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Subjectivism

Ethics

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2 Course Evaluation



<https://eval.uni-bayreuth.de/unizensus/de/sl/1STuD57uzZ98>

3 Today

- I. Metaethics
- II. Noncognitivism
- III. Moral Relativism
- IV. Error Theory

Introduction to **Metaethics**

5 First-Order and Second-Order Claims

- In normative ethics, we consider **first-order** claims
 - Murder is wrong
 - Welfare is good
 - An action is right just in case it maximises utility
- In metaethics, we ask **second-order** claims, such as:
 - when we say that murder is wrong, are we saying something about the world?
 - Is goodness a natural property such as being tall or being green?
 - How can anyone know, or be justified in believing, that murder is wrong?

6 Metaethics

Metaethics covers several areas of philosophy:

- **Philosophy of Language:** what is the meaning and function of moral statements?
- **Philosophy of Mind:** what type of mental state are moral judgments?
- **Metaphysics:** are there moral facts, and where in the world are they located?
- **Epistemology:** can we know moral claims, and if so, how?

7 Objectivism and Subjectivism

- **Objectivism** is the combination of three claims:
 1. **Cognitivism.** Moral concepts and judgments aim to be true
 2. **Truth.** Some moral claims are true
 3. **Universality.** If moral claims are true, they are true for everyone
- We will deal with three theories which can be broadly classified as ‘subjectivist’
 - Non-cognitivism denies (1)
 - Error theory denies (2)
 - Relativism denies (3)

(‘Subjectivism’ and ‘Objectivism’ are not very precise labels—we will learn better ones!)

8 Analogy: Atheism

- Consider **objectivism** about the existence of God:
 1. **Cognitivism.** When we talk about God, we attempt to say something true
 2. **Truth.** At least some (positive) claims about God are true
 3. **Universality.** If any claim about God is true, then it is true for everyone
(Objectivism doesn't say **which** claims about God are true, only that some are.)
- Correspondingly, we can imagine three types of religious scepticism
 1. **The non-cognitivist atheist.** When people talk about God, they do not aim to say anything true, or talk about the world: religious talk merely expresses warm social feelings
 2. **The non-existence atheist.** All (positive) religious claims are false
 3. **The relativist atheist.** All religious claims are only true relative to a specific person or tradition

Discussion

Any questions?

Non-Cognitivism

11 Linguistic and Psychological Definitions

- Defined through the philosophy of language:
 - **Linguistic Cognitivism** (Descriptivism). Moral terms (like ‘ought’, ‘wrong’, ‘good’) are meant to represent features of the world. Moral sentences are true or false.
 - **Linguistic Non-Cognitivism** (Expressivism). Moral terms express mental states of the speaker. Moral sentences cannot be true or false.
- Defined through the philosophy of mind:
 - **Psychological Cognitivism**. Moral judgments, understood as psychological entities, are beliefs or similar to beliefs.
 - **Psychological Non-Cognitivism**. Moral judgments are not beliefs or similar to beliefs.

12 Truth-aptness

- The following claims are all **truth-apt** – they are true or false:
 - Berlin is the capital of Germany
 - Hanover is the capital of Germany
 - Bruce Willis is riding a unicorn in North Korea
 - There is an odd number of stars in the universe
 - In the museum, there is a sign saying ‘Please do not touch the paintings’
- The following claims are **not truth-apt** – they **cannot** be true or false:
 - Monkey greenly fishes Chicago
 - Come on now, Charlie!
 - Yay spinach!
 - Please do not touch the paintings

The expressivist claims that moral sentences fall into the second category

Exercise

Which of the following claims are truth-apt?

1. “The Earth orbits the Sun.”
2. “Come on, hurry up!”
3. “I have strong feelings about spinach.”
4. “Is it raining?”
5. “Our plan is to have no alcohol at the wedding reception.”
6. “Let’s not have alcohol at the wedding reception.”
7. “I feel cold.”
8. “Harry Potter went to Slytherin House.”

14 Variants of Expressivism

Expressivists agree that moral sentences are not truth-apt, but express something
But what exactly do moral sentences express instead?

- **Emotivism:** Moral sentences express emotions (Ayer)
 - Saying 'Murder is wrong' is like 'BOO! Murder'
- **Prescriptivism:** Moral sentences express imperatives (Hare)
 - Saying 'Murder is wrong' is like 'Do not murder!'
- **Norm-expressivism:** Moral sentences express favouring norms (Gibbard)
 - Saying 'Murder is wrong' is like 'Let us make it a rule not to murder'

15 Non-Cognitivism versus Subjectivist Cognitivism

Consider ‘Murder is wrong’

- The non-cognitivist claims that this sentence, when uttered, **expresses** disapproval of murder, but is neither true or false
- This claim has to be distinguished from
 - **Subjectivist Cognitivism**. The meaning of the claim ‘Murder is wrong’ is ‘I (the speaker) disapprove of murder’
 - According to subjectivist cognitivism, ‘murder is wrong’ is true just in case the speaker believes it
 - Subjectivist cognitivism does not seem very plausible; people who say ‘murder is wrong’ do not merely make a descriptive claim about their own beliefs
 - Someone who says ‘murder is wrong’ does not seem to be speaking about their own beliefs

16 Direction of Fit

We can classify mental states according to their **direction of fit**

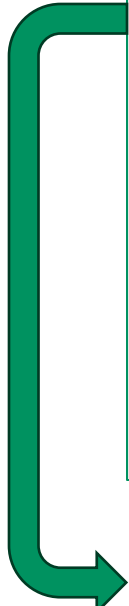
- **World → Mind** direction of fit
 - a mental state which is about the world
 - if the world turns out to be otherwise, our mental states are in some sense wrong
 - Example: **beliefs**, knowledge, sensory experience
 - Analogy (Anscombe): the inventory of a store
- **Mind → World** direction of fit
 - a mental state which describes a pattern **for** the world
 - if the world turns out to be otherwise, the world is in some sense wrong
 - Example: intentions, **desires**, wishes, wants, plans, preferences
 - Analogy (Anscombe): a shopping list

The psychological non-cognitivist claims that moral judgments fall into the second category: moral judgments are similar to desires, wishes, plans, etc.

17 The Argument from Motivation

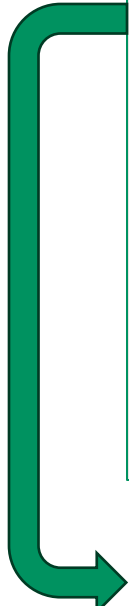
1. If a person judges that it is morally right to do X, then ceteris paribus, this person is motivated to do X (**Judgment Internalism**)
2. A belief that it is morally right to X *alone* cannot motivate someone to do X; one also needs an appropriate desire (**Humeanism**)
3. If moral judgments are beliefs, then judging that it is morally right to X alone does not motivate one to do X (from 2 and the definition of cognitivism)
4. Thus, moral judgments are not beliefs (from 1, 3 and modus tollens)

18 Judgment Internalism

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- Contrast empirical judgments ('I am sitting in this room') with moral judgments ('It is good that I am learning ethics')
- It would **not** be odd to form the empirical judgment but not be motivated in any particular way; but this seems different for moral judgments
- The connection does not **guarantee** that one will act in the relevant way

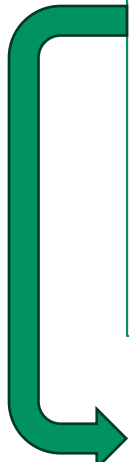
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What about amoralists—people who do not really ‘feel the pull’ of morality?

- Response 1. Amoralists do not really make moral judgments
- Response 2. We limit judgment internalism to people with ordinary moral and cognitive faculties

20 Humeanism

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1. If a person judges that it is morally right to do X, then *ceteris paribus*, this person is motivated to do X (**Judgment Internalism**)
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- Humeanism claims that motivation comes from the combination of a desire and a belief—e.g., ‘I want to learn philosophy’ (desire), ‘These lectures allow me to learn philosophy’ (belief) → ‘I want to listen to these lectures’
- The **mere** belief ‘These lectures allow me to learn philosophy’ would not be sufficient for you to be motivated to be here!

Discussion

Is the Argument from Motivation convincing?
What might one respond?

22 The Argument from Naturalism

Naturalism: Only natural things exist—i.e., things discoverable by natural science, such as atoms, molecules, plants, humans, etc.

- Non-Cognitivism is compatible with naturalism
 - Moral claims express mental states, and these mental states are ‘within the universe’
 - We can use evolutionary biology, anthropology etc. to explain why people have these mental states
- Cognitivism seems to be incompatible with naturalism
 - Moral claims express beliefs, and beliefs make a claim about the world
 - Thus, if a cognitivist says that murder is wrong, they propose that a quality of moral wrongness exists in the world
 - Such a quality seems to be not natural (but more on this next week!), and cannot be understood or explained by the natural sciences
- Inference to the best explanation: non-cognitivism is true

23 The Frege-Geach Problem

- Observation: Moral claims stand in logical relations to each other
 - (1) Animals have moral status.
 - (2) If animals have moral status, then eating meat is wrong.
 - (3) Eating meat is wrong.
- If moral judgments are beliefs, then this is easy to explain: we can just use standard rules of logical inference
- But the non-cognitivist does not think that moral judgments are beliefs; so they have extra explaining to do
- **Basic Problem:** on the surface level, moral claims have logical structure; but the non-cognitivist claims that on the deep level, moral claims are non-cognitive

24 The Frege-Geach Problem

- The non-cognitivist must tell us, for each moral sentence, what kind of attitude it expresses
 - Easy in simple cases: “Murder is wrong” expresses “BOO! Murder”
 - Imagine we have a BOO! and HOORAY! as basic operators
- But what about contexts where simple sentences are **embedded**?
 - Consider again (2) “If animals have moral status, then it is wrong to eat meat”
 - This **cannot** be reconstructed as “BOO! Eating meat”, because the sentence does not express disapproval of eating meat
 - It can also **not** be reconstructed as “HOORAY! Animals”
- **First Problem:** the non-cognitivist must offer us some analysis of complex sentences in which simple moral sentences are embedded
(The cognitivist has no problem here, because they can use standard compositional semantics.)

25 The Frege-Geach Problem

- Imagine that there is a higher-order BOO! operator, and we can reconstruct (2) as
 - (2*) BOO! to [(HOORAY! Animal status) and (HOORAY! Eating animals)]
 - This is a complex non-cognitive state: I disapprove of the combination of approving animal status but nonetheless approving of eating animals
- So now we can reconstruct the previous argument in this way
 - (1*) HOORAY! Animal status
 - (2*) BOO! to [(HOORAY! Animal status) and (HOORAY! Eating animals)]
 - (3*) BOO! Eating animals
- **Second Problem.** This reconstruction cannot explain that the conclusion (3) derives from the premises (1) and (2) by logical necessity
 - There is no logical error if someone has emotions (1*) and (2*) but not (3*)
 - Blackburn: such a person experiences a ‘fractured sensibility’, does not live up their own commitments; but that’s not the same as making a logical mistake!

26 The Frege-Geach Problem

- An Analogy
 - Imagine that you dislike all people who make animals suffer
 - But you do not disapprove of Jeremy, who likes to buy and wear fur coats
 - You are making some kind of mistake, but would you be violating **rules of logic**?
- To solve the problem, non-cognitivists have advocated sophisticated ways for aligning moral sentences and non-cognitive attitudes

Questions?

Relativism

29 Relativism

Descriptive Relativism (DR). Different societies, cultures, historical periods, people (etc.) have deeply incompatible moral beliefs, practices, norms (etc.)

- It is not obvious whether DR is true; there is also much cross-cultural agreement
- This is merely an empirical observation! Nothing yet follows!

Metaethical Relativism (MR). There are no universal moral truths. All moral claims are only true **relative to** a specific society, culture, historical period, person (etc.).

- ‘true relative to’ cannot mean ‘believed by’, or MR collapses into DR
- ‘true relative to’ can also not mean ‘differing by context’ (next slide)

30 Contextualism

Utilitarianism (U). An action is morally right if it maximises aggregate utility.

→ **Applied Judgment (A).** In contemporary conditions of economic affluence, infanticide for economic reasons is never morally justified

→ **Applied Judgment (B).** In Stone Age conditions of extreme survival challenges, infanticide for economic reasons is sometimes morally justified

Ethical Contextualism (EC). What is morally right in one context can be morally wrong in another context.

But EC does **not** entail MR. The utilitarian can believe that U, A and B are all non-relatively true: one can accept EC and reject MR

31 From Descriptive to Metaethical Relativism?

Descriptive Relativism (DR). Different societies, cultures, historical periods, people (etc.) have deeply incompatible moral beliefs, practices, norms (etc.)

Intermediate Premise (1). If people have deeply incompatible beliefs about some subject matter, then there is no universal truth concerning that subject matter.

Metaethical Relativism (MR). There are no universal moral truths. All moral claims are only true relative to a specific society, culture, historical period, person (etc.).

- MR does not directly follow from DR; we need an intermediate premise
- But (1) is false: only because people disagree on something does not show that there is no truth of the matter
 - (You could of course say ‘it’s different with morality!’ but then you need to explain why.)

32 From Descriptive to Metaethical Relativism?

Descriptive Relativism (DR*). Different societies (etc.) have deeply incompatible moral beliefs (etc.) **which cannot be resolved by rational argument**

Intermediate Premise (2). If people have deeply incompatible beliefs **which cannot be resolved by rational argument**, then there is no universal truth in that respect

Metaethical Relativism (MR). There are no universal moral truths. All moral claims are only true relative to a specific society, culture, historical period, person (etc.).

- DR* is much more controversial than DR
 - much depends on what we understand by ‘rational’
 - we might think that many moral disagreements could be resolved if people had sufficient evidence, time, impartiality, mutual tolerance, etc.
- One can deny (2): The mere fact that we cannot convince others does not show that there is no truth of the matter (e.g., disagreement between scientists over interpretation of QM)
- At any rate, if (2) is true, then an easier explanation would be non-cognitivism

Discussion

What might other arguments for relativism be?

34 The Argument from Scepticism

Scepticism (S). We do not know better than other cultures what morality requires.

Metaethical Relativism (MR). There are no universal moral truths. All moral claims are only true relative to a specific society, culture, historical period, person (etc.).

- S is a claim about what we can know, MR a claim about what is true
 - But things might be true or false in an objective sense even if we cannot know them, or even if no one knows better than anyone else (Is there an even or odd number of stars in the galaxy?)

35 The Argument from Tolerance

Tolerance Principle (TP). We should tolerate other cultures and their differences. / We shouldn't impose our view on others.

Metaethical Relativism (MR). There are no universal moral truths. All moral claims are only true relative to a specific society, culture, historical period, person (etc.).

- If MR is true, then TP can only be true relatively
 - Thus, there will be cultures where TP is **false**—would this be in the spirit of the argument?
- TP is a moral premise, while MR is a metaethical claim
 - It is not clear how we get from TP to MR: what would an intermediate premise look like?
 - What the argument at best establishes is that we should act **as if** MR is true, not that MR **is** true
- TP can be true in an objective, non-relative way; we do not need to deny MR

36 The Argument from Cultural Equality

Entailment (E). If there are universal moral truths, then some cultures are better than others.

Cultural Equality (CE). No culture is better than others.

Metaethical Relativism (MR). There are no universal moral truths. All moral claims are only true relative to a specific society, culture, historical period, person (etc.).

- One could deny CE, if modified correctly (e.g., to the degree that a culture endorses female genital mutilation, it is worse than a culture which does not)
- Even if CE is true, E is wrong
 - It could be that different cultures realise different ways of life, without one of these being better than others
 - **Incommensurability:** it might be that A and B are both (objectively) good, without A being objectively better than B, or B being objectively better than A, or A and B being equally good

37 Further Problems for Relativism

- Relativism cannot explain that we disagree at all
 - A says that murder is wrong = (1) “Murder is wrong” is true-relative-to-A
 - B says that murder is permissible = (2) “Murder is permissible” is true-relative-to-B
 - But there is no logical contradiction between (1) and (2), so A and B do not disagree!
- Relativism gets moral deliberation wrong
 - When I ask myself ‘what should I do’, I do not normally ask myself ‘what is wrong relative to my culture?’ or ‘what do I (already) believe is wrong?’
 - One could solve moral problems just by good opinion polling!
- Relativism cannot explain that cultures (or individuals) might (often) be in error

Error Theory

39 Error Theory

- Error Theory accepts **cognitivism** and **universality**: moral language attempts to say something about the world; moral judgments are beliefs; moral sentences are non-relatively true or false
- The central claim of error theory is that **all moral claims are false**
- An analogy: an early modern physicist believes in phlogiston
 - Claims about phlogiston try to say something about objective reality: they are meant to be true, and in a mind-independent way
 - However, all claims about phlogiston are false, because phlogiston does not exist
 - Thus, both the claim ‘phlogiston weighs nothing’ and ‘phlogiston weighs something’ are false
- Similarly, ‘murder is wrong’ and ‘murder is right’ are **both false**
 - Error theory does not entail ‘everything goes’: the claim ‘murder is permissible’ is also wrong!

40 Error Theory: Details

- “Kant believed that stealing is morally wrong”: unproblematic, because we are not saying that anything is actually wrong
- “If stealing is morally wrong, then stealing this purse is morally wrong”: the error theorist could accept that the conditional is true, but denies that the antecedent is
- “Stealing is not morally wrong”: this is true according to the error theorist, but it does not entail that therefore stealing is morally right! (In ordinary language, it does suggest this entailment.)
- “Moral wrongness does not exist”: true, in the same way as “unicorns do not exist” is a true claim about something non-existent

41 Overview

- Objectivism claims: (1) moral claims aim at truth, (2) some moral claims are true, (3) and they are true in a non-relative way.
- Non-cognitivism denies (1). It is motivated by the argument from motivation and naturalism, but faces the Frege-Geach-Problem
- Relativism denies (2). It is a meta-ethical option which very few philosophers advocate; non-cognitivism or error theory is the more coherent subjectivism
- Error theory (or nihilism) denies (3). It is often motivated on the basis of objections to the plausibility of the objectivist story.

42 Tutorials & Next Week

- **Tutorials:** Mackie, John. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Chapter 1, 'The subjectivity of values'.
- **Background text:** Schroeder, Mark. 2010. *Noncognitivism in Ethics*. Chapter 1, 'The problems of metaethics'.
- **Next week:** objectivism!