

Emotivism & The Nature of Morality

Introduction

The study of meta-ethical theories has persistently attempted to answer a huge variety of questions about morality - the differentiation of intentions and actions between those that are right and those that are wrong.^[1] While questions about moral values do not usually have definitive answers, they provide deep insight into the nature and functions of morality. We shall seek to explore the following few questions which are quite important to the discussion about the nature of the subject matter of moral statements: Is morality objective? What do moral claims mean? What does morality depend on?

In this paper, I will first talk about the meaning of objectivity and the properties of objective statements, which we will use later to evaluate the objectivity of moral claims. Following that, I will briefly discuss the two categories of meta-ethical theories, namely Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism and present the Non-Cognitivist theory 'Emotivism' in depth. Later, I will consider some criticisms of the theory and attempt to respond to these objections. In conclusion, I will analyse the implications of the Emotivism theory to the debate of morality.

Objectivity & The Nature of Objective Statements

When a sentence is structured as a declarative and is semantically appropriate, it makes a claim which can be judged to be true or false.^[2] This property that allows a proposition to be either true or false is called its truth-aptness.^[3] Some examples of truth-apt sentences can be:

S1. I have black hair.

S2. It is raining outside.

S3. The Earth is the third planet from the Sun.

Despite the fact that all three aforementioned statements are truth-apt, there is a key difference between them which involves the factors on which the truth or falsity of the claims they make depends. As for S1, its truth or falsity depends on who makes the claim. In the case of S2, its truth or falsity depends on when/where the claim is made. However, S3 is true regardless of who makes the claim or when/where it is made.

Statements which are similar to S3 by nature are termed as objective statements.^[3]

Thus, objective statements are the kinds of statements which can be judged to be true or false and their truth or falsity is independent of who makes the claim or when/where the claim is made. A few general examples of such statements include mathematical lines of reasoning, scientific claims, historical facts, etc.^[4]

Conversely, any statement can be called an objective statement or claim if it is either true or false, and its truth or falsity is independent of:

1. Whether anyone knows or believes it to be true or false
2. Who makes the claim
3. When the claim is made
4. Where the claim is made

In this way, we can reframe the question “Is morality objective?” to “Are moral claims objective?” and proceed to evaluate whether, in general, moral claims possess the same properties as an objective statement or not.^[4]

Moral Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism

It is often the case that meta-ethical theories develop into one of two kinds. Knowing which class it falls into makes it easier to analyse and comprehend the implications of a certain theory.

The first kind asserts that moral claims are statements which do not possess the property of being truth-apt, that is, moral statements do not have truth values. This understanding of the meaning of moral claims is called Moral Non-Cognitivism. In holding this view, Non-Cognitivist

theories of morality imply that moral claims either do not aim to or simply do not express genuine propositions (propositions which are truth-apt).^{[5][6]} Such interpretations of moral statements lead to the conclusion that morality is not objective, as they indicate that moral claims are neither true nor false. The second, Moral Cognitivism, is often seen as the denial of Non-Cognitivism. It holds that moral statements do express beliefs and that they are apt for truth or falsity.^[6]

While it is inevitable for Non-Cognitivist theories to conclude that morality is subjective, it is not necessary for a Cognitivist theory to be objective - although moral claims must be truth-apt, their truth-aptness may or may not depend on other factors.^[6]

Emotivism

Emotivism is a meta-ethical theory which states that ethical judgments are primarily disguised linguistic expressions of one's own attitudes about moral issues.^{[7][8]}

According to this theory, moral claims function as the representation of the emotional and passionate regards of the speaker about certain moral issues. Hence, as argued by Ayer, the meaning of moral claims and judgments cannot be translated into non-ethical empirical terms, but only into imperative statements about the speaker's attitudes.^[9] For instance, the moral claim "Action X is morally permissible" would be the Emotivist equivalent of saying "Action X. Yay!"

So the following claim

"It is morally wrong to torture innocent civilians."

could be translated to

"Torturing civilians? Boo!"

This theory is also colloquially known as the "Hurrah/Boo" theory and can be considered a form of moral expressivism.^[8]

Note that, in light of this view of morality, moral claims are not asserted, but are expressed. This means these claims cannot be interpreted as definite propositions which can be true or false but merely as imperative sentences. By definition of objectivity (see Objectivity & The Nature of

Objective Statements), this means that Emotive moral claims cannot be objective as they lack the property of truth-aptness. This also makes Emotivism a Moral Non-Cognitive theory.^[9]

More recent developments in Emotivism, particularly due to the work of C. L. Stevenson, help avoid the absurd simplicity of Simple Subjectivism. Unlike Simple Subjectivism, these developments offer the possibility of having genuine ethical disputes - actual disagreements about ethical values, not just expressions of contradicting feelings by opposing parties.

According to Stevenson, a moral statement plays two roles. Not only does it declare the speaker's attitude towards an issue, but it also has a persuasive tone. This aspect of Emotivism is known as Magnetic Effects of Moral claims or the First Pattern Analysis of Emotivism. This allows for claims such as "Action X is good" to be interpreted as "Action X Yay! You should do this too."^[10]

Similarly, the moral statement

"It is morally permissible to smoke marijuana for recreational purposes."

can thus be treated as

"Recreational marijuana. Hurrah! You should support my cause too."

By containing such a persuasive device, Emotivism indicates that any disagreements or moral debates are not illusory, but completely justified. This 'magnetic effect' pulls and draws listeners to emulate the views of the speaker by inducing the same type of emotions and attitudes.^[8] Besides, by their very nature, disagreements regarding moral issues are driven highly by emotional and passionate nature of the participants. Emotivism provides a great explanation for such intense emotional involvement in moral debates as it attributes the entirety of a person's morality to the way they emotionally feel about certain moral issues.

The theory of Emotivism also provides an acceptable justification for moral motivation. In linking morality with emotions and intrinsic states of the human mind, it shows that people act morally due to internal and personal factors, as acting morally would have an effect on the emotions

and passions from which it arises. This removes the need for external triggers to force or externally motivate certain people to act morally.

Criticisms of Emotivism

Just as any other theory in Philosophy, there have been several objections to the meta-ethical theory of Emotivism, but only a few are substantial.

Some criticisms of Emotivism arrive from its characteristic properties. These argue that in the case of emotivism, the subjectivity of moral claims is a great problem. This is because the subjectivity, in this case, depends completely on the fact that moral claims can be neither true nor false (moral claims lack truth-aptness). Furthermore, these criticisms claim, it is completely senseless to say the moral claims which are different from ours are mistaken or wrong, as these claims are just expressions of feelings and cannot inherently be true or false - every claim can be said to be correct.^[8]

While I might agree with some facets of this objection regarding the deep subjectivism of Emotive statements, I can argue that it is still possible and entirely sensible to try to show that an opposition's moral claims are mistaken or wrong. As suggested by Stevenson and Hudson, there are several methods of moral argumentation that can be utilised to debate Emotive moral claims, namely Logical methods (finding inconsistencies between a person's attitudes and their moral beliefs), Rational methods (examine facts that relate a person's attitudes to moral beliefs and attempt to show the inconsistencies of those facts) and Non-Rational methods (semantic and psychological influence).^{[10][11]} Perhaps, it can also be argued that the subjectivism of morality coupled with the possibility of a proper debate is a positive aspect of the theory, as it leaves certain stands on moral issues to be dependent on the situation in which the stand is to be taken.

Several other popular criticisms of Emotivism are offered by Utilitarian philosopher Richard Brandt. In his book on various ethical theories, he claims that ethical statements should be viewed as genuine propositions and not just expressions. He thinks emotivism cannot explain why,

historically speaking, people have considered ethical sentences to be matters of fact. He also argues that if someone's ethical views change over time, they consider them to be mistaken and erroneous, unlike their attitudes about other issues (he gives the example of a person who did not like to eat peas as a kid, but does not say his former attitudes were mistaken; however, when the same person looked on their previously different moral attitudes, felt they were unfounded).^[12]

Although Brandt's view about the historical perspective of ethics is perhaps correct, it doesn't take into account the major influence religion had on western philosophy for a great period of time. This means that ethical theories which involved the weak foundations such as that of the Divine Command Theory were prevalent. Moreover, the foundations of all such theories were based on an objective guide or set of rules (such as religious books, etc) by which people were expected to abide by. Hence, in most scenarios people believed them to be matters of fact.

As for a person's reactions to the change in their attitudes with time, indeed attitudes linked with morality and views on moral issues are much more personal and strong in someone's mind than attitudes about certain preferences, behaviours, etc. Thus, a change in ethical attitudes would often be accompanied by greater distress than a change in non-ethical attitudes.

Implications of Emotivism

At this point, let's revisit the questions posed at the beginning of the paper and attempt to provide definitive answers. Is morality objective? What do moral claims mean? What does morality depend on?

Being a Non-Cognitive meta-ethical theory, and relying on expressions of personal feelings about moral issues, Emotivism implies moral claims made do not attempt to present genuine propositions. These moral claims do not have the property of objective statements known as truth-aptness and thus, it can be concluded that according to Emotivism, morality is subjective.

According to the interpretation of morality given by Emotivism, moral claims are expressions of the way an individual perceives or views certain moral issues. As a result, morality depends solely on an individual's views of certain moral issues.

While the meta-ethical theory of Emotivism does have some minor flaws, I believe it is one of the better theories at explaining the meaning of ethical claims. It gives an appropriate justification for the reason people act morally in a wide range of situations regardless of external factors, explaining moral motivation by bridging emotions and morality. It not only justifies moral discussions but also provides an explanation of deep passionate involvement in moral debates.

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