

The denial of moral truth: objections

This handout follows the handouts on ‘Emotivism’ and ‘Prescriptivism’. You should read those handouts first.

THE EXTENT TO WHICH WE CAN VALUE WHAT WE LIKE

Emotivism and prescriptivism face the objection that they don’t place limits on what we can approve or disapprove of. They identify moral judgements with a particular type of judgement – approval, disapproval, a commanded or commended principle – rather than a particular content. But isn’t morality about sympathy, loyalty, courage, happiness, and so on?

Because emotivists and prescriptivists understand moral judgements in terms of their form, not their content, they seem to allow that anything could be a moral judgment. Non-cognitivism claims first, that a judgement is a value judgement if it has a particular form; and second, that value judgements ‘create’ values rather than ‘discover’ them. 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. But 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.

Imagine someone believed in maximising the number of florists in Kensington, and all their ‘moral’ feelings and actions related to this: they are willing to do anything to pursue their goal (even murder), they try to stop florists from closing down, they try to change the law to protect florists in Kensington, they feel no disapproval towards theft, lying, disloyalty, no approval of kindness or courage – unless they relate to florists in Kensington. Such a person would be classed as a psychopath!

Not just any set of expressions of approval or principles can count as ‘morality’. Morality is about what is good or bad for human beings generally, given our nature and the types of problems life throws at us. It must relate in some way to what is good for people (or more broadly, animals, the environment, God).

Emotivists and prescriptivists can respond that while ‘valuing’ is an activity of the will, the will is guided by its nature. We can’t value just anything, precisely because human beings have certain needs and a particular 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’. 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 in a different direction. If we don’t distinguish morality by its content, how can the non-cognitivist draw a distinction between moral approval and disapproval and, say, aesthetic approval and disapproval? 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.

THE POSSIBILITY OF JUDGING THE ABHORRENT PRACTICES OF OTHER CULTURES/INDIVIDUALS

If there is no objective moral truth, then doesn't it follow that 'anything goes'? If morality is a reflection of our choices, feelings, or social conventions, and my choices, feelings, or social conventions are different from yours, then who are you to tell me that my morality is wrong? The denial of moral truth implies tolerance, many people 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 practice, including racism, sexism, female circumcision...? Doesn't morality require that we 'take a stand' against what is wrong?

If morality is the product of my feelings and choices, or simply a set of conventions relative to my society, then morality has no authority over me (or anyone else). I can do whatever I like, as long as I don't get caught. 'Morality' becomes no more than a matter of taste. And if this is so, then morality cannot provide any firm grounds for morally judging the practices of other people.

Emotivists and prescriptivists can argue that this is either an unfair simplification of their theories or a straightforward misunderstanding. Living as though there are no moral 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, or our social conventions, does not imply that we should stop having moral feelings or stop living according to convention. We should disapprove of anyone who advocates that morality doesn't matter or is just a matter of taste.

Tolerance and its limits

However, the denial of moral truth does not necessarily lead to 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. 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. The denial of moral truth doesn't entail that we ought to be tolerant or that we ought not to be tolerant.

Emotivism and prescriptivism can reply that tolerance is a moral attitude towards other people's attitudes, so it may conflict with other moral attitudes I have. 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.

So emotivism and prescriptivism can argue that we can (and should) judge other people's abhorrent practices. 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. Of course, that I think racist discrimination is a good reason to prevent an action is an

expression of my moral feelings. For the cognitivist, by contrast, that this is a good reason to interfere is a fact about reasons. The cognitivist claims to have the backing of reality.

THE POSSIBILITY OF MORAL PROGRESS AND MORAL MISTAKES

A final objection to the denial of moral truth is that it does not allow for the idea of moral progress. 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 we say that this is progress if there is no objective moral truth? (Cognitivists can say that we have become more humane than in the past, and there is greater agreement about moral judgements than before because we are discovering real moral truths.) There are two responses non-cognitivists can give.

First, they can claim that there can be very real improvements in people's moral views (individually or as a culture) if they become more rational. This can happen in several different ways. First, 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 morality 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 vegetarianism 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 changing what needed changing to make them coherent with each other.

Because people are ignorant, do not always think logically, and have not resolved the conflicts between their different feelings and conventions, there is plenty of room for moral progress. But moral progress just means becoming more rational in our moral thinking, not becoming more 'correct' in our moral judgements.

The second response non-cognitivists can give is this: If we disapprove of past moral codes and approve of our own moral code, then we will say that we have made moral progress. Society has moved from moral principles that were bad (i.e. principles we disapprove of) to moral principles that are good (i.e. principles we approve of). That is what moral progress is.

This response means that moral progress is relative a particular 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 how to make sense of moral disagreement, not a special problem about moral progress.