

Lecture Notes 2 : Emotivism and Non-cognitivism

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Cognitivism vs. non-cognitivism: Preliminaries

Cognitivists claim moral terms (P) express beliefs.

Cognitivism: P expresses mental state M , and M is a belief

Weak vs. strong cognitivism

Non-cognitivists deny cognitivism. Moral sentences express non-cognitive states.

Non-cognitivism: P expresses M , and M is _____

an emotion (A. J. Ayer), or
a commendation/reproach (R. M. Hare), or
an acceptance/rejection of a norm (A. Gibbard)

Logical positivism

A.J. Ayer's seminal (1936) *Language, Truth and Logic*. Ayer claims there are two, and only two, basic types of literary meaningful statement:

- (1) All bachelors are unmarried, and (2) It is raining.

Analytic statements like (1) are true or false in virtue of the meaning of the terms involved.

Empirically verifiable statements like (2) are true or false in virtue of observed data.

Ayer asserts:

The Verification Principle (VP): A statement is meaningful if and only if it is (in principle) empirically verifiable, or if it is analytically true.

The VP says that only certain kinds of statements are *truth-apt* (can be true or false). But consider Berlin's 'pink is more like red than like black', or simple conditionals. Moreover, isn't VP self-undermining?

Emotivism and the OQA

Moore's 'open question': (3) is x , which is N , good? Moore infers from the OQA that naturalists commit a fallacy. And he argues that:

- (4) Moral terms do not represent natural entities.

∴ (5) Moral terms represent non-natural, indefinable, irreducible entities.

Ayer exploits the OQA, and the *non-sequitur* from (4) to (5), to argue that:

- (6) Moral terms represent neither non-natural, nor natural entities. In fact, moral claims do not describe or represent anything at all.

Emotions and Moral Statements

Moral statements express emotions. So when I say

- (7) 'It is wrong to kill'

What's happening is that:

- (8) I am expressing anger at killing.

Emotivism is not Subjectivism

Subjectivism is the thesis that moral claims are simply descriptions or representations of one's own emotions, or one's own emotional, or cultural framework. On subjectivism (7) just *means*:

- (9) I get angry at killing

The possibility of moral disagreement

- (10) Genuine moral disagreement is not disagreement about empirical facts, or about analytic statements.

But, Ayer says,

- (11) Empirical facts and analytic statements are all there is to disagree about.

∴ (12) There is no such thing as genuine moral disagreement.

Is emotivism true?

The Frege-Geach problem: expressivism fails to capture semantic surface structure of ordinary moral discourse.

The *Euthyphro* problem.

Study questions

Are emotivists relativists?

Is moral talk nonsense?

Further Reading

Ayer, A. J. (1936), *Language, Truth and Logic*, Penguin, Ch. VI.

Fisher, A. *Metaethics*, Ch. 2.