

The Embedding Problem for Non-Cognitivism; Introduction to Cognitivism; Motivational Externalism

Felix Pinkert

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- 1 Recapitulation Expressivism / Non-Cognitivism
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Expressivism / Non-Cognitivism

Moral psychology

Moral judgements are not beliefs. They are non-cognitive mental states, like desires, intentions, approval and disapproval.

Moral semantics

Moral sentences *express* the above attitudes, and do not have descriptive meaning. They cannot be true or false.

Moral metaphysics

There are no moral facts or properties.

Moral epistemology

We can not have moral knowledge or justified moral beliefs.

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Unembedded contexts

- Unembedded contexts: Moral sentences standing on their own
 - “Lying is wrong.”
 - “You ought to tell the truth.”
- Unembedded moral sentences are used to endorse a moral position.
 - Cognitivism: These sentences *assert* a moral *proposition*.
 - Expressivism: These sentences *express* a moral *attitude*.

Embedded contexts

- Embedded contexts: Moral sentences as part of larger sentences
 - Negation: “It is not the case that *lying is wrong*.”
 - Conditionals: “If *lying is wrong*, then telling half-truths is wrong as well.”
 - Questions: “I wonder whether *lying is wrong*.”
 - Belief reports: “She believes that *lying is wrong*.”
- Embedded moral sentences are *not* used to endorse a moral position.

Cognitivist take on embedded contexts

- Cognitivist explanation:
 - Embedded sentences do not assert a moral proposition, but negate it, assert something about its consequences, ask whether it is true, report that someone believes in it.
 - The proposition remains the same, so the meaning of the sentence is the same:
 - p
 - If p then q .
 - I wonder whether p .
 - She believes that p .

Embedded contexts and imperatives

- Natural move: “Lying is wrong.” → “Don’t lie!”
- Prescriptivist non-cognitivists hold that moral sentences are not only used to express commands, but that their meaning just *is* the command:
 - “Lying is wrong” just means “Don’t lie!”
- Problem in embedded contexts: Substituting the two phrases makes no sense:
 - “It is not the case that *lying is wrong.*” ↗ “It is not the case that *Don’t lie!*”
 - “I wonder whether *lying is wrong.*” ↗ “I wonder whether *Don’t lie!*”
 - “If *lying is wrong,* then telling half-truths is wrong.” ↗ “If *Don’t lie!,* then don’t tell half truths!”
 - “She believes that *lying is wrong.*” ↗ “She believes that *Don’t lie!*”

General expressivist problem with embedded contexts

- When I say “I wonder whether lying is wrong”, I am not expressing any attitude towards lying: condemnation, command, or disapproval.
- Expressivists claim that the sentence “Lying is wrong” expresses such an attitude, and that its meaning just *is* the attitude.
- So “Lying is wrong” does not have the same meaning in the embedded context, where there is no such attitude to express.
- Hence expressivists have a hard time explaining what “Lying is wrong” and “I wonder whether lying is wrong” have in common.

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So what?

- Maybe “*Lying is wrong*” and “I wonder whether *lying is wrong*” have less in common than the language suggests, and “lying is wrong” does change meaning between contexts.
- Problem: If “Lying is wrong” changes meaning between contexts, then moral inferences commit the fallacy of equivocation.

Modus ponens and equivocation

Modus ponens in general

$$\begin{array}{l} (1) \quad p \rightarrow q \\ (2) \quad p \\ \hline \therefore \quad q \end{array}$$

- For *modus ponens* to work, p and q must mean the same throughout.

Modus ponens and equivocation (2)

Modus ponens and equivocation

(1) If *Socrates is a fox*, then socrates has four legs.

(2) *Socrates is a fox*.

∴ Socrates has four legs.

- (1) is only plausible if “fox” means “an animal with a pointed muzzle, bushy tail, and a reddish coat”.
- (2) is only plausible if “fox” means “a sly or crafty person”.
- But if these two meanings are adopted, then “Socrates is a fox” means different things in (1) and (2).
- The argument is then no longer valid. It commits the fallacy of equivocation: Two different meanings are expressed with the same phrase.

The problem with the “so what?” response

An instance of moral modus ponens

- (1) If lying is wrong, then telling one's little brother to lie is wrong.
- (2) Lying is wrong.

∴ Telling one's little brother to lie is wrong.

- cf. above: (2) expresses an attitude of disapproval about lying, while no such attitude is expressed in (1)
- If the expressivist holds that therefore “Lying is wrong” has different meanings in (1) and (2), then the argument commits the fallacy of equivocation.
- (Likewise: “Telling one's little brother to lie is wrong” in (1) and the conclusion.)

The cognitivist's easy time

- On cognitivism, the meaning of “lying is wrong” is the same in (1) and (2): The proposition that lying is wrong.
- The difference between (1) and (2) is not in the meaning of the phrase, but in the speech acts for which it is used:
 - (2) asserts that lying is wrong.
 - (1) does not assert that lying is wrong, but asserts a more complex proposition (namely the conditional).

The cognitivist's easy time (2)

- The cognitivist can easily explain why it is irrational to
 - Accept (1): “If lying is wrong, then telling one’s little brother to lie is wrong”, and
 - Accept (2): “Lying is wrong”, and
 - Deny the conclusion / accept: “It is not the case that telling one’s little brother to lie is wrong.”
- These beliefs are inconsistent: They cannot all be true.

Three challenges for the expressivist

- The expressivist needs to
 - 1 show that “Lying is wrong” means the same in the embedded and unembedded context. Otherwise there cannot be valid moral *modus ponens* arguments.
 - 2 explain what moral implications like “If lying is wrong, then telling one’s little brother to lie is wrong” mean.
 - 3 show why it is irrational to accept the premises of a moral *modus ponens*, but not the conclusion.

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Challenge one: The meaning of “Lying is wrong”

- The sentence “Lying is wrong” is typically used to express disapproval of lying.
- The sentence is not always used to express disapproval of lying, namely in embedded contexts.
- If the sentence is to always mean the same thing, and is to mean attitudes, it cannot refer to the actually held attitudes at the time of utterance.
- Observation: The sentence is *always suited to* express disapproval.
- Sophisticated expressivism: The meaning of the sentence is not the actual attitude expressed, but the attitude that the sentence is suited to express, e.g. disapproval of lying.

Challenge two: The meaning of moral conditionals

- Question: Given that we know the meaning of “lying is wrong”, what is the meaning of “If lying is wrong, then telling one’s little brother to lie is wrong.”?
- Solution: Blackburn’s 1984 account of moral conditionals: Moral conditionals express *higher order attitudes*, i.e. attitudes about having certain attitudes.
- “Lying is wrong” expresses the attitude of disapproval towards lying.
- “Telling one’s little brother to lie is wrong” express the attitude of disapproval towards that action.
- “If lying is wrong, then telling one’s little brother to lie is wrong” expresses disapproval of a combination of attitudes such that one disapproves of lying, but fails to disapprove of telling one’s little brother to lie.

Generalisation of the meaning of moral conditionals

- “ ϕ -ing is wrong” expresses being against ϕ -ing.
- “If ϕ -ing is wrong, then ψ -ing is wrong” expresses being against (being against ϕ -ing, but not being against ψ -ing).

Challenge three: Irrationality of not drawing the conclusion of *modus ponens*

- 1 “Lying is wrong” expresses your disapproval of lying.
- 2 “It is not the case that telling one’s little brother to lie is wrong” expresses that you lack disapproval of telling one’s little brother to lie.
- 3 “If lying is wrong, then telling one’s little brother to lie is wrong” expresses disapproval of holding the attitudes in 1) and 2) together!
 - You are against your own attitudes.
 - You fail to bring your attitudes in line with what combinations of attitudes you approve of.

An apparent problem for Blackburn

- If the expressed attitude just is the meaning of the moral implication, then the following two sentences have the same meaning:
 - 1 “If lying is wrong, then telling one’s little brother to lie is wrong.”
 - 2 “It is wrong to disapprove of lying and not disapprove of telling one’s little brother to lie”
- Problem one: The two sentences don’t seem to mean the same.

A problem for Blackburn

- Problem two: The following inference should then be valid:

A strange inference?

- (1) It is wrong to disapprove of lying, but not disapprove of telling one's little brother to lie.
- (2) Lying is wrong.

∴ Telling one's little brother to lie is wrong.

- But the inference is not valid. And so the original inference cannot be valid, either.

Response to the problem

- Different disapproval attitudes are expressed when we say that something is wrong, or that one should draw a certain inference: moral vs. logical disapproval.
- The notion of validity must be revised for expressivists: It cannot be logical validity, as this assumes truth values of the statements.
 - Otherwise one begs the question against the expressivist.
- Develop an expressivist account of logical “musts”, as in “one must draw the conclusion”: disapproval of not drawing the conclusion.
- To make sense of moral reasoning, Blackburn needs to reinvent logic for attitudes as a non-truth-functional logic.

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Speech acts: Prima facie argument for non-cognitivism

Non-fallacious speech acts argument

- Assuming that moral sentences describe supposed moral facts faces many theoretical problems.
- Moral sentences are used to express emotions and issue commands.
- It is hence a promising response to the above problems to assume that moral sentences *only* express emotions and issue commands.
- The speech acts for which moral sentences are used lend support to a move to non-cognitivism.
- But this move needs independent motivation.

A Neo-Humean Non-Cognitivist Argument

- Internalism'': In practically rational people, moral judgements all by themselves cause motivation.
- Humean Theory of Motivation': No belief can cause motivation all by itself.
- Hence moral judgements are not beliefs.

Remaining challenge for the Humean argument

Can non-cognitivists explain exceptions to internalism? They need an analysis of moral judgment that shows why the following kinds of agents are practically irrational:

- Evil agents, who judge that something is wrong, and yet desire it because of its wrongness.
- Amoralists, who judge that something is wrong, and yet do not desire not to do it.
- Depressed people, who judge that something is wrong, but do not desire anything, nor are (at present) disposed to any emotional reactions.

Challenges for Non-Cognitivists

- Identify the expressed attitudes.
- Give an account of the meaning of moral sentences that preserves the meaning of sub-clauses in embedded contexts.
- Give an account of the meaning of moral implications.
- Give an account of the irrationality of not accepting the conclusions of valid moral arguments if one accepts the premises.

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Moral deliberation step-by-step

- 1 General moral judgement:** You *judge* that you ought to send money to charity if you can thereby save many lives without significant cost to yourself.
- 2 Belief about facts:** You *believe* that by sending money to charity, you can save many lives without significant cost to yourself.
- 3 Particular moral judgment:** You *judge* that you ought to send money to the charity.
- 4 Moral motivation:** You are *motivated* to send money to the charity.
- 5 Moral action:** You *send* money to the charity.

Moral judgments behave like beliefs

- 1 You *believe* that you ought to send money to charity if you can thereby save many lives without significant cost to yourself.
- 2 You *believe* that by sending money to charity, you can save many lives without significant cost to yourself.
- 3 You *believe* that you ought to send money to the charity.

Claim 1: Cognitivism

This reasoning is an instance of *modus ponens*:

1 If p then q .

2 p .

3 q .

- In steps 1) to 3), moral judgments behave like beliefs about moral facts. Best explanation:

Cognitivism: Moral judgments are beliefs.

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Discussion seminar this week

“If expressivists manage to create a logic of attitudes that precisely mimicks the logic of assertions, then expressivism ceases to be distinct from cognitivism.’ Do you agree?”

Discussion seminar week 4

Is there any plausible way for a cognitivist to be a sophisticated internalist about moral motivation?

Contact

You can reach me via email to felix.pinkert@lincoln.ox.ac.uk.