Moral Consensus: A Critique of Ayer's Moral Expressivism

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1. **Introduction**

Moral Expressivism is the view that when we utter normative claims the statements themselves do not carry a truth value. Such statements are not significant but are expressions of emotions which cannot be either true or false. This classifies Moral Expressivism has a type of non-cognitivism. When someone says "stealing is wrong" their statement does not reflect something about the nature of stealing in the world. Rather their exhortation is synonymous with them saying "Boo, Stealing!" This position ties in with a larger metaphysical view of verifiationism; the thesis that only statements that are either empirically verifiable or true by definition are meaningful. Empirical verifiability is such that there can exist some set of observations that would show a particular proposition to be true. To accept Moral Expressivism, and thus non-cognitivism, generates several consequences. A prime concern is that Expressivism supposes a type of moral skepticism, that moral claims are empty and devoid of any sort of truth. There are different theories which attempt to fend off this skepticism, by grounding moral terms with different competing definitions. Ayer's objection to one of the ordinary theories around ethics, Subjectivism, is that its definitions of normative terms like "good" or "right" seem to fail to correctly analyze instances where natural language speakers issue pseudo-contradictions. However, it seems like there may be room for formulating these terms of "good" and "right" such that their definition can adhere to the required conditions needed to satisfy their pursuit in saying something true or false. I will argue that Ayer's attempt to nullify using moral subjectivism to define good and bad fails to consider different types of subjectivism. Specifically, Ayer's argument fails when we formulate moral terms by using a universal consensus subjectivism definition I propose.

2. **The Critique of Moral Subjectivism**

A prominent attempt to define normative terms is by applying Moral Subjectivism. Subjectivism holds that normative terms are defined relative to our understanding or experience of certain concepts. An example of this theory in action would be by defining things as "good" only if they were approved of by most people. Thus, the validity and verification of ethical judgments would be

determined by the nature of the subjective beliefs of most people. To verify such a claim would be tantamount to taking a poll of the population. Ayer argues against this subjectivist view of understanding normative terms. He asserts that this view is not correct because it is not self-contradictory for someone to assert that some actions which are mostly approved of are not good. If "good" was defined in the way that we had asserted it was then such a statement should be non-sensical. For example, it would be akin to someone asserting something about the spouse of a bachelor. Further, this example shows that the challenge is not empirical. The person is not challenging whether P is mostly approved, calling for a revote, rather they are obviously successful in contradicting the definition. Therefore, the problem is that our method for defining "good" is not representative of the way we actually use the word. Therefore, the Moral Subjectivist attempt to provide normative words with a way to evaluate a truth value seems unsuccessful. It is important to note that our assessment of the various proposals for the meaning of moral terms is based on how well the proposal accords to our natural use of language. In this way their success is largely empirical. To disprove a theory is to generate a compelling example of where our theory does not track our natural language. Then if we are going to want to save moral subjectivism, and cognitivism more generally, we are going to need to find a formulation which can satisfy Ayer's example.

3. **Types of Moral Subjectivism**

To find a way to save moral subjectivism, we should delve into a deeper analysis of what subjectivism really can be. When discussing moral subjectivism, there seem to be multiple ways of conceiving of it. The first possible form is that the truth value of our moral judgments depends on what a single person, personally believes.

> **Ultra-Subjectivism:** The view that what makes a value statement true or false is dependent on what the speaker views as correct.

This ultra-subjectivism does not seem to conflict with Ayer's Expressivism. In this ultra-subjective realm, your statement about what is good is equivalent to you merely expressing something rather than making a statement which bears on the world. To say X is good is therefore to say I approve of X. Following Ayer's Expressivism theory, when someone asserts X is good, they are similarly expressing their approval "Hooray, X!". Further, ultra-subjectivism does not seem to accord with our intuitive use of normative language. Often when we use normative words they are meant to extend beyond just a personal view. For example, people often say statements like "I hope I did the right thing". If rightness were defined purely on the specific individual doing the act, like ultra-

subjectivism suggests, this statement would be non-sense.[1] The second way of conceiving moral subjectivism is that it depends on what *most* of us believe.

> **Traditional Subjectivism:** The view that what makes a value statement true or false is dependent on what most people agree on.

This is the formulation which Ayer's argument chiefly contends with. This definition turns moral claims into such claims which carry an empirical way of truth making, polling the population. However, against this theory, we saw that there exist instances where we can create contradictions of how we defined normative words but do so without really being self-contradictory. Where a person asserts that most people approve of X but they don't think X is good. We could also then ask, what does it mean to be the most? Is the most just a majority of people? What if we had a tie in the vote? It seems that we need to have a stricter definition of what it means to be the most. This is not necessarily a disqualifying reason but rather an ambiguity which may be challenging to resolve. The third way of conceiving of subjectivism are those moral judgments which depend on what we all believe.

> **Consensus Subjectivism**: The view that what makes a value statement true or false is dependent on what all people agree on.

It is this third formulation which seems to be resistant to Ayer's argument against subjectivism. Ayer's argument chiefly took issue with the in the inability of *traditional subjective* claims to correctly track language in those cases of self-contradiction. That example being where someone could still acknowledge most people approve of X but assert X is bad. However, with this more restricted definition of good, this possibility seems to vanish. If by our *consensus subjectivism* definition, a good thing is that which all people approve of then the previous example of self-contradiction seems like a genuine contradiction. To show this explicitly, If A says all people approve of X but X is bad this would assert a contradiction. For if A believes X is bad then their first part of their statement is invalid, vice versa.

4. **Trying Consensus Subjectivism**

Now that we have seen consensus subjectivism's unique ability to respond to Ayer's critique, what does this theory look like? A theory which demands moral consensus seems like it would shear many of our common-sense moral propositions as being false. Due to certain fundamental moral disagreements, only the most universal human morals would be able to prevail. Such morals which

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[1] Huemer, Michael. 2005. Ethical intuitionism. Basingstoke [England]: Palgrave Macmillan.

generally aligned with our ingrained moral psychology of harm and fairness, but not those which are uniquely culturally derived. However, with the limited principles made available, we may be able to make the theory more palatable by using those principles to entail other moral principles. For example, if we all agreed that conflicting harm and suffering on the innocent is bad, then we could entail true moral judgments on the action of slavery. If we have a group which objects in consenting to this derived judgment, and we are confident in our moral entailment, we could discount them as being irrational. An important consideration is whether any principles would satisfy our moral definition of consensus. There do seem to exist instances of moral beliefs which according to evolutionary moral psychology would be universally agreed upon such as "to kill your entire family is morally wrong". The problem is that for *Consensus Subjectivism* to assign a truth value, the universality needs to hold with no counter examples. Often a place where these counter examples can be generated is by using psychopaths. While all neuro-typical humans may share that value judgment, it is still perhaps conceptually possible that a psychopath could disagree with such a statement.

5. **Evaluating Moral Contrarian Challenges**

Should psychopath-based counterexamples be a part of our "voting-class" for consensus subjectivism? Evaluating this objection reveals something important about our position of consensus subjectivity, that being that it is still asserting a subjective claim. Consensus subjectivity does not assert that our definitions of good are true from the nature of reality. Such an example of this would be a contention about whether 2 + 2 = 4. We know that this statement is *objectively* true. The truth value of objective propositions does not depend on how we view it. If we attempt to generate an example of a person who defies the truth of this statement, their objection to the proposition does not have any bearing on it. However, with our consensus subjectivism, if someone genuinely disagrees with our example of a moral truth then it does have serious implications on the truth value of the statement. The truth maker in this system is not the nature of reality but the opinions of humanity on such a proposition. Thus, in our definition of consensus subjectivity we choose a frame where we decide that the subjectivity holds, that being all people. But we have seen that to make the truth-maker such a broad class can be challenging specifically against the psychopath-based objections. Perhaps a reformulation of our consensus subjectivism theory can resolve this.

> **Consensus Subjectivism Revised:** The view that what makes a value statement true or false is dependent on what neuro-typical humans agree on

This narrowing down of our subjectivity class is possible because we are trying to find a system which best accords with how we use language. It seems very unlikely that excluding the opinions of psychopaths and other atypical moral contrarians would push us to deviate from how the larger class view moral terms.

6. **Conclusion**

In the pursuit of formalizing and analyzing the way we use speech we saw how normative words carry a unique resistance towards this formalization. Through formalizing, a significant consideration is placed on determining the truth value of an utterance. We saw that non-cognitivists like Ayer seek to address this resistance by supposing that normative propositions do not carry with them genuine truth evaluable meaning. This is accomplished by analytically reducing such normative statements to mere expressions of emotion. One way Ayer supports this thesis was by showing how popular counter-theories to understand the truth values of normative statements fail. Ayer disproved subjectivism by granting it and then generating an example of a common moral statement where subjectivism's truth making power fails to capture our natural meaning. I analyzed his critique of subjectivism and proposed that additional categories of subjectivism may be necessary understand the critique. This led to my *Consensus Subjectivism* formulation which seemed to address the lack of explanatory power brought from the *Traditional Subjectivism* that Ayer dialogues with. With this new form of subjectivism we considered two prominent objections. Whether *Consensus Subjectivism's* stringent truth-making quality is able to grant us with the correct truth values that align with our common-sense way of thinking about such normative terms. If the universality constraint of *Consensus Subjectivism* is too strong to allow for any true moral propositions with the apparent existence of moral contrarians and psychopaths.

Bibliography

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