

Not A Fact But A Feeling

Reason, Relativism, and Reality

Spring 2005

Where are we?

- Last time we considered and rejected an *explanatory* argument for moral skepticism.
- The argument in a nutshell: moral beliefs can't be knowledge because they are not caused by moral facts.
- Our response(s): who says they aren't? and so what if they aren't?

New objection to moral knowledge

- Moral knowledge requires moral *beliefs* -- what if moral judgments turn out not really to be beliefs?
- A belief tells us how things are -- what to do about it is a further question
- But a moral judgment necessarily requires a certain response -- if something is wrong then that tells me not to do it
- Some background before stating the objection

Cognitivism

- Cognitivism says that moral sentences purport to describe reality, are true or false according as they describe it correctly, report the content of beliefs
- Non-cognitivism denies all this
- Ayer: "If I say, "Stealing money is wrong, I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning...It is as if I had written 'Stealing money!' -- where the shape and thickness of the exclamation marks show, by a suitable convention, that a special sort of moral disapproval which is being expressed....there is nothing said here which can be true or false."

Types of non-cognitivism

"Stealing money is wrong" might be compared to any of

- "Stop stealing money!!" (prescriptivism)
- "Stealing money? Boo!!" (emotivism)
- "I condemn stealing money" (expressivism)
- other options?

Let's focus on emotivism to have a definite target.

Humean argument for emotivism

Morality motivates: Finding murder to be wrong gives one some motivation (however slight, perhaps overridden by other motivations) for refraining from murder and preventing others from doing it.

Only desires motivate: A belief is never enough by itself to motivate any particular course of action; it needs to hook up with some preexisting desire.

Conclusion: Finding murder to be wrong is not the same as believing murder to be wrong. What we call "believing murder is wrong" is really booing it

Problem for non-cognitivism

Whatever your theory of ethics, this is a valid argument:

1. If stealing is wrong, getting your little brother to steal is wrong.
2. Stealing is wrong.
3. So getting your brother to steal is wrong.

How will emotivist explain validity?

1. If boo to stealing, boo to getting your little brother to steal.
2. Boo to stealing.
3. So, boo to getting your brother to steal.

Validity is explained in terms of truth. But 2. and 3. are not candidates for truth. (Not to mention that 1. doesn't make sense!)

Keeping the spirit of emotivism

- That was *letter*-emotivism. It flies in the face of common sense. Imagine telling the judge: "You *say* I was bad, but you don't really believe it!"
- Spirit-emotivists say "Well, of course we have moral beliefs (etc.); we propose a new analysis of what moral beliefs are"
- Believing that α is right/wrong just *is* having a pro or con "attitude" about α
- There may also be a rethinking of what is involved in a moral belief's being true

Assessing spirit-emotivism

Spirit-emotivists are committed to the

Motivation Thesis: if X believes he ought to do α , this by itself motivates him to do α .

This holds true only if X 's belief somehow contains the desire to do what he ought.

But then there should be something incoherent in the idea of a person (Chilly) who shares our moral beliefs but isn't at all moved to do what we agree is the right thing.

Could there be a Chilly?

- The story sure *looks* coherent.
- The emotivist has to argue that Chilly does not mean the same thing as we do by *ought* -- he is using the word in an anthropological or scare-quotes sense, as we might use *magic* or *Easter Bunny* in some contexts.
- What do you think?

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