

Ethical Language

- Suppose I say to you 'Burning cats for fun is wrong'.
- What contribution does the moral adjective 'wrong' make to the meaning of the utterance? Is it primarily *descriptive*, the utterance primarily describing something as having a certain property?
- If *yes* (ethical **cognitivism**), then how do we establish whether or not the thing is as described?
 - By simply observing the world?
 - By simply understanding what the utterance means?
 - By using an innate faculty of moral intuition (ethical **intuitionism**)?
- If *no* (ethical **non-cognitivism**), then what is the purpose of this utterance?

AYER'S EMOTIVISM

Ethical Language

- We have already seen that Moore was both a cognitivist and an intuitionist
- Indeed, cognitivism had been the default assumption throughout the history of philosophy
- It no longer enjoys this status, and the emergence of a view known as **emotivism** in the early 20thC deserve a great deal of credit (blame?) for this

The unverifiability of ethical statements

- Ayer believed that sentences that are not analytic(ally true/false) are factually meaningful iff verifiable
- He did not take ethical statements to be analytic
- He also endorsed Moore's Open Question argument, holding that
 - Ethical statements aren't definable in terms of statements that are verifiable through the senses (e.g. statements about sense data)
- Like Moore, he took this to entail that ethical statements aren't themselves verifiable through the senses
- Finally, against Moore, he rejected the claim that intuition could provide an alternative means of verification
- Upshot: in his view, ethical statements are factually meaningless

The unverifiability of ethical statements (ctd)

- Correction: he actually takes ethical statements to only *sometimes* fail the verifiability test, as he takes them to be ambiguous
- In the case of ‘Torturing cats for fun is wrong’:
 - **Descriptive** sense: ‘states that a certain type of conduct is repugnant to the moral sense of a particular society’ (passes test)
 - **Normative** sense: ‘expresses a moral judgement’ (fails test)
- But if ethical statements, on their normative reading, are factually meaningless, what are we doing when we assert them?

Note

- Ayer *isn't* saying that in making an ethical statement, one is *saying* that one has certain feelings: one is merely *conveying* them
- If he were, he would be a cognitivist (an ‘**orthodox subjectivist**’):

‘[A]lthough our theory of ethics might fairly be said to be radically subjectivist, it differs in a very important respect from the orthodox subjectivist theory. For the orthodox subjectivist does not deny, as we do, that the sentences of a moralizer express genuine propositions. All he denies is that they express propositions of a unique nonempirical character. His own view is that they express propositions about the speaker’s feelings. If this were so, ethical judgements clearly would be capable of being true or false. They would be true if the speaker had the relevant feelings, and false if he had not. And this is a matter which is, in principle, empirically verifiable.’

Ayer’s emotivism

- Ayer: ethical statements do not make claims about the world; rather, they firstly ‘*express*’ feelings

‘...if I say to someone, ‘You acted wrongly in stealing that money’, I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, ‘You stole that money’. In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. 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, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker’

Ayer’s emotivism (ctd)

- Secondly, according to Ayer, ethical statements have the further purpose of *inciting* feelings:

‘...ethical terms do not serve only to express feeling. They are calculated also to arouse feeling, and so to stimulate action... Thus the sentence ‘You ought to tell the truth’ may be regarded both as the expression of a certain sort of ethical feeling about truthfulness and as an expression of the command, “Tell the truth”
- Upshot: ethical statements do not bear truth values

‘If a sentence makes no statement at all, there is obviously no sense in asking whether what it says is true or false. And we have seen that sentences which simply express moral judgments do not say anything. They are pure expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood’

Note

- In a quote I gave you earlier, Ayer *does* say that when we say
‘You acted wrongly in stealing that money’
[i]t is as if [we] had said
‘You stole that money’
- If that were correct, then the assertion *would* have a truth value
- He could still, however, claim that the contribution of moral adjectives is not descriptive

STEVENSON’S EMOTIVISM

C. L. Stevenson



- Born 1908 in Ohio
- BA at Yale in English Lit. (1930), then went to study at Cambridge where he encountered Moore and Wittgenstein and began to study philosophy, obtaining a BA in philosophy (Cambridge 1933) and then a PhD (Harvard 1935)
- Assistant Prof. at Yale (1939–1946) but denied tenure, apparently because of the views aired in his *Ethics and Language* (1944)
- Associate Professor then full Professor at Michigan until 1978
- Influential figure in 20th C ethics
- Father of the well-known poet Anne Stevenson
- Died 1979 in Vermont

Stevenson’s argument

- Stevenson’s motivation for his view are grounded here:
‘These...are the requirements with which the ‘vital’ sense of ‘good’ is expected to comply : (1) goodness must be a topic for intelligent disagreement; (2) it must be ‘magnetic’ ; and (3) it must not be discoverable solely through the scientific method.’
- Stevenson argued from these criteria to emotivism by noting that emotivism’s main competitor wrt satisfying (2) satisfied neither (1) nor (3)
- Note that verificationism doesn’t play a role here; this partly explains the persistence of emotivist-like theories after the fall of verificationism

Requirement (2)

- Moral statements are ‘magnetic’ = sincere assent to them must be accompanied by a corresponding motivation
 - If I sincerely assent to ‘Torturing cats for fun is wrong’, then I *must* be motivated, to some extent, to not torture cats for fun
- This is not something well-explained by most cognitivist approaches (e.g. hedonism)
 - I could sincerely assent to ‘Torturing cats for fun would increase the total amount of happiness in the world’, without at all being moved to refrain from torturing cats for fun
- Important note: similar comments arguably apply to Moore’s approach

Requirement (1)

- It seems that people can be said to *disagree* on moral claims:
 - A: Letting in more refugees is the right thing to do.
 - B: That’s not so. Letting in more refugees is not the right thing to do.
- But on the subjectivist view, it seems that this is not so:
 - A: I prefer that we let in more refugees.
 - B: That’s not so. I prefer that we not let in more refugees.

Requirement (2) (ctd)

- One traditional cognitivist option *does* handle this reasonably well, on one incarnation: **orthodox subjectivism** (Stevenson: **interest theory**; Soames: **egoism**)
- Such theories, as we have seen, take moral statements to involve descriptive claims about the preferences of the speaker
- Example:
 - ‘It is right to tell the truth.’ \Leftrightarrow ‘I prefer for people to tell the truth.’
- Stevenson argues that it however falls prey to two further problems

Requirement (3)

- Stevenson endorses, like Ayer, Moore’s Open Question argument:
 - ‘No matter what set of scientifically knowable properties a thing may have (says Moore, in effect), you will find, on careful introspection, that it is an open question to ask whether anything having these properties is good. It is difficult to believe that this recurrent question is a totally confused one, or that it seems open only because of the ambiguity of “good”. Bather, we must be using some sense of “good” which is not definable, relevantly, in terms of anything scientifically knowable. That is, the scientific method is not sufficient for ethics.’
- Upshot: subjectivism is a non-starter (the conclusions of the argument are obviously consistent with Moore’s cognitivism, but requirement (2) takes care of the latter)

Stevenson's formulation of emotivism

- Stevenson distinguishes between two kinds of linguistic meaning:
 - Propositional** (descriptive) meaning: not explicitly defined by Stevenson, but connected with the purpose of eliciting *beliefs*
 - Emotive** meaning: '[the] tendency [of a word], arising through the history of its usage, to produce (result from) *affective responses* in people'
- Most terms, in his view, have both types of meaning (e.g. 'lazy', 'courageous') with some being extremely thin on the descriptive front (e.g. 'good', 'wrong': arguably purely emotive)

Emotivism and the three requirements

- Clearly, emotivism meets requirement (2): on this view, sincere assent to ethical statements must be accompanied by a corresponding motivation
- Requirement (3) (that empirical facts do not support ethical statements) is satisfied on the grounds that cognitivism is rejected
- But how about (1), the possibility of accounting for a sense of genuine moral disagreement? Does the proposal not face similar difficulties to that faced by subjectivism?

Stevenson's formulation of emotivism (ctd)

- Just like Ayer, Stevenson declines to provide sentences that he takes to be *equivalent* in (emotive) meaning to ethical sentences (he doesn't think there are any such candidates)
- Some useful emotivist approximations of 'Doing *x* is wrong' however:
 - 'Don't do *x*' / 'Let's not do *x*'
 - 'Boo to doing *x*!'

Ayer on emotivism and moral disagreement

- Ayer certainly thought that emotivism might be in trouble here:
 - 'There is, however, a celebrated argument against subjectivist theories *which our theory does not escape*. It has been pointed out by Moore that if ethical statements were simply statements about the speaker's feelings, it would be impossible to argue about questions of value. To take a typical example: if a man said that thrift was a virtue, and another replied that it was a vice, they would not, on this theory, be disputing with one another. One would be saying that he approved of thrift, and the other that he didn't; and there is no reason why both these statements should not be true. Now Moore held it to be obvious that we do dispute about questions of value, and accordingly concluded that the particular form of subjectivism which he was discussing was false.'

Ayer on emotivism and moral disagreement (ctd)

- Ayer's response: the above kinds of case do not point to *moral* disagreements, but rather are expressions of different preferences resulting from disagreements about matters of non-moral fact

'When someone disagrees with us about the moral value of a certain action...we do admittedly resort to argument in order to win him over to our way of thinking. But we do not attempt to show by our arguments that [our opponent] has the 'wrong' ethical feeling towards a situation whose nature he has correctly apprehended. What we attempt to show is that he is mistaken about the facts of the case. We argue that he has misconceived the agent's motive: or that he has misjudged the effects of the action, or its probable effects in view of the agent's knowledge...'

Stevenson on emotivism and moral disagreement

- Stevenson takes another line: while Ayer grants that the only disagreements there are 'disagreements in belief', Stevenson thinks that the term ought to be extended to another kind of phenomenon
- His rough analysis of the exchange:
 - A: Let's all support letting in more refugees.
 - B: On the contrary, let's not all support letting in more refugees.
- On his view the conflict between *A* and *B* is not that they are recommending beliefs that cannot both be held
- Rather, they are recommending *actions* which cannot both be followed (a 'disagreement in interest')

Ayer on emotivism and moral disagreement (ctd)

- So, in our refugees case, there is a probable disagreement underpinning the verbal exchange, but simply on such things as the economic or social impact of accepting refugees, etc.

Stevenson on emotivism and moral disagreement (ctd)

- He tells us:
 - 'We must distinguish 'disagreement in belief' (typical of the sciences) and 'disagreement in interest'. Disagreement in belief occurs when *A* believes *P* and *B* disbelieves it. Disagreement in interest occurs when *A* has a favourable interest in *X*, when *B* has an unfavourable one in it, and when neither is content to let the other's interest remain unchanged. Let me give an example of disagreement in interest. *A*: 'Let's go to a cinema tonight'. *B*: 'I don't want to do that. Let's go to the symphony'. *A* continues to insist on the cinema, *B* on the symphony. This is disagreement in a perfectly conventional sense. They can't agree on where they want to go, and each is trying to redirect the other's interest. (Note that imperatives are used in the example.)'

Stevenson on emotivism and moral disagreement (ctd)

- Furthermore:

'It is disagreement in interest which takes place in ethics. When *G* says 'This is good', and *D* says 'No, it's bad', we have a case of suggestion and counter suggestion. Each man is trying to redirect the other's interest...It is in this sense that they disagree.'

ROSS'S OBJECTION

Can emotivism scale up?

- Ross (1939): emotivism may be prima facie plausible wrt certain very *simple* moral statements, but not wrt more *complex* ones (similar point made later by Geach)
- It seems that 'killing cats for fun is wrong' has the same meaning when embedded in various constructions:
 - 'It's not the case that killing cats for fun is wrong.'
 - 'Is it case that killing cats for fun is wrong?'
 - 'If killing cats for fun is wrong, then allowing someone to kill cats for fun is wrong.'
 - 'Murray hopes that killing cats for fun is wrong.'

Can emotivism scale up? (ctd)

- But, if so, Stevenson's proposal would then yield something like:
 - 'It's not the case that let's not kill cats for fun.'
 - 'Is it case that let's not kill cats for fun?'
 - 'If let's not kill cats for fun, then let's not allow someone to kill cats for fun.'
 - 'Murray hopes that let's not kill cats for fun.'
- Not good
- Ross' conclusion: whilst ethical statements are indeed *used* to influence people's behaviour, such use doesn't exhaust their functionality (they have a primarily descriptive role)

A dilemma (ctd)

- Possible rejoinder to Ross' point: the emotivist translations suggested are not the right ones, as embedding the clause changes its meaning
- But then that the following 'argument', which appears to be valid, is actually invalid because it commits the fallacy of equivocation:
 - (1) Killing cats for fun is wrong.
 - (2) If killing cats for fun is wrong, then allowing someone to kill cats for fun is wrong (when you could easily stop them from doing so).

- (3) So, allowing someone to kill cats for fun is wrong (when you could easily stop them from doing so).

References

- Ayer, A.J. 1946: *Language, Truth, and Logic (Second Edition)*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Barnes, W.H.F. 1934: A Suggestion About Value. *Analysis* 1(3): 45-46.
- Carnap, R. 1935: *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.
- Stevenson, C.L. 1937: The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms. *Mind* 46(181): 14-31.

Next week: Quine on Logical Positivism

- Required reading:
 - Soames, S. *DoA*, Chs 16 & 17
- Recommended reading:
 - Hylton, P. 2014: Willard van Orman Quine. In E.N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2014 Edition)*.
 - Quine, W.V.O. 1951: Two Dogmas of Empiricism. *Philosophical Review* 60(1):20-43.