Non-Cognitivism

103 Ethics: Metaethics, Michaelmas Term 2013

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Recapitulation and introduction of Non-Cognitivism

Specifying Non-Cognitivism

How not to argue for Non-Cognitivism

Arguments for Non-Cognitivism

Challenge for Non-cognitivism: Identifying a relevant attitude

Summary
Overview of different metaethical views
From Cognitivism to Non-Cognitivism

- Cognitivism: Judging that stealing is wrong is to truly or falsely believe that stealing is wrong.
- Though metaethical questions:
  - What property is wrongness?
  - How does the property relate to the natural properties of the action?
  - How do we know whether the property is instantiated?
  - Why do descriptive beliefs about moral facts reliably motivate?
- The Non-Cognitivist evasive manoeuvre: Judging that stealing is wrong is not a belief about some facts and properties. Instead, it is an evaluative attitude towards stealing.
### Full-blown Non-Cognitivism / Expressivism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Moral psychology</strong></th>
<th>Moral judgements are not beliefs. They are non-cognitive mental states, like desires, intentions, approval and disapproval.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral semantics</strong></td>
<td>Moral sentences <em>express</em> the above attitudes, and do not have descriptive meaning. They cannot be true or false.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Moral metaphysics</strong></td>
<td>There are no moral facts or properties.</td>
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<td><strong>Moral epistemology</strong></td>
<td>We can not have moral knowledge or justified moral beliefs.</td>
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</table>
Misunderstanding: “Moral sentences are used to report attitudes.”

- Moral sentences do not *report* desires, they *express* them.
- Cf.: “I am angry at you.” and “You . . . .!”
- “You ought to φ” expresses my desire for or approval of you φ-ing, but does not report my desire for it, since it does not *assert* that I have a desire for you to φ.
- “I desire that you φ” reports my desire, since it asserts that I have it.
- Contrast: Actual desires subjectivism: “You ought to φ” means the same as “I/Most of us/God desire that you φ.” So actual desires subjectivism claims that moral statements report desires, and is hence a form of cognitivism.
Misunderstanding: “Moral utterances voice attitudes”

- Moral sentences do not voice desires in the same way as shouting “ouch” voices pain: The pain simply causes me to shout “ouch”.
- You can use the utterance “you ought to φ” meaningfully to express a desire even if you do not have the desire. Non-cognitivism allows for insincerity in moral utterances.
  - Cf.: You can use “Open the door” without having a desire that the door is open.
- Likewise, you can have the desire and not express it in any way.
Misunderstanding: “All moral sentences are false.”

- Mistaken inference: Non-cognitivism entails that all sentences of the form “x is right” is not true, so they are all false.
- Mistake: Non-cognitivism holds that moral sentences are neither true nor false, they are “untrue”: They are simply not the kind of sentence that can have a truth value, because they do not purport to describe anything.
Clarification: Untrue sentences and non-cognitivism

- Descriptive sentences, and beliefs, can also be untrue:
  - e.g. “The kitchen is dirty.” can turn out to be neither true nor false if the kitchen is in some grey area state of cleanliness.
  - likewise: “Mr X is bald.”, “This is a lot of food.”

- So it is better to characterise non-cognitivism as the claim that moral judgments are not beliefs, from which it follows that they are neither true nor false. Just saying that moral judgments are neither true nor false is not enough to characterize non-cognitivism.

- Moral judgments could then still be beliefs, but we might perpetually live in a moral grey area where nothing is clearly right or clearly wrong.
Non-Cognitivism

How not to argue for Non-Cognitivism

The speech act fallacy

The speech act fallacy

- Moral sentences are used to express emotions or to recommend or command actions.
- Hence the sentence does not assert any proposition about moral facts.

Why fallacy?

- “This dog bites” is used to recommend staying away from the dog.
- Hence the sentence does not assert any proposition about the dog’s behaviour.
- This is clearly false.
The speech acts which a sentence is used to perform do not map neatly onto the semantics of the sentence.

- One can assert that one does not agree to a costly request, or that some claim about one’s possessions is true, by uttering the question “Am I Rockefeller?”.
- The question “Would you please come here?” is used to issue a command to come here.
- The indicative sentence “I am underwhelmed by your performance” can be used to issue a command to do better.
A better argument

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.
Argument from the imperative use of moral sentences

- If I say: “You ought not to lie,” I seem to be prescribing or commanding actions.
- Contrast: If I say “The grass is green,” I seem to be describing things or asserting that things are in a certain way.
- Observation: Moral sentences such as “you ought to keep your promise” are used to command/prescribe/recommend actions.
Argument from the imperative use of moral sentences (2)

- Sentences that command actions *express* desires (or some other non-cognitive evaluative attitudes): If I sincerely command that you do not lie, I must desire that you do not lie.
- Non-Cognitivist conclusion: The meaning of “you ought not to lie” = the mental state it expresses = the desire that you keep your promise.
  - Note that this conclusion does not necessarily follow: A sentence could command and express desires, without its meaning being exhausted by the desire. Cf. hybrid expressivism.
Explanatory power arguments

- Moral judgments & moral discourse has feature $F$.
- Theory $T_1$ does a better job at explaining $F$ than theory $T_2$, and other things equal is hence preferable.
Commanding what you think is morally wrong

- Note the apparent contradiction between “You ought not to lie.” and “Just tell a lie!”.
- Non-Cognitivist explanation:
  - When we say “You ought not to lie”, we command you not to lie, and express a desire that you not lie.
  - When we say “Just tell a lie!”, we command you to lie, and express a desire that you lie.
  - These commands and expressed desires are practically contradictory.
Internalism

Non-Cognitivism can easily explain for the motivating force of moral judgments:

- If you desire to $\phi$, you are motivated to $\phi$.
- If you approve of $\phi$, you are motivated to $\phi$.
- The motivation is just part of what it is to desire or to approve. So non-cognitivism explains moral motivation directly by reference to the nature of moral judgments.
Moral Disagreement

- Moral disagreement tends to be much more vehement than many other forms of disagreement.
- Moral disagreement is harder to resolve than many other forms of disagreement.
- Non-cognitivist explanation:
  - Moral disagreement is disagreement in deeply held evaluative attitudes.
  - There are no moral facts out there that could adjudicate between competing moral convictions.
Avoiding problems arguments

- Theory $T_2$ faces problem $P$.
- Theory $T_1$ does not face $P$ and other things equal is hence preferable.
Non-Cognitivism and problems for naturalist cognitivism

- Naturalist cognitivists need to find a plausible candidate natural property that is rightness.
- Non-cognitivists face no such task: There is no property of rightness to be identified anywhere.
Non-Cognitivism and problems for non-naturalist cognitivism

- Non-naturalists are pressed to defend the existence of an additional kind of property in their ontology.
  - Non-cognitivists deny that any property of rightness exists.
- Non-naturalists have difficulty explaining how moral knowledge is possible.
  - Non-cognitivists deny that moral knowledge is possible.
  - Non-cognitivists explain how we can at times be very confident in our moral judgments: In these cases, we hold strong and unambiguous evaluative attitudes.
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Challenge for Non-cognitivism: Identifying a relevant attitude

The attitude problem

- Non-cognitivism: Moral judgments are non-cognitive evaluative attitudes.
- Question: Which attitudes are they?
Answer 1: Moral feelings

- Claim: To think that you ought to $\phi$ is to have a certain moral feeling about you $\phi$-ing.

- Problems:
  - What is a moral feeling?
  - We can think that something is right or wrong without feeling in any particular way at the time of that judgment.
Answer 2: Dispositions to feel good or bad

- **Claim:** To think that $\phi$-ing is right is to be *disposed to* feel good/bad if one does/does not $\phi$
- This disposition is not always triggered, so it is no problem that we can judge that $\phi$-ing is right without feeling anything.
- **Problem:** “Feeling good/bad” is too unspecific.
  - I am disposed to feel good/bad when I win/lose a game.
  - But that does not mean that I think it is morally right to win a game.
Dispositions to feel good or bad (2)

- “Feeling guilty” as feeling morally bad will not do:
  - There is no corresponding concept for feeling morally good.
  - To feel guilty is to feel bad about doing wrong/to feel bad because one thinks that one did wrong.
  - To say that thinking that \( \phi \)-ing is wrong is to be disposed to feel bad because one thinks that \( \phi \)-ing is wrong is a circular analysis.
Answer 3: Intentions

To think that $\phi$-ing is right is to intend to $\phi$.

Problems:
- I can intend to $\phi$ without having any moral thoughts about it.
- I can think that something is right but, because of weak will or depression, fail to intend to do it.
Answer 4: Desires

- To think that \( \phi \)-ing is right is to desire \( \phi \)-ing.
  - Problem: I can desire \( \phi \)-ing without thinking it to be morally right. I can desire smoking a cigarette without thinking that it is morally right to smoke cigarettes.

- To think that \( \phi \)-ing is right is to desire that one desires \( \phi \)-ing.
  - Problem: I can desire to desire to smoke a cigarette without thinking it to be morally right to smoke a cigarette.
  - E.g. it may be advantageous in my social circles to smoke, and if I could get myself to desire smoking, that would be very helpful.
Answer 4: Desires (2)

- To think that $\phi$-ing is right is to desire $\phi$-ing and desire that others desire $\phi$-ing.
  - Problem: I may desire that others share my taste for music, food or drink without thinking that it is morally right to indulge in these things.
  - E.g. I may desire it for their sake (they don’t know what they are missing!), or for my own sake (if more people desire it, it will be more readily available to me.

- To think that $\phi$-ing is right is to have a *special sort of desire* for $\phi$-ing.
  - Problem: What is that special sort of desire?
Answer 4: Complex desires and dispositions

- To think that $\phi$-ing is right is
  - to have a desire to $\phi$
  - to have a desire that others $\phi$
  - to desire punishment for people who do not $\phi$
  - to be disposed to feel bad if one does not $\phi$
  - to be disposed to feel resentment if others do not $\phi$

- Think for yourself if this or a similar complex analysis does the job!
Non-Cognitivism

Remaining challenge

- Non-cognitivism has the advantage of readily explaining the reliable motivating force of moral judgments.
- But: Can non-cognitivists explain exceptions to internalism? They need an analysis of moral judgment that makes sense of:
  - 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.
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Summary

Non-cognitivism:
- Moral judgments are not beliefs, but non-cognitive evaluative attitudes.
- Moral sentences express non-cognitive attitudes.

Non-cognitivists can explain:
- The imperative use of moral sentences.
- The motivating force of moral judgment.
- The vehemence and intractability of some moral disagreements.
Non-cognitivists can avoid

- Naturalist Cognitivism’s problem of identifying a natural property that is rightness.
- Non-Naturalist Cognitivism’s problems of defending an extension of one’s ontology, and of explaining moral knowledge.

Non-cognitivism faces the challenge of identifying evaluative attitudes that are expressed by our moral sentences.
Feedback

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Recommended Reading

Expressivism, non-cognitivism


Gibbard, A. *Thinking How To Live*: Ch. 1.


Contact

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