

Chapter 21, Metaethics

Relativism

Something is wrong if a person or group thinks it is

1. Person – if the individual *thinks it is right it is right*:

- But a) if it means what somebody *thinks* is right is *really* right for her = circular and probably absurd
b) argument = no point in debating with someone what is right for her to do but we do, even when they're sure e.g. teacher and his grades

2. Group – we should *conform to moral standards of group/society*:

- But a) obligations to friends/relatives outweigh any obligation decreed by group/society
b) we don't just accept uncritically the moral standards handed down to us by our parents/authorities – we insist on the importance of questioning them
e.g. Nuremberg Trials + Euthyphro problem

Objectivism/Subjectivism

Problem = not where our values come from but how we justify them

1. Objectivism:

a) Definition:

- (i) Values and truths exist independently of human wishes and beliefs
- + (ii) A moral judgement = objective if and only if
 - I. it = either true or false
 - + II. its truth/falsity doesn't depend on peculiarities of an individual or the culture to which he belongs, but on a rational agent

b) But no ethical characteristics whose existence can be proved by definition or by observation
e.g. Utilitarianism – goodness = happiness measurable in terms of pleasure/pain

c) But a judgement = true if it can gain publicly warranted endorsement
– by publicly determinable procedure
i.e. like scientific statements we show them to be true/false by informed, reflective group of careful observers

2. Subjectivism:

a) Definition:

- (i) Moral judgements cannot be said to be true/false independently of the attitude of some people
- (ii) Expressions of taste or personal opinion between which nothing can adjudicate

b) 2 elements:

- (i) Moral judgements = non-propositional – don't make statements that could be proved true/false
- (ii) If propositional and can be proved true/false they are about the psychology of the person who makes them and only them

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c) Forms:

- (i) Moral judgements = **disguised commands**
- (ii) They are expressions of **attitudes/feelings**
- (iii) They report/represent the fact that I have these attitudes/feelings
= **autobiographical reports**

Cognitivism/Non-Cognitivism

I. Cognitivism:

- a) **Definition:** moral judgements = **propositional** – can be known **true/false**

e.g b) Naturalism:

- (i) Moral judgements can be **justified by reasoning using nonmoral terms + moral terms = completely definable in nonmoral terms**
e.g. Utilitarian and Evolutionary ethics – moral judgements = disguised ways of making psychological assertions
- (ii) All ethical statements = **statements that we have certain feelings of approval and disapproval**
- (iii) **Problem** = **statements of approval/disapproval = evoked by prior judgement** as to whether an action is right
i.e. our thinking that it's right cannot be identical with our approving of it
- (iv) **Precludes any possibility of settling moral disputes**
– all that's needed to establish the truth of the statement = **introspection** that you or the group have these feelings
– but I can rarely be wrong about my feelings whereas **we are frequently wrong about what's right** – our judgement cannot be disputed by another person
- (v) **Any judgement I make = logically compatible with any judgement I or someone else might subsequently make**
– merely different statements about different dispositions
– reporting different feelings at different times
= private reaction theory
- (vi) **No different if the moral judgement states what the community feels**
But I. we all have the experience of judging something as wrong, when the community felt it was right
II. we may know the community to be misinformed about something, yet still bound to approve of it as long as the community does
- (vii) **Naturalistic fallacy:**
 - I. **fallacy to define goodness = indefinable** – the 'Open Question' Argmt
 - II. **fallacy to try to define it in terms of natural properties:**
 - But I. goodness **may not be a property at all**
 - 2. even if it is a property – the fact that it's not definable in terms of natural properties **doesn't mean it is a non-natural property** – ethical properties may be identical with natural properties

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3. Certain properties cannot be defined in terms of other properties

c) Non-Naturalism – Intuitionism:

- (i) Direct non-sensory, cognitive awareness of necessary truth of certain moral claims = necessary and synthetic
- (ii) Goodness = unique, simple, unanalyzable quality
- (iii) Stand for an objective reality – apprehended directly though we cannot prove it exists through empirical observation
- (iv) Problems:
 - I. doesn't explain what this is and what we should be apprehending as a non-natural quality or relation = important because
 - 1. many of our intuitions turn out to be wrong
 - 2. where there's a clash of intuitions we need to know how to settle it
 - II. answer = self-evident:
 - but they're not self-evidently true in same way as logical/mathematical truths which are analytic – moral judgements = synthetic

d) Naturalism/intuitionism – criticisms:

- (i) both assume moral words = property ascribing – not all words are
- (ii) both fail to account for the practical functions of moral discourse
 - i.e. action-guiding or attitude moulding = conative aspect ≠ just descriptive – ascribing some property but prescriptive

2. Non-Cognitivism:

a) Definition:

- (i) Ethics ≠ a form of knowl – ethical lang ≠ descriptive
- (ii) Moral claims = expressions of attitudes/decisions of principle/or declarations of intentions
- (iii) Intention = prescribe what sh/be the case ≠ describe what is the case

e.g. b) Emotivism:

- (i) Moral utterance = emotional expressions of approval/disapproval
 - or attempts to arouse similar feelings in others
 - or stimulate actions, primarily through commands
- (ii) ≠ true or false because not assertions or descriptions of anything
- (iii) Problems:
 - I. Like ethical naturalism – no contradiction between ethical claims – no genuine moral disagreements Re. Stevenson – disagreements in attitude = product of disagreements in belief
 - II. How do we know that for an utterance to be moral it must be attitude-expressing?
 - 1. If an empirical claim – all it would show = that an attitude was expressed
 - 2. If analytic – then we shouldn't be able to express an attitude and believe something quite different
 - III. It is not the case that moral dispute ends when agreement in attitudes – because the reasons for disapproving of something = different
 - +
 - Not every consideration leading us to adopt the same attitude will count as a morally

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relevant reason for adopting the attitude – what we believe and what we desire = 2 different things
e.g. the smoker who wants to give up

c) Prescriptivism – R.M. Hare:

- (i) Moral utterances = prescriptive because they contain imperatives that tell us to do something
- (ii) Cognitive element = non-moral facts about people's preferences
- (iii) Universal – we treat other people's preferences as if they are our own
- (iv) Prescriptions = expressions of our preferences because they contain imperatives
- (v) Where there is a conflict of preferences we weigh them up and choose whichever is the strongest
- (vi) Compared with strict non-cognitive theories:
 - 1. it is objective
 - 2. moral judgements = universal – not just expressions of personal attitudes
 - 3. there is a way of resolving moral disputes
 - 4. therefore there is a point to moral discourse
- (vii) Problem = whether prescriptions = just expressions of preferences

Is–Ought Gap

1. Difference between is/ought:

- a) Intuitionists = properties
 - (i) natural properties – statements of fact
 - (ii) non-natural properties – moral judgements
- b) Emotivists/Prescriptivists – different uses of moral language – factual statements describe/moral judgements evaluate
 - (i) emotivists – express attitudes of approval/disapproval
 - (ii) prescriptivists – I. express same attitudes
II. guide actions/influence choices

2. Difference between fact statements and moral judgements = difference of meaning:

- a) Intuitionists:
 - (i) no factual statement means same as a moral judgement
 - (ii) but still a logical connection = perceived by ethical intuition
- b) Emotivists/Prescriptivists:
 - (i) 'ought' cannot be deduced from 'is'

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- (ii) although normal to give factual statements as reasons for moral judgement this \neq moral necessity revealed through ethical intuition, but because we invoke moral standards we and society accept

Descriptivism

1. The 3rd answer to the problem:
i.e. publicly warrantable criterion to rescue morality from futility
2. Moral evaluations = logically grounded in:
 - a) descriptions of facts relating to human wants
 - or b) some notion of man's true end or function
 - or c) moral traditions of society
3. Both the description + the endorsement of the moral implications occur in close combination and any attempt to single them out = incorrect use of moral language