

Emotivism and Solomon's Theory of Emotions

It was suggested in class that Solomon's theory of emotions spells trouble for the emotivists. If the emotivist wants to reduce ethical utterances to "mere" emotions, and emotions turn out to be judgments¹ (rather than primitive feelings or something of the sort) then it seems that the emotivist has not succeeded in his reduction. However, I want to argue that this is not necessarily the case.

I will begin by looking briefly at A.J. Ayer's formulation of emotivism. On Ayer's view, to say an act is wrong is merely to express a feeling about that act: "For in saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making any factual statement, not even a statement about my own state of mind: I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments."² To use Ayer's example, if I tell you that you were wrong to steal some money, I am just expressing my moral disapproval of the act. The statement 'You were wrong to steal some money' says nothing more about the act than does the statement 'You stole some money'. (421) An additional observation about Ayer's theory should be made. Words such as 'right' and 'wrong' are used to express our feelings, not assert that we have those feelings. Ayer likens the use of 'right' and 'wrong' to a cry of pain. Therefore, statements containing those words cannot be true or false, since "they do not express genuine propositions." (422) According to Ayer, to call an act wrong is to express disapproval or similar feelings towards that act (but not assert that one disapproves of the act). Now, Ayer uses the term 'feelings' rather than 'emotions'.

¹ Solomon's theory is of course more complex than his slogan "emotions are judgments" but, for the sake of simplicity, I will use the slogan to refer to his theory.

² Ayer, A.J. "Emotivism." Ethical Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings, 4th Ed. Ed. Louis P. Pojman. Australia: Wadsworth-Thomson, 2001. 422. Hereafter, cited, parenthetically, by page number.

We could take him to mean that we are just expressing physical sensations when we make ethical utterances, but let us take him to mean ‘emotions’ by ‘feelings’.

So, on Ayer’s theory, ethical utterances are merely expressions of emotions, not even assertions that we have those emotions. If we assume that emotions are judgments then ethical utterances are expressions of those judgments.

Ethical utterances are not assertions that we have made any judgments or that we “have” any judgments. Now, I admit that I do not know what it means for an utterance to be an expression of a judgment but not an assertion of that judgment. It may be that that a judgment’s expression and its assertion amount to the same thing. On Ayer’s original formulation, it is easy to understand how an ethical utterance could be an expression of, but not an assertion that one has a certain *feeling*. Ayer tells us that ethical utterances are like cries of pain, and we can understand how a cry of pain is an expression of the feeling of pain, but not an assertion that one has the feeling of pain.³ However, this example does not have a clear parallel in the case of judgments. The expression of a judgment does not seem to be like a cry of pain, nor anything else I can think of; at least, not anything else which could be an expression but not an assertion. But, if expressions of judgments and assertions of judgments are distinct from each other, then it seems that the emotivist has a way out, because he is not saying that ethical utterances *are* judgments, but that they are *expressions* of judgments.

³ For one thing, an assertion like “I am in pain” has a truth value, but it is not clear how a cry of pain could have a truth value.