

Moral anti-realism: two objections¹

Metaethics is the branch of philosophy that asks about what morality is, philosophically speaking. It asks questions in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and epistemology. For example, can ethical claims be true or false? If so, are these truths objective? Are there moral properties, like being right or wrong, that are part of reality? And if there are ethical truths, how do we discover what these truths are?

Moral realism claims that there are moral properties, and these are objective - 'mind-independent' - because whether some action or state of affairs is good or bad, right or wrong, is independent of whether people believe that it has this property. Moral anti-realism denies this - there are no such properties. Different anti-realist theories disagree how we should understand moral language, e.g. whether it attempts to make claims about objective properties, but fails ('error theory'), or whether it doesn't attempt to assert truths at all ('non-cognitivism'), instead expressing our emotions ('emotivism') or simply prescribing what to do and praise ('prescriptivism'). For more on these theories, see the handouts 'Mackie's error theory', 'Emotivism' and 'Prescriptivism'. In this handout, we discuss two objections to anti-realist theories.

WHETHER MORAL ANTI-REALISM BECOMES MORAL NIHILISM

Moral nihilism is the rejection of all moral values and principles. It is the view that nothing is of moral value, that we have no moral duties. Moral anti-realism claims that there are no mind-independent moral properties, no objective moral truths, and non-cognitivist forms of anti-realism claim that morality is an expression of our emotions or attitudes. We may object that if this is so, then really there are no moral values - we invent them. Really, we have no obligation to be moral, because we have no obligation to have certain emotions or adopt certain standards of value. If moral properties are not objective, if moral judgments are not objectively true, then why accept morality at all?

Moral anti-realists can argue that this is either an unfair simplification of their theories or a straightforward misunderstanding. Error theory allows that we can have subjective moral values, and all three theories will argue that living without 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 does not imply that we should stop having moral feelings. The emotivist may still show disapproval of anyone who advocates that morality doesn't matter or is just a matter of taste. Similarly, the fact that we must adopt standards of

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 396-9

value doesn't show that we should stop making prescriptions, and we may prescribe that people live according to particular standards.

The moral nihilist can respond that this is unjustifiable. Can we really justify interfering with how other people behave - when they behave 'immorally' - just because their actions don't accord with our feelings or choices? This seems very petty. But this isn't the reason we are interfering, claims the anti-realist. It is not because it offends us, but because they are being racist or cruel or cowardly or whatever.

The difficulty here is that my taking racist discrimination as a good reason to prevent an action is itself an expression of my feelings or the standards on which I make prescriptions. For the anti-realist, moral disagreement is always eventually a stand-off between subjective points of view. For the moral realist, by contrast, that racist discrimination is a good reason to interfere with someone's action is a moral fact, based on the moral properties of racism. The moral realist claims to have the backing of reality.

MORAL PROGRESS

If there is no moral reality, we can argue, then our moral views 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? There are two responses moral anti-realists can give.

First, they can claim that there can be very real improvements in people's moral views if they become more rational. This can happen in several different ways.

1. 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 false beliefs.
2. People can become more consistent, more willing to universalise their principles. For example, Singer argues 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.
3. 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 lying. 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 moral anti-realists 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 to a particular moral point of view. Non-cognitivists will say that talk of moral progress is itself non-cognitive, an expression of someone's moral attitudes rather than a claim that can be true or false. If two people disagree over whether we have made moral progress in the last 200 years, say, this disagreement should be understood in the same way that any moral disagreement is understood. There is no special problem about how to explain moral progress.