

Subjectivity and Objectivity in Moral Judgements

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Lecture 1: Moral Subjectivism

Definition: *Moral judgements are nothing but expressions of, or about, the individual judge's own attitudes (their thoughts, feelings, personal opinions, etc.)*

A form of *moral relativism* (it is sometimes called "individual relativism") since it conceives morality as being relative to the individual.

A *meta-ethical* theory – a view about the nature of ethics (cf. a *normative* moral theory, which is a view about which actions are right, wrong, good and bad).

Some say moral subjectivists conceive *moral* judgements such as "It's wrong to torture hamsters for fun" as like *aesthetic* judgements such as "Rodin's *The Thinker* is brilliant", "Strawberry ice-cream is my favourite" or "Peter Andre is a dream-boat"

A Case for Moral Subjectivism

1. Appeals to Ordinary Facts About Moral Judgements

- Argument from Individual Judgement
Individuals make moral judgements in their own way. We are guided by our own perspective on things, our own moral convictions and conscience.
- Argument from Emotion
Making moral judgements involves having the right emotional responses to things, without which we could not make moral judgements. Emotions are had by individuals.
- Argument from Disagreement
Even clear-thinking people commonly disagree about moral issues. These differences reveal differences in subjective attitudes.

2. "Political" Arguments

- Argument from Democracy
Everyone has an equal right to voice their opinions, so we should treat each other's views as equally plausible.
- Argument from Tolerance
We should respect and tolerate other people's opinions, and subjectivism is the only way of showing why this is so.

3. Doubts About "moral truth"

- Argument from Lack of Authority
There is no such thing as a "moral authority" (e.g. God, guru) who determines moral standards.
- Argument from Lack of Proof
Since we cannot prove that some actions are right, others wrong (cf. a proof in mathematics, or a logical proof), this must be a matter of personal opinion.
- Argument from Lack of Evidence
We cannot see, hear, smell, taste or touch supposed "moral facts", so there can be no evidence of them. We should not believe in things for which we have no evidence.

4. More Technical Arguments

- No “Ought” from an “Is”
Hume said that we cannot derive an “ought” (or “ought not”) conclusion from premises which only contain “is” (or “is not”).
- Argument from Motivation
Beliefs, which are the products of the faculty of reason, cannot motivate us by themselves. We also need a desire (or “passion”) to move us (Hume).
- Argument from Economy
Simple explanations are best (a principle from science). Subjectivism is far simpler than competing theories. So we should prefer it.
- Argument from Queerness
“Moral truths” would have to be both constituents of the world and motivate us to act: they would be “queer” metaphysical entities (Mackie).
- Argument from Authenticity
Moral judgements are an individual’s free decision, which express the sort of person she chooses to be (Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre).

So... given all these arguments (and there are more!), there seems to be an overwhelming case in favour of some form of moral subjectivism... But which form?

Bibliography

Introductory Readings

Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, Chapters 2 & 3

Benn, *Ethics*, Chapters 1 & 2

Shafer-Landau, “Ethical Subjectivism”, in Feinburg & Shafer-Landau, pp. 604-16.*

Rachels in Singer (ed.) *A Companion to Ethics*, Chapter 38

More Advanced

A. J. Ayer, “Critique of Ethics and Theology”, in *Language, Truth and Logic*; reprinted in Geoff Sayre-McCord (ed.) *Essays on Moral Realism*.

A. J. Ayer, “The Emotive Theory of Morality”, in James P. Sterba (ed.) *Ethics: The Big Questions*, Blackwell, 1998, pp. 27-33. See also the articles by Blanshard and MacIntyre in that volume.

J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin, 1977.

Mary Midgley, *Can't We Make Moral Judgements?*, Bristol Press, 1991, Chapters 12-14.

David McNaughton, *Moral Vision*, Blackwell, 1988, Chapter 2.

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong & Mark Timmons (eds.) *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, OUP, 1996. Especially articles by Peter Railton and Simon Blackburn.

David E. Cooper, *Existentialism*, 2nd Edn., Blackwell, 1999.

* Beware: Shafer-Landau’s definitions of “normative” and “meta-ethical” subjectivism are misleading, and don’t correspond to my uses of these terms! He calls the view that an action is morally right iff the person judging the action approves of it, “normative subjectivism” (p. 605). Putting it this way makes it look as though moral subjectivism is on a par with normative theories that say which actions are right/wrong (e.g. Utilitarianism). But since (so-called) normative subjectivism is silent about the *content* of moral judgements, it should not, in my view, be aligned with them.

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Lecture 2: Two Varieties of Moral Subjectivism

Recap: moral subjectivism holds that moral judgements are nothing but expressions of, or about, the individual judge's own attitudes.

Simple Subjectivism (Rachels, pp. 39-41):

Definition: Moral judgements are nothing but expressions *about* the individual judge's own attitudes.

This is a view about the meaning of moral judgements:

- X is morally right/good *really means* I approve of X
- X is morally wrong/bad *really means* I disapprove of X

Moral judgements can be "true" or "false", depending on whether the judge reports her attitudes accurately (i.e. sincerely).

Four Problems with Simple Subjectivism

1. Generates contradictions – ϕ -ing can be both right (as I judge it) and wrong (as you judge it). But the subjectivist can interpret these as "right-for-me" and "wrong-for-you", thus removing the contradiction.
2. Makes us all morally infallible – my judgements can't fail to be true (given I am sincere). But intuitively, we make "wrong" moral judgements from time to time.
3. Can't explain moral disagreement – we are talking about different subjects (my feelings and your feelings respectively). What would "(dis)agreement" mean?
4. Can't explain moral persuasion – since we are talking about different subjects, why should I bother telling you about my attitudes?

Emotivism (Rachels, pp. 41-7)

(20th century philosophers A. J. Ayer & C. L. Stevenson)

Conceives moral judgements not as reporting facts about the agent's attitudes, but as *expressions* of those attitudes, which are intended to bring about changes in other people's attitudes. Cf. the following expressive uses of language: "Hooray!", "Go away", "Come here", "Boo!", "Fiddlesticks", "Yeuch", "Gross", "Mmmm".

Definition: Moral judgements are nothing but *expressions* of the individual judge's own attitudes.

- X is morally right/good *really means* Hooray for X!
- X is morally wrong/bad *really means* Boo to X!

Moral judgements are not assessable as "true" or "false" any more than "Yuck!" is.

How Emotivism Solves the Problems with Simple Subjectivism

1. Contradiction only holds between things that can be true or false. According to emotivism moral judgements cannot be true or false. So there can be no contradiction.
2. Since moral judgements cannot be true or false, it doesn't even make sense to say that they "get it right" (or wrong). So the infallibility charge lapses.
3. The emotivist distinguishes disagreement *about* attitudes, from disagreement *in* attitudes. A moral disagreement is a disagreement *in* attitudes, not a disagreement *about* attitudes.
4. Moral judgements can be intended to affect other people's attitudes, just as my saying "Hooray for X!" might be intended to affect your attitude towards X.

Some Remaining Problems

- No way of distinguishing better or worse attitudes, e.g. kindness from cruelty.
- Moral judgements are not subject to rational criticism or rational persuasion.
- Whether something "is" right/wrong/good/bad depends on somebody actually making such a judgement.
- There is no moral truth (moral anti-realism), and hence no moral knowledge (moral non-cognitivism)

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Lecture 3: Objectivism, Cognitivism and Realism

Moral Objectivism

Definition: *Moral judgements can express “objective” moral facts. The facts are “objective” in the sense that their truth does not depend on who judges them, or whether anybody judges them at all.*

Moral objectivism is a meta-ethical theory according to which morality is not relative to anything (cf. subjectivism (both versions) and cultural relativism).

Moral objectivism combines two theses, a metaphysical and an epistemological one.

Some New Terminology

Positions in meta-ethics tend to be defined according to how they stand on certain key metaphysical and epistemological issues.

Metaphysical (concerning what there is)

Moral Realism: There are mind independent moral facts

Moral Anti-Realism: There are no mind independent moral facts

Epistemological (concerning what can be known)

Moral Cognitivism: We can know (at least some) moral facts

Moral Non-Cognitivism: We can't know any moral facts

Some Interrelations

- Moral cognitivism entails moral realism.
- Moral objectivism is the conjunction of moral cognitivism and moral realism.
- Moral anti-realism entails moral non-cognitivism.
- Simple subjectivism, emotivism and cultural relativism are anti-realist, and hence non-cognitivist positions.
- Moral non-cognitivism is compatible with both moral realism and anti-realism. The non-cognitivist who is also a realist thinks that whilst there are moral facts, we can't in principle know what they are (the sort of “sceptical realism” that has been associated with Hume).

Some Challenges for the Objectivist

Explain the metaphysical status of moral facts

- How are they related to “natural” facts? (Moral naturalism)
- How do they derive their specific content? (See Mill, Kant, Aristotle...)
- How do they motivate us to act? (If no desire necessary, then how?)

Explain the epistemology of moral judgement

- How can we come to know moral facts?
- Which moral facts can we know?
- (How) can we know we know?
- Why does moral judgement seem to have a subjective character (emotion, feeling, opinion)?

Not an easy ask!

Perhaps some version of non-cognitivism looks preferable...

Non-Cognitivism Revisited

- Can avoid the requirement to explain genuine moral facts, by being anti-realist.
- The non-cognitivist need not be a subjectivist since it is possible to deny that moral judgements are *merely* expressions of the *individual judge's* attitudes.
- The challenge is to give an account of how moral judgements acquire their apparently mind independent content. Two current attempts:
 1. J. L. Mackie's *Error Theory*. Moral judgements are a human invention, arising from institutions, and so on. Insofar as moral judgements purport to represent the world, they are always in error.
 2. Simon Blackburn's *Quasi-Realism*. Moral judgements are expressions of attitudes, but because we share such attitudes with others, and adjust them in the light of rational criticism, an apparently factual discourse emerges. Moral judgements are not an "error". Thus we have everything the realist wants without *being* a realist (hence quasi-realism).
- Since moral judgements express attitudes, motivation comes for free.
- Strictly speaking, since there is no such thing as moral truth, the non-cognitivist does not do moral epistemology: their task is to explain apparent epistemological problems away.

Additional Reading On This Theme

Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1998.

And don't forget...

J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin, 1977, especially Chapter 1.

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong & Mark Timmons (eds.) *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, OUP, 1996. Especially articles by Peter Railton and Simon Blackburn.