

2 Expressivism

Expressivism is an anti-realist view.

The earlier versions of it deny that our moral language primarily aims at representing facts and that our moral thoughts are primarily cognitive (beliefs). In other words, they deny a) Representationalism, and b) Cognitivism.

Rather, they think moral judgements primarily express some conative states of mind, such as desires, plans, acceptance, rejection, endorsement, condemnation.

Expressivists typically argue that there are important differences between our practice of moral evaluation and typical cases of representational use of language and cognitive states of mind.

However, expressivists do not need to say that our moral sentences do not represent facts or that no belief is involved in making a moral judgement.

By saying,

“It is monstrous for you to bury your mother alive”,

the speaker does purport to represent the fact that the person buried her mother alive.

What the non-cognitivist denies is that such representations and beliefs are the “essential”, or primary, purpose of making a moral judgement.

The point of making the moral judgement is not to tell you that you buried your mother alive. It is, for example, to express a disapproving attitude toward that action.

Expressivism is also not the claim that our moral language is merely frequently correlated with the conative states of mind. Rather, the conative attitude is essential to the meaning of typical moral judgements.

E.g. When I think of students, there is frequently in my mind the picture of motivated, hard-working, young people. But none of the above feature is essential to the meaning of “student”.

But when I say someone is a nuisance, I do necessarily have an attitude of dislike towards that person. The attitude of dislike is an essential part of the meaning of “nuisance”.

According to some expressivists, when we engage in ethical thought and talk, we are not primarily exchanging information. Rather, we are expressing and coordinating attitudes of approval and disapproval.

2.1 Expression versus Description

Surface Grammar and Pragmatic Use

We noted earlier that one piece of evidence for Realism is that we seem to be reporting facts when we make moral judgements.

However, expressivists point out that a sentence may be grammatically a declarative sentence, which is typically used to describe, but used by the speaker to primarily serve another function.

I wouldn't do that, if I were you. (advice, or threat, instead of describing the speaker herself)

You did it again. (complain, or criticism, instead of describing what the listener did)

Esteemed Admissions Committee: I recommend Michael to you. I know Michael through the various courses I taught in the past three years. During these classes, I often see him attend lectures, though I'm not absolutely sure what he was doing during class. It is worth noting that during all these years, no student has complained to me that Michael hit them. Also, the Police has never had any conclusive evidence that Michael stole phones from other students. So, if police record were any indication of academic excellence, then Michael might as well be a perfect young scholar. In conclusion, all the information I have about Michael is, strictly speaking, logically compatible with the possibility that he might succeed in your programme. Thank you very much for your attention.

Which one is descriptive? Which one is prescriptive?

Qin: The essay due date for this course is Dec. 31.

Qin: The essay due date for Lucas's course is Dec. 15.

Expressing Conative Attitudes

Expressivists claim that the same is true when we engage in moral thinking and talking.

Traditional expressivists view most of our moral talk as not primarily aiming at describing the world, rather we are expressing some non-cognitive, conative attitude.

Unlike some of the above examples, this non-cognitive attitude is not an accidental feature that occasionally accompanies an otherwise descriptive moral sentence.

This non-cognitive attitude characterises moral thought and talk.

Key to moral thought and talk is this conative attitude, purporting for things to change.

When I say that

The essay is due on Dec 31.

I am not reporting or describing a fact of the world which I happen to have discovered. Rather, the announcement I made causes the essay to be due on that date.

One way to understand the due date announcement, as well as characteristic statements about moral rightness/wrongness, is that they are implicitly imperative, putting items on the addressee's list of things to do.

Not Reporting that One Has Certain Conative Attitude

The expression of this conative attitude should be distinguished from reporting or describing that one has a certain conative attitude.

Cheating is wrong

should not be read as

I disapprove of cheating.

Otherwise, people would not be disagreeing and merely talking past each other, because it would be like one says,

I feel pain.

whereas the other says,

I don't feel pain.

Suppose I was seated at a restaurant and said to the waiter,

I would like a durian pizza.

It would be odd for the waiter to say,

Oh, interesting. You are saying, if you were to have a durian pizza, you would like it.
So, do you want to order something to eat?

But this would be a natural reaction, if my sentence is taken to be descriptive.

2.2 The Relation Between the Moral and the Natural

Expressivists offer an explanation of the relation between the natural and the moral.

They typically claim all that exists objectively is the natural world.

Morality is the conative attitude we hold towards the objective natural world.

2.3 Hume's Belief-Desire Theory of Motivation

Humean Theory of Motivation has it, roughly, that our motivation to do X has two necessary components:

- a) A desire to realise state Y, and
- b) A belief that doing X will help realise state Y.

For example, if I'm thirsty, and would like to quench my thirst.
Why did I open the fridge and fetch the cola? Because

- at) I desire to quench my thirst, and
- bt) I believe that opening the fridge and fetching the cola will help quench my thirst.

Arguably, moral judgements essentially motivate.

Which role does ethical judgements play in motivating us? The belief role, or the desire role?

Among those who accept the Humean Theory of Motivation,

Cognitivists argue that ethical judgements play the belief role, partly because this enables the existence of ethical knowledge, and we do appear to have ethical knowledge, whereas

Non-Cognitivists argue that they play the desire role, partly because it best explains Motivational Internalism.

2.4 Motivational Internalism

Morality is inherently practical. It is not simply a report of what the world is like.
It needs to move people to act.

If I think poverty is a bad thing, then I must be at least somewhat motivated to have poverty reduced, either by doing it myself, or by having others (e.g. government or charitable organisations) do it.

If we accept that making a moral judgement is inherently connected to being motivated to action, then it seems that one good explanation is that moral judgements express conative states of mind.

Conative states of mind, such as desire, are inherently connected to motivation to act.



David Hume, 1711-1776

Whereas the realist faces difficulties explaining why (or denying that) objective moral facts that are independent of our attitudes can motivate, expressivists have a ready answer to why moral thought and talk motivate.

2.5 Hume's Law and Open Question

Hume's Law: We can never reach a moral/normative conclusion ("ought") purely based on natural facts ("is").

This is usually shortened to: You Cannot Derive an "Ought" from an "Is"

Purely natural facts may be relevant to determining moral/normative facts. But they alone never completely settle any moral/normative question without the input of moral/normative facts.

The following arguments are all invalid.

P1: The poor people are suffering.
P2: Donating to charity will relieve them of suffering.
C: Therefore, you should donate to charity.

P: University A is closer to home, has more professors, and costs less, than University B.
C: Therefore, you should go to University A.

More generally,
P: Full description of nature.
C: You should do X.

In order to derive moral/normative conclusions, there must be at least one moral/normative premise.

P1: The poor people are suffering.
P2: Donating to charity will relieve them of suffering.
P3: Suffering is bad. We should prevent bad things from happening.
C: Therefore, you should donate to charity.

P1: University A is closer to home, has more professors, and costs less, than University B.
P2: It's better to go to a university that is closer to home (or has more professors, or costs less).
C: Therefore, you should go to University A.

Ayer (1936) argues that one good explanation of the fact that we cannot derive an "ought" from an "is" and the Open Question is that our ethical language do not aim at representing reality.

Of course, as we have seen previously, a competing explanation is that moral facts are non-natural.

But if you already are leaning towards a naturalistic worldview. You would regard the expressivist explanation as better than the non-naturalist one.

The expressivist explanation does not need to posit a non-natural realm of facts and is more parsimonious.

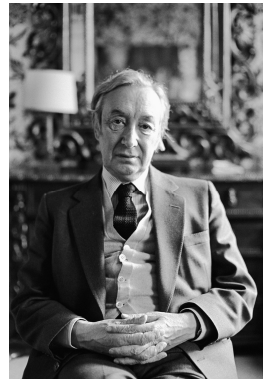
2.6 Emotivism (Boo/Hooray Theory)

Emotivism is one very early version of Expressivism.

Ayer (1936) thinks that ethical statements state facts only when they are used to describe moral views of communities, but when used to talk about the speaker's own moral thoughts, they express emotive reactions.

This is also often called the “Boo/Hooray! Theory of Ethical Language”.

This is based on his radical empiricism (Logical Positivism) and the associated Verificationist Semantics.



A. J. Ayer (1910-1989)

The meaning of a statement is its method of verification (Schlick, 1932).

In short, Ayer thinks that, empirically unverifiable claims must either be analytically true, or meaningless.

For him, most theological, metaphysical, and ethical claims are not false, but meaningless. Such sentences are not truth-apt (able to be true or false).

Moral judgements may have meaningful (verifiable) parts. But the extra content added by moral terms is not verifiable and therefore meaningless.

When I say that “It was wrong of you to steal from the supermarket yesterday”, I am making a meaningful statement, namely that you stole from the supermarket yesterday. This part is verifiable.

However, I also express an attitude towards your stealing. Wrongness is a property that is unverifiable. It does not add any factual content to the sentence.

But, if Ayer is right, neither is the word “wrong” here to make an additional description of the world. It is used to express an emotion.

The sentence can be read as “You stole from the supermarket yesterday. Boo!”

Note that Ayer's denial of truth-aptness of moral sentences is arguably in stark opposition to common sense and appearance.

We affirm and deny moral claims.

Our use of moral language seems to confirm that moral sentences can be true or false.

We often engage in rational deliberation, reflecting on our own moral view and criticising that of others.

Our moral language and thought seem to have an objective, interpersonal authority, requiring others to behave in certain ways regardless of their own attitudes.

2.7 Frege-Geach Problem

The Frege-Geach Problem is a problem for Expressivism.

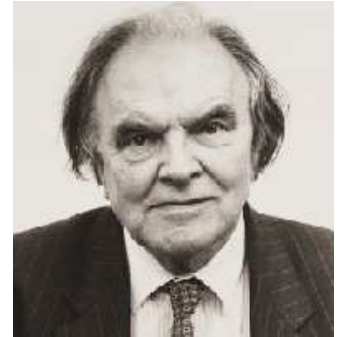
It seems that a moral utterance has the same meaning when asserted and when embedded in a larger sentence in an unassertive manner.

Cheating is wrong.

Lucas thinks cheating is wrong.



Gottlob Frege (1848-1925)



Peter Geach (1916-2013)

But Expressivism seems to have difficulty in explaining this sameness of meaning.

Compositionality Assumption about Meaning

Compositionality assumption about meaning has it that the meaning of a sentence is a function of the meaning of its components and the way they are put together.

This seems to be the best explanation of why we can understand new sentences that we have never heard of.

If so, we expect the meaning of the components of a sentence to be stable.

This seems to be what's needed to make sense of logical inferences.

If [you cheat in the exam], then [you fail the course].

[You cheat in the exam].

Therefore, [you fail the course].

(Modus ponens, a valid form of argument)

If P, then Q.

P.

Therefore, Q.

The above argument is logically valid. In contrast, the below argument is not valid. It commits the Fallacy of Equivocation.

If [Dr. Wang is discovered to have committed plagiarism], then [Dr. Wang is dead].
If [Dr. Wang is dead], then [Dr. Wang no longer needs food].
[Dr. Wang is discovered to have committed plagiarism].
Therefore, [Dr. Wang no longer needs food].

While the following form is valid,
If P, then Q.
If Q, then R.
P.
Therefore, R.

The below form is not valid
If P, then Q₁.
If Q₂, then R.
P.
Therefore, R.

Another instance of Fallacy of Equivocation:
A normal mouse₁ has the temperature of 36.5-38°C.
The mouse₂ on my table has a temperature of 17°C.
Therefore, it is not a normal mouse.

Meaning of Embedded and Unembedded Sentences

But the meaning of a free-standing moral sentence would be different from the meaning of its embedded form, according to Emotivism (and many other forms of Expressivism).

If so, then we have difficulties making sense of the validity of the following moral reasoning. (Geach, 1965)

If [torturing is wrong], then [torturing prisoners of war is wrong].
[Torturing is wrong].
Therefore, [torturing prisoners of war is wrong].

According to Expressivism, “Torturing is wrong” in the second premise has an essential part in its meaning the expression of a conative attitude, such as the disapproval of torturing; whereas the same words “Torturing is wrong”, when embedded in the first premise, does not express that conative attitude, and therefore differs in its meaning.

Validity requires sameness of meaning.

If Emotivism were right, the above argument commits the fallacy of equivocation.
But it doesn't. The argument seems logically perfect.

How could Emotivism and other Expressivisms explain why embedded sentences
lost their emotive/expressive meaning?

Question: Why is there no Frege-Geach Problem for Realism (Cognitivism and
Representationalism)?

Correspondence Theory of Truth

The traditional, mainstream theory of truth is the Correspondence Theory.

The Correspondence Theory of Truth has it that being true is a property that a
sentence, an utterance, a judgement, etc. can have, when it corresponds to
reality.

Take the sentence

Snow is white.

What is the condition for this sentence to have the property "true"?

It has the property "true", when what it says, namely that snow is white, really
corresponds to what the world is like.

Deflationary Theory of Truth (Minimalism)

The Deflationary Theory of Truth rejects the Correspondence Theory.

It refuses to think of being true as a substantive property a sentence can have.

Instead, it views truth minimalistically, in that the meanings of

Snow is white

and

It is true that snow is white

are regarded as the same.

Nothing is added to the content of the sentence by the truth ascription.

This equivalence in meaning is usually stated by the Equivalence Schema.

"p" is true if and only if p.

"Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white.

Whereas the Correspondence Theory gives us the property of truth, the Deflationary Theory gives us a condition of truth.

Deflationary Theory of Truth as a Solution to the Frege-Geach Problem

Adopting the Deflationary Theory of Truth gives Expressivism resources to handle the Frege-Geach Problem.

Now the expressivist can say that both the embedded and the unembedded instances of the moral sentence are truth-apt, without positing a moral reality for the sentence to correspond to.

Blackburn (1984) argues that the difficulty for Expressivism to explain truth and falsity of moral claims is only apparent and due to our mistakenly assuming the Correspondence Theory of Truth.

Once we adopt a Minimalist Theory of Truth, the problem evaporates.

Equipped with a Minimalist Theory of Truth, the expressivist does not need to deny that moral sentences are truth-apt.

On this view, truth and fact claims and beliefs are just sentences and mental states of affirmation.

2.8 Explaining Disagreement

For Emotivism, ethical statements about one's own moral opinion merely express emotions.

But emotions are not truth-apt.

So, no sense can be made of genuine moral disagreement.

According to Emotivism, there are only factual disagreements disguised as moral disagreements.

But it does seem to us that we genuinely disagree about moral issues, and some of these disagreements do not go away even if all factual disagreements are settled.

Expressivists think they do possess resources to make sense of disagreement.

When one person expresses the attitude of approval, and another the attitude of disapproval, towards the same, their conative attitudes clash.

This is one place where Expressivism differs from Relativism. Certain forms of Relativism have difficulties explaining disagreement.

When all I say is that kicking the little dog is wrong-for-me, or wrong-for-my-society,
and you say that it is not wrong-for-you, or wrong-for-your-society, what we say
do not clash.

In addition, in cases of long-standing moral disputes that seem to have reached an
impasse, Expressivism seems to offer a good explanation.

The expressivist can say that this is because each party in the dispute holds
conflicting attitudes towards the same object.

If moral disputes are primarily cognitive, we should expect people to be able to
gather evidence and eventually reach agreement.

2.9 Prescriptivism

Prescriptivism is the view that moral disagreement is neither
a difference in emotive feelings, nor an inconsistency in
beliefs. Rather, moral disagreements are due to
inconsistent prescriptions. (Hare, 1952)

Consider Hare's thought experiment involving a Christian
missionary landing on an island of cannibals. The
missionary says that cannibalism is wrong, whereas the
locals think cannibalism is perfectly acceptable.



R. M. Hare (1919-2002)

Hare thinks that the best way to describe this apparent disagreement is neither as a
factual disagreement, nor as difference in emotions. Rather, we should think of
the missionary and the cannibals as prescribing different actions or ways of life.
They do the prescribing by calling different things "good".

Hare argues that, if we think goodness is an objective property, then we must
conclude that the two words (of the cannibal and of the missionary) must have
different meanings.

And if they do have different meanings, then the cannibal and the missionary
wouldn't be disagreeing.

But we tend to think that they do disagree, when talking about different things as
good.

So, Hare concludes, their disagreement couldn't be about whether certain actions have the property good, but must be a disagreement in prescription.

2.10 Norm-Expressivism

Gibbard (1990) proposes that our moral judgements express commitment to systems of norms or general rules.



Allan Gibbard (1942-)

2.11 Quasi-Realism

Blackburn (1984) accepts that our moral practice appears realist, but denies that Realism is true.

These appearances include:

Sincere moral inquiry

Possibility of mistake

Objectivity, etc.



Simon Blackburn (1944-)

The quasi-realist wants to be able to behave in all the above ways and others, just like the realist, without embracing Realism.

Conditionals as Attitudes of Disapproval

The earlier Blackburn (1984) attempts to solve the Frege-Geach Problem (in the case of logical inference) by reading conditionals and other embedded uses of moral sentences as requirements on consistency in moral sensibilities.¹

E.g. "If torturing is wrong, then torturing prisoners of war is wrong" expresses disapproval towards someone having the moral sensibility of disapproval of torturing but not disapproval of torturing prisoners of war.

Under what condition should you disapprove of me, after I said, "If you give me \$300, I'll give you my phone"?

As a result, modus ponens involving moral sentences appear valid, but really, it is because we are under pressure of consistency in moral sensibility.

Torture is wrong.

¹ He later gave up this account (Blackburn, 1998).

If torturing is wrong, then torturing prisoners of war is wrong.

So, torturing prisoners of war is wrong.

The first premise in the above argument expresses disapproval of torture, the second expresses disapproval of someone who disapproves of torture but does not disapprove of torturing prisoners of war. The speaker then is under the pressure to also disapprove of torturing prisoners of war. Otherwise she is being disapproved of by her own standards.

Representational Language and Non-Cognitive Mind

Blackburn (1984) points out that a purely expressive language is insufficient for the purposes we put the moral language to use.

Even if we have started with a purely expressive language similar to the one emotivists think we are using, this language would evolve to have moral predicates, moral judgements, moral reasoning, and basically everything the realists ascribes to our moral language.

In short, Blackburn solves the Frege-Geach Problem by admitting that the moral language is almost (quasi) the same as what the realist advocates it to be. It's just that this language is ultimately used to express non-cognitive attitudes, rather than describing a (non-existent) objective moral reality.

Supervenience

The moral supervenes on the non-moral.

Expressivism has a ready explanation for this (Blackburn, 1971; Hare, 1952).

The idea is that we cannot simply approve of a state of affairs and at the same time disapprove of exactly the same state of affairs. This would be arbitrary and inconsistent.

If such arbitrariness would be allowed, it would defeat the purpose of moral evaluation.

The expressivists claim that the best explanation of supervenience is that moral judgements are desire-like reactions to non-moral facts.

Blackburn's Supervenience Challenge to Realism

Blackburn (1984) argues that, given three plausible assumptions, the realist cannot explain the supervenience of the moral on the natural.

These assumptions are

- (1) Motivational Internalism: That a moral judgement contains with it a necessary motivation to act.
- (2) Humean Theory of Action: That to be motivated to act, there must be a desire for things to be a certain way and a belief that certain actions will help make things that way.
- (3) A natural property cannot conceptually guarantee that a moral property is present. To do this would require our moral theory.

And Blackburn's challenge to the realist is to explain supervenience without using a conceptually necessary link between the moral and the natural. He thinks the realist will have no explanation.

In contrast, the quasi-realist can explain supervenience as a constraint on our expressing.

Given the purpose of our value-expressing, if we allow treating naturally identical cases morally differently, then this kind of expressing would not be able to guide our practical decision-making.