

Jackson and Pettit take Ayer's expressivism to be composed of two basic claims. First, ethical sentences are not truth-apt, and so do not even *report* what the speaker believes. Second, ethical sentences express distinctive pro and con attitudes (again, without reporting). Expressivism is, according to its proponents, *not* a form of subjectivism in ethics. Subjectivism, as Jackson and Pettit understand it, requires that ethical sentences report what the speaker believes.

The core challenge that Jackson and Pettit raise, is intended to show that expressivism is just another version of subjectivism. The issue revolves around the modern philosopher John Locke and a specific piece of his philosophy of language. According to Locke, 'Words being voluntary signs, they cannot be voluntary signs imposed by [a speaker] on things [the speaker] knows not.... they would be signs [that the speaker] knows not what, which is in truth to be the signs of nothing.' In short, words are a kind of sign or symbol that adhere to the conventions of the linguistic community in which those signs or symbols occur. Locke, then, is supposing that a speaker could not use such a sign or symbol without also understanding the conventions associated with it.

If we accept this claim, then ethical sentences *must* be, at least in part, reporting our belief that we have a pro / con attitude since that is what the conventional use requires. Using a term reports that I accept that conventional use (in this case, that I have a pro / con attitude). As Jackson and Pettit put it:

"For...we could hardly have agreed to use the word for an attitude we did not recognize and failed to believe we had, since that would be to use the word for 'we know not what'. But that is to say that expressivists must allow that we use the word sincerely only when we *believe* that we have a certain kind of attitude. And then it is hard to see how they can avoid conceding truth conditions to 'That is good', namely, those of that belief. Not only will the sentence 'That is good' express the attitude alleged, it will be true just in case the attitude is present and false otherwise: it will in some sense, however broad, report the presence of that attitude. Expressivism will have become a variety of subjectivism." (pg 242)

Mark van Roojen (of UNL!) puts the matters as follows:

"This variety of subjectivism agrees with one of the positive non-cognitivist theses (that moral utterances conventionally express non-cognitive attitudes), but it does not agree with either of the essential negative non-cognitivist claims (that the judgments don't express beliefs and/or that they are not truth-apt)." (From the SEP entry on [Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism](#))

Perhaps expressivists could reply that when we make ethical sentences, it is more like an involuntary reaction - like wincing or yelling when scared. You needn't be reporting a belief about a certain pro / con attitude. Jackson and Pettit find this account to be implausible. First,

they claim that we don't often 'give out' the first thing that pops in our head. Second, even if we did, it is still possible that they are simply claims about certain recognized attitudes (even if the recognition of these attitudes is non-conscious / subpersonal).

Expressivist Reply 1:

There is a difference between expressing what one believes from reporting what one believes. This distinction, the expressivist could claim, allows for the expressivist position that 'X is right' does not report, but expresses one's pro-attitude to X. Such a move fails, according to Jackson and Pettit, because even if you are not reporting that you have a specific belief, you are still reporting the content of that belief. It remains possible, then, that the following biconditional holds: 'X is right' expresses a certain pro-attitude iff 'X is right' reports the content of the attitude.' (pg 245) This is *not* what the expressivist wants, and yet they can't rule it out given what has been said.

Expressivist Reply 2:

Ethical terms like 'good' and 'bad' are conventional, intentionally employed signs of psychological states - they just don't have truth conditions because they are akin to 'hurrah' and 'boo'. Such a move, Jackson and Pettit argue, also fails. The first reason it fails is that words like 'hurrah' and 'boo' *could have had* truth conditions if our language had developed differently. They haven't, though, and so they don't. If 'good' and 'bad' are to be similarly explained, then the expressivist must accept that such ethical terms 'serve only in a very loose fashion to signal the presence of the attitudes they express'. (pg 247) Moreover,

"Expressivism is not the view that there is only a rough, unclear, insufficiently-entrenched-for-truth-aptness connection between ethical words and the attitudes that lead to their production. Expressivists think that ethical terms are well-suited for the task of discussing the attitudes they hold ethical sentences express; if the ethical terms were not well-suited, expressivists would have trouble telling us what their books and articles are about" (pg 247)

A possible reply to this further objection would be a kind of weak expressivist. Such an expressivism would be claiming that while current uses of 'good' and 'bad' are unable to have truth conditions, they may gain them in the future if our language 'entrenches' them. Jackson and Pettit call this a 'bizarre style' of expressivism (is that a bad thing?). At the very least, it is not the expressivism of Ayer.

Expressivist Reply 3:

Ethical sentences are like commands or recommendations (rather than exclamations like 'hurrah' or 'boo'). Command like 'shut the door' are not truth-apt, and so, the idea goes, neither are ethical sentences. This also, according to Jackson and Pettit, fails. Commands are not made more or less command-y if I say 'I command you to shut the door' instead of 'Shut the door'. The truth conditions of the first apply equally to the second. Jackson and Pettit offer the

following semantic principle about commands: it is true in S's mouth at t just if S did indeed command at t that the door be shut. (pg 248)

It might be objected that this account of commands violates what English speakers take to be 'good English', but (though they disagree) the same charge can be leveled against expressivism. This is not to say that 'Shut the door' and 'I command that the door be shut' have the same *meaning*. They obviously do not since, for example, the latter can function in the antecedent of a conditional, whereas the former cannot. Jackson and Pettit maintain, however, that in 'simple' contexts of the kind they have been interested in, that both utterances have the same truth conditions. Additionally, if you are going to issue such a command, then you know that you are issuing such a command (as Locke claimed).

Disagreement and Expressivism

When you produce the sentence that 'X is right' and I produce the sentence that 'X is wrong', it cannot be, according to the expressivist, that my claim and yours are incapable of both being true at the same time. Rather, most expressivists claim that our sentences express different moral attitudes to X. This, however, does not offer them a leg up over subjectivism since the subjectivist agrees (they just further claim that such sentences are truth-apt).

"Indeed, almost every party to the debate in meta-ethics believes that if I sincerely assert that X is right and you sincerely assert that X is wrong, we must have different moral attitudes; so, if that counts as our disagreeing, as expressivists who are not eliminativists about moral disagreement must allow, almost every party to the meta-ethical debate can respond to the problem of moral disagreement simply by noting that a difference in moral attitudes can survive agreement over all the facts." (pg 251)