

## 24.231 Ethics – Handout 4 Brink, “The Form and Content of Moral Judgments”

Brink argues that non-cognitivist theories (he considers emotivism and prescriptivism), which claim to provide an account of the meaning of moral judgments, are implausible, because they cannot accommodate our actual practice of moral judgment, which seems to presuppose cognitivism.

- (1) Many of our moral judgments make reference to moral properties, moral facts, and moral knowledge, all of which non-cognitivists say aren't possible.
  - Examples: “Goodness deserves reward;” “It’s wrong to hold people accountable for actions which they could not know were wrong.”
  - These kinds of judgments seem particularly resistant to non-cognitivist translation.
- (2) It seems like we can make moral judgments without expressing emotions and without attempting to influence the behaviour of others.
  - We can conceive of an *amoralist*, who can make moral judgments but remains unmoved by them;
  - We can conceive of actual situations in which we (or others) might recognize the wrongness of an action but not care about it.
- (3) How can an emotivist translate the following moral judgments?
  - “It’s wrong to hold people accountable for actions which they could not know were wrong.”
  - Possibility: “Boo to holding people accountable for actions to which they could not have sincerely said ‘Boo!’” But is this what we mean to express by the judgment? What about holding an amoralist accountable?
  - “The turpitude of a crime should determine the severity of punishment.”
  - Possibility: “Hooray for determining the severity of punishment of a crime according to how vehemently I boo it”? But again, is this plausibly what we mean to express by the judgment? Most of us believe our moral judgments could be mistaken; in that case, wouldn’t we want the severity of punishment to track the severity of the crime, not the severity of our response to it?
- (4) How does a non-cognitivist account for moral uncertainty, moral disagreement, and the (apparent) possibility of having mistaken moral views?
  - We sometimes think we don’t know the answer to a moral question; emotivism suggests that in that case, we just haven’t yet decided how to respond (and however we end up responding is fine). But to us, it feels like we’re looking for the *right answer* to our question.

- *Contra* Ayer, it seems like we often do continue to disagree (and believe opposing views to be mistaken) even after all questions of non-normative fact have been settled. We don't think our opponent is just in a different mood!
  - Brink suggests that the non-cognitivist might account for the possibility of at least some mistaken moral judgments by appealing to conflicting *attitudes* – if our attitudes are inconsistent, maybe the non-cognitivist could say that that is what it is for one of them to be mistaken. (Brink points out that this leaves us with no guidance as to *which* of two inconsistent attitudes to revise, and doesn't allow that one might have a mistaken but self-consistent and empirically-well-informed set of moral views). But what's wrong with having inconsistent attitudes, particularly if they aren't trying to track an independent moral truth?
  - What does an emotivist think we're doing when we say things like "I used to think gay marriage was wrong, but now I realize I was mistaken"?
- (5) *The Frege-Geach Problem*. The emotivist, as we're starting to see, has particular difficulty explaining the meaning of moral judgments when they are embedded in larger statements that may not themselves be judgments about the rightness or wrongness of actions. Peter Geach developed an influential version of this objection to emotivism. He pointed out that emotivists have a hard time accounting for the apparent straight-forward validity of arguments of this sort:

- (i) If lying is wrong, then lying to your little brother is wrong.
- (ii) Lying is wrong.
- (iii) Therefore lying to your little brother is wrong.

The argument appears to be straightforwardly valid, and we do often reason in this way. But while the emotivist will want to interpret (ii) and (iii) along emotivist lines, (i) cannot easily be interpreted that way. For one thing, the moral judgments in the conditional (both the antecedent and the consequent) are *unasserted* – the speaker isn't actually judging any act wrong in asserting (i). So in this case, surely, the judgment needn't express any emotions on the part of the speaker. For another, there seems to be no way to substitute an emotivist understanding of moral judgments into (i) without making the sentence ungrammatical and incomprehensible. But if we interpret (i) along traditional lines, and give (ii) and (iii) an emotivist interpretation, then an equivocation is introduced into the argument, and it is no longer valid. More on this in class...

If Brink is right that emotivists and other non-cognitivists cannot accommodate all these features of our moral discourse, why should that matter to the emotivist? Why not just think, so much the worse for our moral discourse?

Here it's important to remember that the emotivist was offering an account of the *meaning* of our moral terms (remember also that Ayer rejected subjectivism and utilitarianism because he thought they couldn't adequately accommodate the way we used moral language). Emotivism was supposed to explain what we are actually doing when we make moral judgments, despite the absence (Ayer claims) of moral facts and moral properties. We can accept Ayer's claim about the absence of moral facts and moral properties while rejecting his emotivist account of the

meaning of our moral judgments. That is, we can conclude that because there are no moral facts and properties, our moral judgments are simply *false*. But in that case we've abandoned emotivism for *error theory*.

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