles I disapprove of) to moral principles that are good (i.e. principles I approve of). That is what moral progress is. This means that moral progress is itself a moral point of view. If you disagree with me, you might claim that today's moral principles are much worse than those 200 years ago and so we have not made moral progress. But this is now just the familiar problem of moral disagreement or relativism, and we saw how the non-cognitivist answered these problems above. The problem of moral progress is just another example of these problems.