



The case for non-cognitivism

- According to moral realism, when we use moral language to express our moral attitudes, we express beliefs that purport to describe reality (cognitivism) and some of these beliefs turn out to be true. (Our moral attitudes are both truth-apt and sometimes true).
- Moral realists are committed to a controversial psychological thesis and a controversial metaphysical thesis.
- Non-cognitivists reject realism because they reject the idea that our moral attitudes are truth-apt. Instead, the moral attitudes we express when we use the language of morality (e.g., 'right', 'wrong', 'required') are non-cognitive states (e.g., desire, emotion, prescriptions) that are not truth-apt.
- Error-theorists (next week) reject realism because they reject the idea that our moral beliefs could correctly describe reality as containing things that oblige us to act in certain ways. (Error-theorists are cognitivists, so they agree with the moral realists about moral psychology.)

The Humean Theory of Motivation

According to the Humean theory of motivation (HTM):

Whenever someone is motivated to act, they have a motivating reason to act that way that consists of a belief and an independent/pre-existing desire. (Specifically, they will be motivated to X if they have a motivating reason to X where that consists of (i) a desire to Y; (ii) a belief that X-ing is an effective way to Y.



Why be a Humean about motivation?

(P1) All beliefs concern analytic or synthetic propositions.

(P2) No belief in an analytic proposition can motivate us to act on its own (e.g., the belief that all bachelors are unmarried adult males will not motivate you to act in any way at all).

(P3) No belief in any synthetic proposition can motivate us to act on its own (e.g., if you are indifferent to the causes and the effects, learning that such and such a cause is responsible for such and such an effect will not motivate you to act).

(C) No beliefs, whether they concern analytic or synthetic propositions, can motivate you to act on their own.

When you are motivated to act, your motivation will depend upon further features of your mental life (e.g., your wants, desires, emotions, fears, etc.).

Smith on the HTM

- The Humean theory of motivation is a theory of motivating reasons. It states that such reasons consist of combinations of belief and desire. It is important to distinguish motivating reasons from other sorts of reasons, such as normative reasons (sometimes called 'justifying reasons'). Recall from last lecture that the normative has to do with the good/bad or right/wrong. Whereas motivating reasons explain why it is that someone performed an action, normative reasons help explain whether something counts in favor or against some action.
- Suppose that the hotel is on fire, but I am completely unaware of this fact. I could jump from my sixth floor window into the cold river below and escape the fire, but if I were to do so, you would not explain my action by reference to the fire or some desire I had not to be burnt to a crisp. If, however, I did jump, there would be something that counted in favour of jumping. If I jumped, I'd live another day. If I stay, I'll be roasted.
- Suppose Audrey and Coop both know that there will be dancing at the party. Audrey loves to dance. Coop hates dancing, but loves Audrey. If we wanted to explain why Audrey was at the party and Coop was at the party, we wouldn't cite their beliefs about the dancing. Presumably, Audrey went (in part) because of a desire to dance and Coop because of a desire to be where Audrey is.
- At the party, Audrey grabs a bottle of petrol, a handful of limes, some tonic, and mixes Coop a "Bernie". Coop thinks that she's handing him a gin and tonic. It would be appropriate for an outside observer to say that Coop has no reason to drink the stuff, but certainly there's an explanation as to why he does. We can explain his action by reference to his beliefs and desires, but Smith thinks there's no (normative) reason to drink the stuff.
- For our purposes, we can say that motivating reasons explain why an agent performed an act of a certain type (i.e., they are elements of a psychological explanation of behaviour). Normative reasons explain whether anything counted in favour/against performing an act of that type (i.e., they are pros and cons).



The Humeans say that role of reason or belief is not to move us to act. This is the role of passion or desire. Belief's role is to guide or steer us in effective ways when we pursue our desires.

Smith on the HTM

Why does Smith accept the HTM? He says, "there will be only one reason to believe the Humean's theory ... and that is that the Humean's theory is alone able to make sense of motivation as the pursuit of a goal. My reason for believing this is relatively simple--it seems to follow from a proper conception of desire."

What are desires?

(a) On the phenomenological conception, they are feelings of which we are aware. The "violent passions" well represented on the covers of romantic novels. The thought that desires so understood is always present when we are motivated to act does not ring true.

(b) On the functional conception, they are states of mind (that might not have any distinctive phenomenology) with a certain direction of fit.

Direction of fit

Let us consider a man going round a town with a shopping list in his hand. Now it is clear that the relation of this list to the things he actually buys is one and the same whether his wife gave him the list or it is his own list; and that there is a different relation where a list is made by a detective following him about. If he made the list itself, it was an expression of intention; if his wife gave it to him, it has the role of an order. What then is the identical relation to what happens, in the order and the intention, which is not shared by the record? It is precisely this: if the list and the things that the man actually buys do not agree, and if this and this alone constitutes a mistake, then the mistake is not in the list but in the man's performance (if his wife were to say: "Look, it says butter and you have bought margarine", he would hardly replay: "What a mistake!" we must put that right" and alter the word on the list to "margarine"); whereas if the detective's record and what the man actually buys do not agree, then the mistake is in the record.



Desire, belief, and direction of fit

Smith says that states of desire have a certain functional role--the desire to X is understood as a state that grounds various dispositions. Beliefs also have a functional role and can be understood as states that ground various dispositions. These states differ (in part) because the dispositions they ground differ.

Someone who desires a cigarette, for example, is disposed to reach for one when one believes one is in reach. Someone who believes a cigarette is within reach is not disposed to reach for it simply by virtue of having this belief. Beliefs aim to fit the world; desires aim to modify the world to fit them.

Smith's argument for the HTM

(P1) If you have a motivating reason (say, to flip a switch), you have a goal (e.g., to turn out the lights).

(P2) If you have a goal (e.g., to turn out the lights), you are in a state of mind that the world must fit (i.e., if the world did not fit your mind, your goal would not be achieved).

(P3) If you are in a state of mind that the world must fit, you have a desire (e.g., if you have the goal of shutting off the light, you either desire the lights to be off or take yourself to have some further desire that would be satisfied if the lights were off).

(C) If you have a motivating reason (e.g., to flip a switch), you have some desire.

The upshot?

Remember from last time that this argument provides one of the main motivations for non-cognitivism:

(P1) If moral judgments expressed belief rather than some non-cognitive attitude (e.g., desire), Smith on the HTM would be no necessary connection between moral judgment and motivation [HTM].

(P2) There is, however, a necessary connection between moral judgment and motivation [JMI].

(C) Moral judgments express non-cognitive attitudes, not just belief.

In light of Smith's arguments for the HTM, we seem to be just a bit closer to undermining cognitivism.

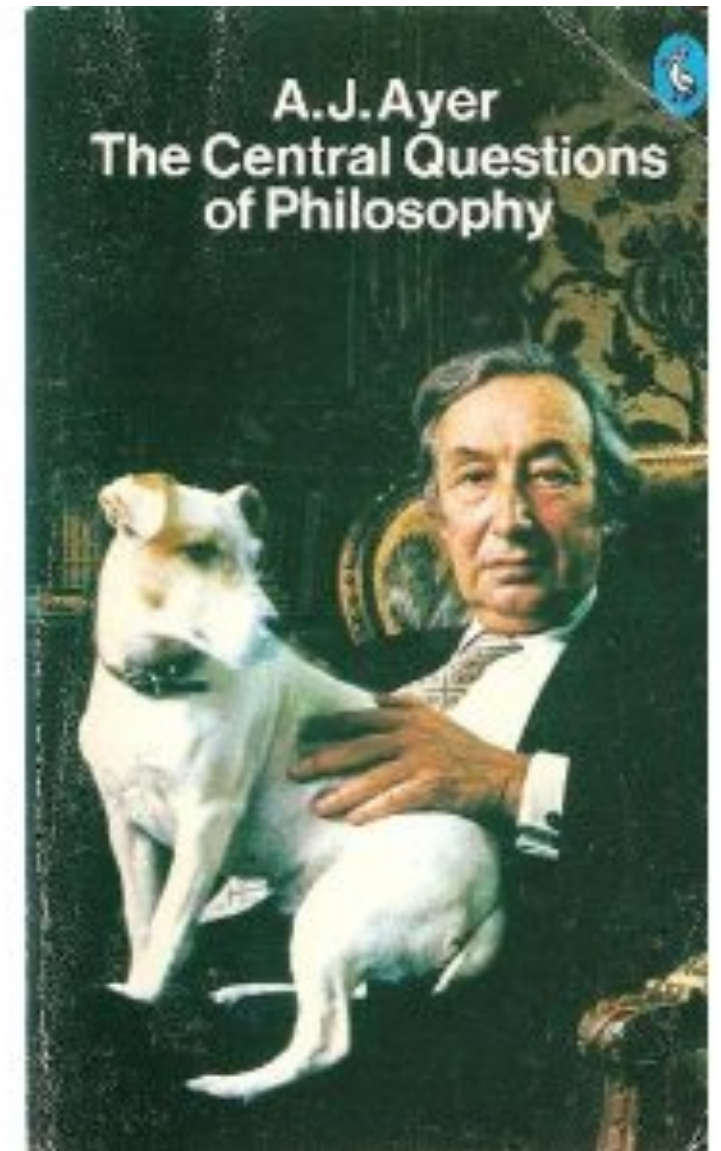
Arguments for non-cognitivism

- The motivation argument: cognitivism is incompatible with the conjunction of HTM and JMI.
- The logical positivist's arguments

Ayer's verificationism

In *Language, Truth, and Logic*, Ayer defended the verificationist view:

(V) S is a meaningful sentence (or "cognitively significant") iff: (a) either S or $\sim S$ is verifiable or (b) either S or $\sim S$ is analytic.



Are moral claims meaningless?

Ayer's view does seem to imply that value statements are cognitively meaningless and this seems to trouble him:

There is still one objection to be met before we can claim to have justified our view that all synthetic propositions are empirical hypotheses. The objection is based on the common supposition ... that 'statements of value' are genuine synthetic propositions, but that they cannot with any show of justice be represented as hypotheses, which are used to predict the course of our sensations; and, accordingly, that the existence of ethics and aesthetics as branches of speculative knowledge presents an insuperable objection to our radical empiricist thesis. In the face of this objection, it is our business to give an account of 'judgments of value' (63).

Why think that moral claims are cognitively meaningless? Ayer considers the suggestion that we "reduce" moral sentences to non-moral sentences (think about the way we can reduce talk of the "average person" to talk about collections of people). A utilitarian will define "rightness" in terms of pleasure and a subjectivist will define it in terms of what the speaker approves of:

According to U, 'x is right' is true iff x produces at least as good a balance of pleasure over pain as any alternative to x-ing.

According to S, 'x is right' is true iff x is generally approved of.

If either U or S were true, moral language could be reduced to factual language and Ayer could regard it as cognitively meaningful. Alas, Ayer thinks that since it is not self-contradictory to say, 'x is right, but x does not produce as great a balance of pleasure over pain as its alternatives', 'x is right' cannot mean what U says it does. (Similar problems arise for S).

If there is no reduction possible and moral claims are meaningful, then moral sentences would be both meaningful and unverifiable. Ayer rejects this idea, so he is driven to say that sentences that contain moral language are (strictly speaking) cognitively meaningless. In spite of this, they play an important role.

What do moral terms do?

Consider three sentences:

(1) You took that watch that did not belong to you.

(2) It was wrong to take that watch that did not belong to you.

(3) It was illegal to take that watch that did not belong to you.

It is clear that (1) and (3) are logically related but differ in meaning. What about (1) and (2)? For Ayer, 'wrong' does not add new meaning to (1), but it nevertheless serves a purpose:

The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. Thus 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 ... adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings of the speaker.

Emotivism

According to the emotivist, we use moral language to express emotions or feelings (i.e., emote). Such emotions are not truth-apt in the way that beliefs are. Sadness is neither true nor false. Neither is anger or disgust.

Whereas there seems (to the Humeans, at least) to be no necessary connection between belief and motivation, there does seem to be some internal connection between emotions and feelings and motivation. So, one reason you might prefer emotivism to cognitivism is that it does a better job explaining why it seems there is an internal connection between moral judgment and motivation.

A common mistake is to think of emotivism as the view that the moral judgment, "It was wrong to take the watch" means "I dislike that you took the watch" (or something to that effect). This is a mistake. Using Ayer's argument from before, suppose I say, "Even if contrary to fact I had no feelings whatever concerning theft, it would be wrong for you to steal watches". This might be true, it might be false, but it is certainly not self-contradictory in the way that, say, "Even if I had no feelings whatever towards theft, I would dislike it if you stole something". Expressing how you feel is not the same as describing what your feelings are. (Think about cheering your team vs. describing yourself as someone who cheers. The former expresses a feeling, but the latter does not.)

The problem of disagreement

- Objection 1: We often disagree about moral matters. When we disagree, however, we have incompatible attitudes. (When we disagree about what tomorrow's weather will be, we both have beliefs about what tomorrow's weather will be and these beliefs are incompatible.) According to the emotivist, moral judgments express attitudes that are not truth-apt. As such, they cannot be incompatible. As such, moral disagreement would be impossible on the emotivist view.
- Reply: Can't we account for the appearance of disagreement in terms of differences in emotions? If you dislike intensely beets, you might think that there's some extended sense in which such a feeling is incompatible with a love for beets. So, if I disapprove of public hangings and you wish there were more of them, perhaps we disagree in this sense--our non-cognitive attitudes are such that my attitude is the sort that would prevent me from being in yours and vice-versa.

The Frege-Geach problem

A more serious problem has to do with Ayer's suggestion that the point of using moral language is to express how you feel. Ayer's suggestion seems to be this:

Ayer's Performativism: In using moral language (e.g., 'wrong', 'bad'), I perform the act of expressing disapproval.

In asserted contexts (e.g., where I say, "You shouldn't have hit him!") it is plausible that I will express how I feel. So far, so good.

What about unasserted contexts? Consider:

(1) If infanticide is wrong, abortion is wrong.

In asserting (1), I don't assert that infanticide is wrong and don't express my disapproval of infanticide. Yet, according to Ayer, we explain what 'infanticide is wrong' means in terms of expressing disapproval (which we don't do). Without an account of what 'infanticide is wrong' means in unasserted contexts, we cannot explain the force of these two arguments:

(A1) If infanticide is wrong, abortion is wrong. Abortion is not wrong. Thus, neither is infanticide.

(A2) If infanticide is wrong, abortion is wrong. Infanticide is wrong. Thus, abortion is wrong.

Frege-Geach (cont.)

If an argument is valid (as the arguments just sketched seemed to be), then the meanings of the terms that figure in the premises and conclusion have to remain invariant. Otherwise, the argument equivocates. Consider:

(P1) All politicians are snakes.

(P2) Snakes have no legs.

(C) Politicians have no legs. [From Jim Pryor]

(P1) God is love.

(P2) Love is blind.

(P3) Ray Charles is blind.

(C) Ray Charles is God. [From a bathroom wall]

We can see these arguments have no force when we see that the meaning of key terms changes as we move through the argument, but it seems that our moral arguments from the previous slide have force. Can the non-cognitivist explain why it seems these arguments have force? If so, they need to provide an account of the meaning of moral language in unasserted contexts.

What's next?

The most straightforward way to account for the intuition that our moral arguments are valid is to say that we use our moral language to express beliefs in propositions that can be evaluated in terms of truth and falsity. If moral judgments do express beliefs that are truth-apt, cognitivism is true. Cognitivists need to address the motivational argument for non-cognitivism discussed earlier. Moreover, moral realists need to address a persistent metaphysical worry. Ayer might be right to reject the idea that moral properties are natural properties and he might be right to reject the idea that moral properties are non-natural properties. Perhaps the lesson to take from this is simply that there are no properties that are moral properties and 'good' fails to pick out any property at all. We'll turn to look at arguments for error-theory next.