

Background

For Ayer, *synthetic propositions* are empirical hypotheses. There is an old debate in philosophy about the nature of *analytic* and *synthetic* propositions. In chapter one, Ayer states that his motivation (and that of his fellow *positivists*) was to avoid skeptical arguments about knowledge. Ayer's specific approach was to explain *meaning* in terms of *verification*. How does this help him avoid skepticism? The answer is that, for example, positing that I am being deceived by an evil demon is a claim that is itself unverifiable. Such a status renders the claim *meaningless*.

Ayer's principle of verification was a hotly debated, and eventually abandoned, thesis. But, insofar as we seek to understand chapter six of this book, we will treat it as being 'in play'. Historically, an analytic sentence was understood as being true merely because of the meanings of the word(s) *alone*. 'A vixen is a deer', for example, is true without my having to 'go out' into the world to confirm its truth. Its truth is not probabilistic but necessary (given certain linguistic givens). Synthetic sentences, on the other hand, require what Ayer called *verification*. They are a kind of hypothesis about the world and can be, in a sense, tested. Their truth is not necessary but probabilistic. 'Vixens are not allowed to be hunted in Canada', for example, is not true merely because of the meaning of 'vixen'.

Chapter 6

With these distinctions in mind, Ayer begins chapter six by considering if statements of value are synthetic. 'Giving to the poor is good' is not a hypothesis, and so cannot be synthetic. It also is not true because of the meaning of the words. So, Ayer sets his task to explaining how to understand such 'judgements of value'.

We shall set ourselves to show that in so far as statements of value are significant, they are ordinary 'scientific' statements; and that in so far as they are not scientific, they are not in the literal sense significant, but are simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true nor false. (pg 63)

What Ayer wants is to see if there is any possibility of translating ethical value claims into empirical claims. Utilitarians offer such a translation (i.e. good = happiness / bad = reduction in happiness or increase in pain). He rejects such views, however, for reasons that seem Moorean. It is not 'self-contradictory' to say that something which produces happiness is not good, and so the Utilitarian translation fails. Unlike Moore, however, Ayer takes this as conclusive evidence that good, though undefinable, is also unscientific (i.e. not a hypothesis). In essence, Ayer is claiming that while 'good' can be made sense of in the *attributive sense*, it cannot be made sense of in the *predicative sense*.

Some ethical theorists, like W.D. Ross, base their moral system off of properly trained intuitions. Such theories are absolute in the sense that they are not reductions to claims about social acceptance, or psychological states like happiness or pain. Such a position is a non-starter for Ayer as such moral judgements and statements are unverifiable. There is no test whereby we can confirm that I have a *prima facie* duty to keep my promises.

If Ayer is right about everything just summarized, then the entire domain of ethics is, to some degree, meaningless. Adding 'right' or 'wrong' to a moral claim adds nothing. 'Scott stole that bike' is not different in any important sense from 'Scott acted wrongly by stealing that bike'. All that is added by the use of 'wrong' is a sense of my own moral disapproval. Such moral terms indicate to the audience that I approve / disapprove of their actions *and nothing more*. Ayer labels such moral terms as being purely *emotive*. (pg 67) His view, therefore, is known as *emotivism*.

The key to understanding Ayer's emotivism is to view each use of a moral term as requiring a kind of psychological translation. Such translation approaches attempt to make sense of what is going on when a certain term or terms are used. Hence, though 'right' is a meaningless term, it functions as a way for me to imbue a sentence with the emotion that I have towards the action in the sentence. The following is how I think of it:

'X is wrong' =_{translation} 'X is an action' + a linguistic device (a word, tone, conversational implicature, etc.) to express my disapproval of X

'X is wrong' is neither true, nor false. This is not so for the kind of 'orthodox subjectivist' that Ayer considers. For the orthodox subjectivist, such claims are true or false since they are assertions. 'X is wrong' for the subjectivist can be paraphrased as 'I disapprove of X'. That is a simple psychological claim that, in principle, could be verified. But for Ayer, when I say 'X stole' and couple it with a disapproving tone, then I am not asserting anything. I am merely expressing myself and such expressions are not true or false.

You can think of it like this: when you cheer for your favorite sports team you are expressing your support of the team by gleefully yelling "go huskers!". The words "go huskers" are neither true nor false. They do not assert your support for the team. Rather, the words chosen, plus the way in which the words were said express your support.

"For whereas the subjectivist holds that ethical statements actually assert the existence of certain feelings, we hold that ethical statements are expressions and excitants of feeling which do not necessarily involve any assertions." (pg 69)

In response to Moore, a view like Ayer's must account for what is commonly called *moral disagreement*. When you say that 'abortion is wrong' and I say that 'abortion is permissible' it certainly feels though we are debating whether or not something is true. Ayer cannot allow this.

His response is to point out that in cases where two people *with similar cultural backgrounds* offer opposite expressions of value, you do *not* try to change their moral system. Instead, Ayer claims, we attempt to convince them that they have the facts of the case wrong. In the abortion example, I may point out that a zygote is unlikely to be a human person. I do not attempt to get

them to change their mind that murder is wrong. What I try to convince them of is that terminating a zygote is not a case of murder.

Since we come from the same cultural background (more or less?), we share similar values (more or less?). Hence, we focus on the facts of the case rather than on differences in our value systems. With a disagreement involving a person from a completely different moral system, Ayer states, such debates usually end with one or both parties finding the other 'impossible'. Moreover, no one moral system is better than another, and so there is no way to settle that debate. Thus, Ayer concludes, morality is merely another topic to be studied by sociologists and psychologists. (pg 71)

Why do most moral rules seem to apply regardless of what we desire? Ayer states that most moral theories have one further feature in common: fear. We fear being condemned by our society, or by God. Such fear is why moral rules appear categorical. If you break the moral rule, either society or God will judge you.

Moral rules which tend to encourage certain types of conduct in a society (conduct which the members of that society deem acceptable) keep social cohesion. Moral rules which tend to discourage certain types of conduct in a society (conduct which the members of that society deem unacceptable) also keep social cohesion. The only real problem, then, is that moral theorists take these purely psychosocial truths and go one step too far: they treat these psychosocial realities as though they were the definitions of ethical concepts.

This take on ethics applies equally to aesthetics. No aesthetic judgment will be judged meaningful on Ayer's theory for the exact same reasons that ethical claims cannot. Theological claims, likewise, are rendered meaningless. A fun wrinkle is that Ayer finds both the agnostic and the atheist to be in error when they deny / question God's existence. The claims made by both camps use theological terms, and such terms are meaningless. According to Ayer, theological terms are purely metaphysical, and so not truth-apt. In other words, it doesn't even make sense to be antagonistic to religion. To sum up, the moral theorist, the aesthetic critic, and the theologian are not saying anything true, but neither are they saying anything false.