

Lecture notes, Phil 4830, spr 03.

Anti-Realism

Important background concepts/distinctions:

- “evaluative” vs. “descriptive” sentences/predicates
- “Ethics”: studies philosophical questions pertaining to or arising from evaluative sentences. Two sub-branches:
 1. *Normative Ethics* is devoted to *advancing* (endorsing) evaluative claims.
 2. *Meta-Ethics* does not advance evaluative claims. It studies *the nature of* evaluative claims.

Important questions of meta-ethics:

- “Are some evaluative sentences *objectively true*?”
- “What does the word ‘good’ mean? Can it be defined?”
- “How, if at all, does one *know* what is right or wrong?”
- “How do moral values *motivate* people to act in certain ways? How, if at all, do they give us *good reasons* to act in certain ways?”
- We will discuss all of these questions. Notice that these include:
(i) *ontological/metaphysical*, (ii) *semantic*, (iii) *epistemological*, and (iv) *psychological* questions.

The question of objectivity:

- First, we need to ask:
 - What is meant by “objective truth”?
A sentence is *objectively true* if it is true, and whether it is true does not depend upon observer attitudes towards it.
 - What is meant by an “objective property”?
P is an *objective property* if P is a property (roughly, it may be predicated of things), and whether x has P does not depend upon observer attitudes towards x.
- Examples
 - Is “*funniness*” an objective property? Is “David Letterman is funny” objectively true?
 - Is *monetary value* an objective property?
 - *Tastiness*?
 - *Redness*?
 - *Squareness*?

Moral Realism vs. Anti-Realism:

- Realism:

Some moral (/evaluative) statements are objectively true.

Or: There are objective moral properties.

Varieties of realism will be discussed later.

- Anti-realism: Two ways of stating it:
 - No moral statements are objectively true. 3 varieties:
 1. *Subjectivism/relativism*: Some moral statements are 'subjectively true'/true relative to some person/group.
Why: Evaluative sentences say that some individual or group takes some attitude toward the object of evaluation.
 2. *Non-cognitivism*: Evaluative sentences are neither true nor false.
Why: Evaluative sentences are non-assertive / do not assert propositions / are emotive or imperative, etc.
 3. *Nihilism*: Evaluative sentences are false.
Why: Evaluative sentences say that the object of evaluation has a certain sort of objective, irreducible, non-natural 'evaluative property,' but there are no such properties.
 - There are no objective moral properties. The 3 varieties again:
 1. *Subjectivism/relativism*: Moral properties are subjective. They consist in being the object of some attitude of an observer.
 2. *Non-cognitivism*: Evaluative predicates do not (even purport to) attribute properties to objects.
 3. *Nihilism*: Evaluative predicates purport to refer to evaluative properties, but no such properties exist.
- Important: These are the only logically possible positions.

Examination of Subjectivism/Relativism:

- Cultural relativism: “X is good” means that the speaker’s society approves of X.
Consequences:
 - Why should I care about what is ‘good’?
 - Society is always right. Slavery was good (at the time). Oskar Schindler was evil.
 - *Reply*: No; “good” refers to the value system of the *speaker’s* society--in this case, the person giving the objection.
 - “Most people in our society approve of abortion, but abortion is not good.” is necessarily false, and self-contradictory.
 - “If society approved of torturing babies, then I should torture babies” is true, and tautological.
- Individualistic relativism: “X is good” means that the speaker approves of X.
Consequences:
 - People don’t really disagree about ethics.
 - The individual is always right. You can never be mistaken in your moral beliefs.
 - “I approve of abortion, but abortion is wrong.” is self-contradictory.
 - “If I approved of torturing babies, then I should torture babies.” is true and tautological.
 - *Reply*: It is possible to “rigidify” the reference of “good” (fix it to the present speaker’s actual, present attitudes).
 - *Counter-reply*: Change to: “If I approve of torturing babies, then I should torture babies”

Arguments for relativism?

- Some cite the extent of *cultural differences* in moral beliefs. Does this strongly support relativism?
- It seems contradictory (or something) to say, “I approve of x, but x is wrong.” Is relativism the only/best explanation for this?

Dishonest relativism?

- Postow says: it is ‘dishonest’ (or inconsistent?) to (a) profess a moral value system, and (b) profess that an alternative value system is equally valid. Why?
 - (a) means you think people should do act A (say).
 - (b) means that you admit that someone else (with an alternative value system) has no good reason to do A--or no *better* reason to do A than to do some incompatible action.

Examination of Non-Cognitivism:

Two varieties:

- *Emotivism*: Evaluative sentences express speakers' feelings. (Ayer)
- *Prescriptivism*: Evaluative sentences serve to endorse or command courses of action. (Hare)
- Stevenson says: Evaluative sentences function as tools for influencing people's interests. (They do not *describe* people's interests.)

Why people held this:

- In Ayer's case: logical positivism.
- Psychologically, evaluative judgements are associated with emotions.
- General sympathy for anti-realism, + better than subjectivism. Advantages:
 1. Explains the nature of moral disagreement. (To discuss: the role of empirical evidence, arguments in ethics.)
 2. Explains the "magnetism" of the good.
 3. Subjectivism implied that evaluative judgements actually *report facts*, that could be verified purely empirically.

The 'Frege-Geach Problem':

- Deals with "embedded" evaluative sentences. Ex.:
 1. In compound sentences, with logical connectives:
 - "If [*lying is wrong*], then God will punish people for lying."
 - "Either Simpson didn't kill his wife, or [*the verdict was unjust*]."
 2. In propositional-attitude contexts:
 - "John believes that [*war is bad*]."
 - "I hope that [*I haven't done something wrong*]."
 - "Everyone says that [*you should take care of your children*]."
- Why do these create a problem?
 - a. It seems that such sentences would not make sense on the non-cognitivist view. But they make good sense in English.
 - b. Hard to see how the non-cognitivist can give a *systematic semantics* for such sentences, and one in which the meanings of the embedding contexts are constant (i.e., "believes" doesn't shift its meaning, etc.).
 - c. *Evidence* that evaluative sentences are assertive--they go in contexts where propositions normally go.

Problem:

- Evaluative sentences pass every test for assertiveness that works in uncontroversial

cases.

- Take the grammatical form of assertions. Can appear in that-clauses.
- Embedding: Go into any contexts that normally call for proposition-denoting expressions (see above)
- We think we can: *believe, deny, assert, doubt, wonder whether*, etc., an evaluative proposition. We call them “true” and “false”. Any propositional attitude can be applied to an evaluative ‘proposition’.
- They stand in logical relations.
- We argue for/against them.
- We think we may be ‘wrong’ about them. We take time to try to make sure.
- Evaluative *predicates* can be put into any context that calls for a property. E.g., “(x) (Ax → Bx)”
- None of these things works on paradigmatically non-assertive utterances.

Examination of Nihilism/Moral Error Theory

Basic idea:

- All positive evaluations are false. (“x has moral property F”)
- *Why*: Moral language is committed to objective values. There are no objective values. Hence, (positive) moral claims are false.

Main argument for:

1. There are no objective values.
 - a. The argument from ‘queerness.’ The ‘magnetism’ of value. The non-physical, non-natural nature of value.
 - b. The argument from ‘relativity.’
 - 1’. There is almost no cross-cultural agreement on values.
 - 2’. “A judgement about objective fact should be everywhere the same.”
 - 3’. So, probably, there are no objective evaluative facts.
 - c. The epistemological argument.
2. Evaluative sentences assert/presuppose that there are objective values.
 - a. The problems with relativism.
 - b. The problems with non-cognitivism.
3. So, moral evaluations are false.

Where moral language comes from:

- People have feelings of approval/disapproval.
- People ‘project’ feelings onto objects.
- Helps to motivate people to conform to social norms.
- Evidence for this: the way moral facts are supposed to be connected with motivation; the magnetism of the good.

Problem:

- This position is radically counter-intuitive. The following seem to be implications of Mackie’s position:
 1. It is not wrong to torture people just for the fun of it.
 2. Torturing is permissible.
 3. Pleasure isn’t better than suffering.
 4. In general: nothing matters. Nothing is better than anything else. There’s no reason to do or not do anything.
- Mackie says:
 - We can skeptically explain why people might have moral beliefs.
 - There is no need to preserve common sense beliefs or intuitions, if we can provide a

skeptical explanation instead:

“Nor are there ... any non-logical difficulties in the way of our accepting this view, except the persistence of the belief that moral facts are objective. [Note the misstatement.] . . . However firm the belief may be, ... it is not valid evidence for the existence of moral facts.” (85)

- Methodological issues:
 - Should one attempt to preserve common sense beliefs at all, in philosophical theories?
 - If yes, *how serious* of an objection is this?