

## Lecture Notes 6 : Quasi-Realism

Lecturer: Nicholas Vrousalis

nv211@cam.ac.uk

**The Frege-Geach problem**

Emotivists offer an account of moral statements in *asserted* contexts:

- (1) Murder is wrong.
- (2) Love is good.

In emotiv-ese these statements translate as:

- (1') Boo! to murder, or *B!(murder)*
- (2') Hooray! to love, or *H!(love)*

The question then arises what moral statements express in unasserted contexts:

- (3) If murder is wrong, then it is wrong for John to murder.

Conditionals like (3) are not assertions: the analysis of (1') and (2') therefore does not apply.

Early expressivists in general claimed that:

- (4) The expressive function of moral terms comes only in assertion, and
- (5) Moral terms get their semantic value from their expressive function.

In two famous papers Peter Geach (1960, 1965) argued that this way of construing moral discourse is incoherent.

**The Fallacy of Equivocation**

- (6) John lives next to Natwest bank.
  - (7) If you live next to a bank, then you live next to a river.
- ∴ (8) John lives next to a river.

Is this argument valid?

**Moral *modus ponens***

Geach noticed that arguments like this seem perfectly valid:

- (9) Murder is wrong.
  - (10) If murder is wrong then it is wrong for John to murder.
- ∴ (11) It is wrong for you to murder.

But no assertion in (10). The expressivist says that the meaning of 'wrong' in (10) is different from the meaning of 'wrong' in (9). Hence any attempt to construct moral *modus ponens* like the one just rehearsed is doomed from the start.

### A preliminary response

(12)  $B!(murder)$ .

(13) If  $B!(murder)$  then  $B!(John\ murders)$ .

$\therefore$  (14)  $B!(John\ murders)$ .

This response fails because (13) does not express any disapproval of murder, or indeed any disapproval whatsoever.

### Quasi-realism to the rescue!

On Blackburn's (early) view the way to read (9)-(11) is as follows:

(15)  $B!(murder)$ .

(16)  $H![B!(murder)\&B!(John\ murders)]$ , or:  $B![B!(murder)\&\neg B!(John\ murders)]$

$\therefore$  (17)  $B!(John\ murders)$ .

Hence the person who commits himself to (15) and (16), but fails to commit himself to (17) 'has a fractured sensibility which cannot itself be an object of approval.' (Blackburn 1984, 195)

### An objection

If you are committed to  $\{p, p \rightarrow q\}$  but fail to accept  $q$  you do not *merely* suffer 'fractured sensibility'. You suffer irrationality.

Blackburn's counter-response: commitment-theoretic semantics (see Blackburn 1998).

### What's the point?

Values spread unto the world by our own minds and sensibilities. But this, Blackburn points out, does not necessarily deprive moral claims of truth-aptness. We must, however, somehow earn the right to talk about truth in ethics. Blackburn: such truth is made up of 'sentimental' material.

### Study questions

What is the Frege-Geach problem? Is it a problem only for emotivists?

Does quasi-realism improve our understanding of moral discourse?

### Further Reading

Fisher, A. *Metaethics*, ch. 6.

Miller, A. (2003), *Metaethics*, ch. 4.