

Moral realism: two objections from Ayer and Hume¹

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?

Cognitivism is the view that ethical language expresses ethical beliefs about how the world is. Cognitivists argue that moral judgements can be true or false, and so aim to describe the world. Furthermore, we can be mistaken about whether a moral judgement is true or false. Our thinking it is true does not make it true.

But if there are truths about morality, what kind of truths are they? Moral realism claims that good and bad are properties of situations and people, right and wrong are properties of actions. Just as people can be 5 feet tall or run fast, they can be morally good or bad. Just as actions can be done in 10 minutes or done from greed, they can be right or wrong. These moral properties are a genuine part of the world. Whether moral judgements are true or false depends on how the world is, on what properties an action, person or situation actually has.

Moral realism in the last 150 years has focused on trying to clarify the precise nature of the relation between moral properties and natural properties. This has led to two positions: moral naturalism and moral non-naturalism. Moral naturalism claims that moral properties are natural properties; moral non-naturalism claims that they are a distinct, non-natural kind of property.

In this handout, we discuss two related objections to any form of moral realism - indeed, to any form of cognitivism. They arise from considerations concerning what we can know and what moral language means.

THE ARGUMENT FROM HUME'S FORK

David Hume presents three objections to cognitivism, and so to moral realism. All three objections appear in his *Treatise of Human Nature*. We discuss just his first argument in this handout. For discussion of his other two arguments, see the handout 'Moral realism: two objections from Hume'.

Hume's fork is the claim that we can have knowledge of just two sorts of claim: relations of ideas or matters of fact. Relations of ideas can be discovered just by thinking, by recognising the truth of an analytic proposition or by deductive

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. 351-2, 363-8

reasoning. To deny a relation of ideas is to contradict oneself. Matters of fact are claims about what exists, and they are established by sense experience and causal inference.

We should add that Hume understands the faculty of knowledge as 'reason'. So because there are just two types of knowledge, reason makes just two types of judgment - judgments about relations of ideas and judgments about matters of fact. With this in place, Hume presents the following argument:

- P1. There are only two types of judgements of reason, relations of ideas and matters of fact.
- P2. Moral judgements are not relations of ideas.
- P3. Moral judgements are not matters of fact.
- C1. Therefore, moral judgements are not judgements of reason.

This raises an issue for cognitivism. If moral judgments are not judgments of reason, then according to Hume's fork, we cannot have any knowledge of them. This is because, Hume goes on to argue, moral judgments are neither true nor false, but function in some other way (non-cognitivism).

Should we accept the argument? The arguments for, and against, (P1) are arguments over whether empiricism about knowledge is true. We won't review those arguments here.

What of (P2)? Hume presents two arguments for this. First, relations of ideas are supposed to be certain - to deny them is a self-contradiction. But moral claims aren't conceptual truths, like 'black is the opposite of white', or truths of logic or mathematics, like $3 \times 5 = 30/2$. So what relations of ideas are moral claims supposed to be? Second, there is no relation of ideas that applies just to morality. Any relation that describes moral or immoral actions also applies to physical objects, but these aren't moral or immoral. Take murder, for example, which involves one thing killing another. A plant can kill another plant. There is nothing in the idea of 'killing' that gives us moral wrongness.

We can object that murder is not simply killing. It is wilful, premeditated killing. But, Hume responds, this just means that the action has a different *cause*. But the relation between cause and effect, that one thing brings about the death of another, which we describe as 'killing', remains the same. That some event has a particular cause is a matter of fact, not a relation of ideas. It is up to the person who wants to claim that moral judgements are relations of ideas to show what relations of ideas they are, and how they are unique to morality.

How about (P3)? If we claim that moral judgements are a matter of fact, we must identify *which* fact. But, Hume says,

Take any action that is agreed to be vicious—wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find the matter of fact... that you call 'vice'. However you look at it, all you'll find are certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts; those are the only matters of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you as long as you focus on the object...

Let's allow that the death was caused by an act of will. How is that the fact that it is wrong? We cannot, through empirical investigation, find the property of 'moral wrongness'. The judgment that murder is wrong doesn't state an empirical fact.

The conclusion of Hume's argument follows from his premises, i.e. the argument is valid. So if Hume successfully defends each premise, (P1), (P2) and (P3), then he has shown that moral judgments are not judgments of reason, i.e. they are neither true nor false and so cognitivism - and therefore moral realism - is false.

Discussion

To answer the objection, the moral realist needs to either deny Hume's fork or meet Hume's challenge of identifying some relation of ideas or some matter of fact that constitute moral judgments.

Non-naturalists will likely deny Hume's fork, arguing that moral intuitions are not relations of ideas in Hume's sense because they are not analytic truths. They are synthetic propositions that are self-evident and so aren't established the way that other, empirical matters of fact are. But Hume's objection puts pressure on intuitionists to say more about how this is possible.

Reductive naturalists will argue that moral judgments are matters of fact. However, it will take philosophical reasoning to show *which* matters of fact they are.

(Although it is not directly relevant to moral realism, we can also find an account of moral judgments as a relation of ideas in Kant's moral theory. We could argue that whether a maxim is universalisable or not is a relation of ideas, established by the test of contradiction. This was not a relation that Hume considered.)

A J AYER'S VERIFICATION PRINCIPLE

In the 1930s, a school of philosophy arose called logical positivism, concerned with the foundations of knowledge. It developed a criterion for when a statement is meaningful, called the principle of verifiability, also known as the verification principle. On A. J. Ayer's version, presented in *Language, Truth and Logic*, the verification principle says that a statement only has meaning if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable.

A statement is analytic if it is true or false in virtue of the meanings of the words. For example, 'Bachelors are unmarried' is analytic and true; 'Squares have three sides' is analytic and false. A statement is empirically verifiable if empirical evidence would go towards establishing that the statement is true or false. For example, if I say 'The moon is made of green cheese', we can check this by scientific investigation. If I say 'The universe has 600 trillion planets', we can't check this by scientific investigation in practice, but we can do so *in principle*. We know how to show whether it is true or false, so it is 'verifiable' even though we can't actually verify it. Furthermore, we don't need to be able to *prove* that an empirical claim is true or false. For empirical verification, it is enough for empirical evidence to raise or reduce the probability that a statement is true.

The principle can be understood as a development of Hume's fork. However, while Hume's 'fork' provides an account of what we can *know*, the verification principle is an account of what statements have *meaning*. But the verification principle defines meaning in terms of *how we can know* whether a statement is true or false. Unless there is some way of showing, at least in principle, that a statement is true or false, then it doesn't really say anything, it doesn't make a meaningful claim. The verification principle claims that the only alternative to knowing something analytically is to use empirical experience. So like Hume's fork, it defends a form of empiricism.

Ayer applies the principle to ethical language. Moral judgments, such 'murder is wrong' or 'pleasure is good', are not analytically true. This seems clear. But, he argues, empirical investigation can't show them to be true (or false) either. He agrees with Moore that 'X is wrong' cannot mean 'X would cause unhappiness' (or any other proposition substituting a natural property for 'wrong'). The open question argument shows that it is never a contradiction to say 'X would cause unhappiness, but it is right to do it nonetheless'. So Ayer agrees that moral naturalism is wrong. We can show that murder causes grief and pain, or that it is often done out of anger. But we cannot demonstrate, in the same way, that it is wrong. We can show that people pursue pleasure, but we can't show that it is good. And so we can't use empirical experience to discover what is right or wrong.

Non-naturalists, such as G E Moore, believed that moral judgements are about non-natural properties. While they are neither analytic nor empirically verifiable, they are nevertheless true or false. Ayer rejects this, and argues that we can't establish the truth or falsity of a moral claim by appealing to 'intuition', as Moore claims, unless we are able to provide some criterion for deciding between conflicting intuitions. Given the verification principle, only an empirical criterion will do. But there is no empirical test that will establish which intuition is correct and which is incorrect. (If there were, then moral properties would be natural properties again.) And so, Ayer concludes, moral judgements don't state truths or falsehoods at all and are therefore not genuinely meaningful.

Discussion

As the last sentence shows, Ayer's objection is to cognitivism. Moral realism fails because it assumes that cognitivism is true. The objection depends on the verification principle. But the principle faces a famous objection. According to the verification principle, the principle itself is meaningless. The claim that 'a statement only has meaning if it is analytic or can be verified empirically' is not analytic and cannot be verified empirically. But if the principle of verification is meaningless, then what it claims cannot be true. So if the principle is true, it is meaningless, and so not true. Obviously, if it is false, it is false. Either way it is not true. Therefore, it does not give us any reason to believe that ethical language is meaningless.

Ayer claims that the principle is intended as *a definition*, not an empirical hypothesis about meaning. In other words, it is intended to reflect and clarify our understanding of 'meaningful' uses of words. Ayer accepts that the principle isn't

obviously an accurate criterion of 'literal meaning', but that is why he provides arguments in specific cases, such as ethical language, which support it.

But in that case, the verification principle is only as convincing as the arguments that are intended to show that it is the right definition of 'meaningful'. If we do not find the arguments convincing, the principle provides no independent support. Ayer accepts Moore's rejection of naturalism. This still leaves Ayer's challenge to Moore's intuitionism hanging: can intuitionism - or any form of realism - provide an account of how we can decide between conflicting intuitions?