Emotivism[1]

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? In this handout, we discuss one theory that seeks to answer these questions: emotivism.

Emotivism claims that moral judgements *express* the feeling or attitude of approval or disapproval. To say that 'Murder is wrong' is to express one's disapproval of murder. Ethical language is 'emotive'. This is a 'non-cognitivist' theory.

NON-COGNITIVISM AND MORAL ANTI-REALISM

Non-cognitivist theories of ethics claim that ethical language does not try to describe the world and cannot be true or false. Moral judgements do not express beliefs, but some other, non-cognitive mental state. Different non-cognitivist theories disagree on exactly what moral judgments express, but they agree that moral language does not function to state facts.

Non-cognitivist theories are anti-realist. Since moral judgments do not describe the world and are neither true nor false, then there are no mind-independent moral properties that would make moral judgments true or false. For example, to say 'racism is wrong' is not to claim that racism has any kind of property. It is, instead, according to emotivism, to express disapproval of racism.

EMOTIVISM AND SUBJECTIVISM

In one sense, emotivism claims that morality is 'subjective'. However, there is an important distinction between emotivism and the theory that is called 'subjectivism'. Subjectivism claims that moral judgements *assert* or *report* approval or disapproval, and there is a difference between expressing disapproval and asserting it. We can understand this better by looking at what subjectivism claims, and then contrasting it with emotivism.

One form of subjectivism claims that to say '*X* is wrong' is simply to say that 'X is generally disapproved of'. But this can't be right, because it is not a contradiction to say 'Most people approve of *X*, but *X* is wrong nonetheless'. For example, racism

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[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. 382-6, 389-96

has been very common historically. We may argue that 'racism is wrong' even while acknowledging that most people approved of it.

A second form of subjectivism, 'speaker subjectivism', claims that the meaning of '*X* is wrong' is something like 'I disapprove of *X*' or again 'I think *X* is wrong'. This is a (psychological) fact about oneself, so the statement can be true or false. Speaker subjectivism, therefore, is an unusual form of reductive moral naturalism: the facts that make moral judgements true are facts about the individual speaker's mind.

Speaker subjectivism entails that we cannot make mistakes about what is right or wrong. If I say 'Murder is right', I am simply stating 'I approve of murder'. If I am sincere, then I do approve of murder, and so murder is, indeed, right ('for me', we might say). But, we can object, we naturally think that people *can* make mistakes about morality. Speaker subjectivism makes no sense of deliberation, trying to *figure out* what is right or wrong. Why should I bother to deliberate? *Whatever* I come to feel will be right!

By contrast, emotivism claims that moral judgements do not express *any* kind of truth or falsehood, because they are not cognitive. Where subjectivism is a form of cognitivism, emotivism is a form of non-cognitivism.

This enables emotivism to explain, and respond to, the objections to subjectivism above. To say that 'most people approve of racism' does not contradict 'racism is wrong', because 'racism is wrong' doesn't state something true or false. It doesn't *state* anything at all. Instead, it expresses the speaker's disapproval of racism. And we cannot be infallible in the sense of getting the answer right; there are no moral truths.

WHY EMOTIVISM?

In *Language, Truth and Logic*, A J Ayer argues that moral judgments do not make claims that are true or false as they are neither analytic nor can they be verified empirically. But, according to his 'verification principle', these are the only two ways in which we can meaningfully make claims about what is true or false. So he concludes that moral language does not make meaningful claims about what is true or false. Instead, he argues, moral judgment express feelings:

> If I say to someone, "You acted wrongly in stealing that money" … 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'. Through expressing our feelings, it also aims to arouse feelings in others, and so get them to act in certain ways.

Ayer's defence of emotivism depends on the verification principle. However, defending the central claim that moral judgments express emotions, rather than state facts, does not depend on the principle of verification. For example, in *Facts and Values*, Charles Stevenson argues that moral words have emotive meanings, which are not descriptive. The central ethical terms – 'right', 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad' – only have emotive meanings, of expressing approval or disapproval. But many moral terms ('steal', 'honesty', 'respect') have both descriptive and emotive

meanings. To be told that someone is 'honest' is to learn something about them. For instance, they can't be honest while lying frequently! And whether someone lies frequently is a matter of fact. But the term 'honest' isn't just a description; it also has an emotive meaning of approval.

The emotive meaning of moral judgments is related to their use. The purpose of moral judgements is not to state facts, but to influence how we behave through expressions of approval and disapproval. '*X* is good', and other moral judgements, are used both to express the speaker's attitudes and to influence the attitudes of other people. Moral terms are 'dynamic', and the main purpose of making moral judgements is to influence other people's emotions and behaviour.

One advantage of emotivism is that it easily explains how and why it is that moral judgements motivate us. If moral language were just descriptive, stating how things are, why would that get us to act in certain ways? We need to care. And what we care about is captured in our attitudes to the world. Emotivism connects caring, approving, disapproving, with the very meaning of ethical words.

EMOTIVISM AND MORAL LANGUAGE
Is emotivism's analysis of the meaning of moral language correct? We can argue that it is not.

First, being emotive and influencing people's attitudes is something that lots of non-moral language does as well, e.g. advertising. So we will need to say more to distinguish morality from advertising.

Second, does moral language always function to influence others? We may express our moral attitudes to others who already agree with them or that we know to be indifferent to our views – so influencing their attitudes is not the purpose. But this doesn't show that we aren't expressing a moral judgement.

Third, moral language isn't always particularly or necessarily emotive. The key moral terms 'good', 'right', 'wrong' and 'bad' may arouse emotions in others or express ours, but again, this depends on context. We do not think that it is always good to arouse emotions in others on moral issues, especially by using emotive language. Moral discussion can be, and sometimes should be, dispassionate.

But how strong are these objections? The purpose of moral language, says emotivism, is to influence what people do. Without this, we would have no moral language or judgements at all. However, that doesn't mean that it always has to be used for this purpose. This is normal – many types of language can be used in 'non-standard' ways in different situations. For example, it is possible to use fact-stating language to insult someone; e.g. 'You have a big nose'. That it is an emotive statement on this occasion doesn't make the meaning of the sentence 'emotive' – it states a factual claim. Likewise, language which is standardly emotive can be deployed without the intention to arouse emotion or influence action. The objections don't show that moral language isn't 'essentially' emotive, only that it isn't always emotive.

However, it is worth noting that cognitivist theories don't face this objection in the same way. According to cognitivist theories, moral judgments are statements of fact. The meaning of moral judgments is given by what would make them true. So we can understand what 'murder is wrong' means by understanding what it is for murder to be wrong. Now, we can use the claim 'murder is wrong' to do other things, such as influence people's behaviour or complain or express anger or…. But these effects don't give us the meaning of moral judgments. The many uses of moral language don't threaten cognitivist theories the way that they threaten emotivism.

EMOTIVISM ON MORAL REASONING

If I say 'abortion is wrong' and you say 'abortion is right', according to emotivism, it seems that I am just expressing my disapproval of it and you are expressing your approval. I'm just saying 'Boo! to abortion' and you're saying 'Hurrah! for abortion'. I am also trying to influence your attitudes, and you are trying to influence mine. But we are not doing so rationally, or by appealing to facts about what is good or bad. Trying to influence people without reasoning is just a form of manipulation. Emotivism reduces moral argument to propaganda. While sometimes moral argument might take this form, we do usually take ourselves to be reasoning about what is right, not simply mouthing off.

We can put the point another way. If, as emotivism claims, moral judgements and arguments are about influencing people's attitudes, then a good moral argument will be one that is effective. That is all. There is no other, e.g. rational, criterion by which we might judge that it is a good or bad argument. Whatever I appeal to, to make you change your mind, no matter how irrelevant or far-fetched, if it makes you change your mind, it is a good argument. This is highly unsatisfactory.

Ayer responds that moral arguments are not arguments over moral judgements, but over facts: 'we do not attempt to show by our arguments that [the other person] 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.' When arguing over animal rights, say, we are constantly drawing facts to each other's attention. I point out how much animals suffer in factory farms. You point out how much more sophisticated human beings are than animals. I point out that it is unkind to kill animals for food. You respond that people are not motivated by unkindness, and indeed, farmers can be very kind to the animals when alive. And so on. But if we both agree on the facts, but still disagree morally, there is nothing left to discuss, says Ayer, no further argument can take place. Moral judgements always presuppose a system of values; but no arguments for these values can be given.

But there are two objections to this response from Ayer. First, if you and I disagree about a moral judgement, and moral judgements have no truth value, are we right to say that there is a 'disagreement' here at all? Isn't a disagreement when you think some claim is true and I think it is false? If so, then moral disagreement is only possible if cognitivism is true, since only cognitivism says that moral claims can be true or false.

Second, emotivism does not give us an adequate account of deliberation. If you are unsure about whether something, lying say, is right or wrong, we can understand that you are trying to work out what your attitude towards lying should be. But why can't you settle the question of whether lying is right or wrong by simply noting whatever attitude you already have towards it? If emotivism is right, it seems that thinking hard about the question is irrational.

We can put the point another way: emotivism doesn't explain how someone can rationally change their mind on a moral issue. First, they have one attitude, then they have another. But what reason do they have to change their mind?