

Meta-ethical approaches

Theory that believes objective moral laws do not exist; a non-cognitivist theory; moral terms express personal emotional attitudes and not propositions; ethical terms are just expressions of personal approval (hurrah) or disapproval (boo); explains why people disagree about morality. A.J. Ayer - ethical statements are neither verifiable nor analytic; made to express joy or pain (emotion); expressed to be persuasive; emotivism is not subjectivism.

Challenges: no basic moral principles can be established; ethical debate becomes a pointless activity; there is no universal agreement that some actions are wrong.

Background: Hume's fork

David Hume (1711-1776) bases his theory of moral language on a famous distinction, which we can call **Hume's fork**, which the emotivists build upon. Language about the real world, argues Hume, is either analytic or synthetic: it is a fork with two prongs, so called, because it gives us two alternative types of language, so that statements about the objective world can only be of one of two sorts.

Hume argued all statements that are either true or false are either analytic or synthetic. An analytic statement is true by definition: "all bachelors are unmarried". The truth or falsehood of this statement is contained in the very idea of "bachelorhood". A synthetic statement, in contrast, can only be verified by sense experience. 'My brother is a bachelor' is synthetic because I can check whether he is or is not married (it's a statement of fact).

Moral statements are neither **analytic** nor **synthetic**, argued Hume, so they're an expression of emotion or sentiment. The fork therefore has two "prongs". The trouble is, moral statements don't fit either the analytic or synthetic "prong", and so are pronounced objectively "meaningless". We mustn't overstate this though: moral statements are still subjectively meaningful - meaningful to me.

Emotivism: AJ Ayer

A.J. Ayer (1910-1989) builds on David Hume's insights discussed above in two senses:

1. Ayer adopts the same **analytic/synthetic** distinction about language about the real world (rather than about metaphysics). Only statements that are either analytic (true by definition) or synthetic (true by observation) are meaningful.
2. Ayer agrees with Hume that moral statements add nothing factual and can have no factual basis. They have no **empirical** basis.

Verification principle

A.J. Ayer argued that statements about reality needed to be verified true or false according to sense experience. In other words, synthetic statements must be subject to the verification principle.

'We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition it purports to express – that is, he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true or reject it as being false.'

(1946:16).

Notice how Ayer, like Hume, attaches verification to a certain sort of empiricism, one that requires observations to be made as to the truth or falsity of a statement.

“There is a table in the next room” can be easily verified by going into the next room and observing. However, the statement “lying is wrong” cannot be subject (or so he argues) to the same experiment.

Ayer concludes that ethical statements had no factual content as they could not be verified true or false.

Take, for example, the utilitarian proposition that actions are good or bad according to the pleasure or pain produced. So “goodness” here is a natural property of an action because it can be measured by consequences.

Echoing the open question argument, Ayer observes:

“It is not self-contradictory to say some pleasant things are not good, or that some bad things are desired”

(Ayer, 1971:139).

So, argues Ayer, if we can still ask the open question “is it good?” after we have asked “is it pleasurable?”, then goodness or badness must mean something else other than the pleasure or pain produced.

Language, Truth and Logic

In *Language Truth and Logic* Ayer sets out to enquire whether “statements of ethical value can be translated into statements of fact” (1946:106). His enquiry therefore concerns the validity of naturalism, which argues that values can always be derived from facts. Ayer is out to establish the philosophical basis of the non-naturalist case. His stated targets are threefold.

1. Utilitarians who argue that “good” is equivalent to “pleasurable”.
2. Subjectivists who see “good” as equivalent to a “feeling of approval”.
3. Intuitionists, because “unless it is possible to provide some criterion by which one may decide between conflicting intuitions, a mere appeal to intuition is worthless as a test of a proposition’s validity” (1946:109), and if we say we “just know” it’s right, this is of only **psychological** interest.

Ayer accepts Moore's **open question argument** that it is not self-contradictory to ask of either feelings or pleasure "okay, smoking dope gives you pleasure, but is it good?" This implies that goodness is independent in some sense of the facts of the matter - independent of natural features of the world. It's worth reading this paragraph in full:

"We reject the subjectivist view that to call an action right, or a thing good, is to say that it is generally approved of, because it is not self-contradictory to assert that some actions which are generally approved of are not right, or that some things which are generally approved of are not good. And we reject the alternative subjectivist view that a man who asserts that a certain action is right, or that a certain thing is good, is saying that he himself approves of it, on the ground that a man who confessed that he sometimes approved of what was bad or wrong would not be contradicting himself. And a similar argument is fatal to utilitarianism. We cannot agree that to call an action right is to say that of all the actions possible in the circumstances it would cause, or be likely to cause, the greatest happiness, or the greatest balance of pleasure over pain, or the greatest balance of satisfied over unsatisfied desire, because we find that it is not self-contradictory to -say that it is sometimes wrong to perform the action which would actually or probably cause the greatest happiness, or the greatest balance of pleasure over pain, or of satisfied over unsatisfied desire, And since it is not self-contradictory to say that some pleasant things are not good, or that some bad things are desired, it cannot be the case that the sentence 'X is good' is equivalent to 'x is pleasant', or to 'x is desired'. And to every other variant of utilitarianism with which I am acquainted the same objection can be made. And therefore we should, I think, conclude that the validity of ethical judgements is not determined by the felicific tendencies of actions, any more than, by the nature of people's feelings; but that it must be regarded as 'absolute' or 'intrinsic', and not empirically calculable."

(1946:107)

Ayer is thus setting out to define the logical properties of ethical judgments such as “stealing is wrong”. Does “stealing is wrong” express an empirically provable proposition? Ethical concepts are not, he argues, agreeing with David Hume, reducible to empirical concepts or things that can be proven by observation. We cannot find an empirical test, argues Ayer, that would establish some fact to arbitrate between two people, one who felt stealing is wrong absolutely and one who felt it wasn’t.

Pseudo-concepts

Ethical statements are not analysable because, argues Ayer, they are pseudo-concepts:

“It follows that any attempt to make our use of ethical concepts the basis of a metaphysical theory concerning the existence of a world of values, as distinct from the world of facts, involves a false analysis of these concepts.”

(1946:119)

But what is a pseudo concept? It is concept which appears to have factual content but in fact does not: it only has metaphysical content.

“The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. Thus if I say to someone, ‘You acted wrongly in stealing that money,’ I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, ‘You stole that money.’ In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, ‘You stole that money,’ in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker”.

(1946:110)

So “stealing money is wrong” is actually, according to Ayer, a statement of an altogether different sort. Rather than appearing to disguise some natural fact about the world within it (naturalism), the moral statement is just the same as saying “Stealing money!!” expressed with certain tone of voice to convey my disapproval. Ayer concludes:

“Another man may disagree with me about the wrongness of stealing, in the sense that he may not have the same feelings about stealing as I have, and he may quarrel with me on account of my moral sentiments. But he cannot, strictly speaking, contradict me. 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”. The function of the word “wrong” here is purely emotive “to express certain feelings about certain objects, but not to make any assertion about them”.

(1946:110)

Ayer explains that ethical statements actually have three functions, a point that is often missed. As well as expressing or evincing feelings, “they are calculated also to arouse feeling, and so to stimulate action”.

How this differs from subjectivism

Ayer is keen to clarify that he is not arguing for subjectivism, even though you and I may think he comes very close to it. This is because the statement “stealing is wrong” does not **necessarily** mean I have the feelings myself. The feeling may have no actual, naturalistic, factual basis in me.

This is a subtle point: Ayer argues that ethical statements are simply forms of expression of feelings, not assertions about those feelings which we could, in principle have empirical arguments about. Remember they are ‘pseudo-concepts’ which appear to make assertions but in fact only make expressions. They have no basis as assertions of fact: they have the logical status only of the words “yuk!”, “Boo!”, “hooray!”.

Hence Ayer’s philosophy is sometimes referred to as the “boo-hooray!” theory, even though textbooks rarely explain fully why Ayer comes to this conclusion. It is grounded in the idea that only certain analytic or synthetic statements are truly **propositions** rather than just **exclamations**. Moral language in a sense hides beneath a cloak of propositional form which proves to be illusory. Ethical judgements, concludes Ayer, have no propositional validity at all, no truth or falsehood claims underpinning them.

Is moral argument impossible?

A common objection to emotivism is that moral arguments become impossible, and moral progress, as suggested by the cartoon, is simply a matter of shouting “Boo!” and “Hooray!” at each other. Ayer accepts that apparently his argument does make disputes about ethical questions impossible. But his way out of the criticism, first put by G.E. Moore, is that “we hold that one really never does dispute about questions of value” (1946:114).

Ayer admits this is a paradoxical conclusion. We think we are engaging in a moral dispute, but the argument itself is an illusion because there are no facts to dispute about (at least, there are no moral facts. There may be facts, of course, about whether my wallet was actually stolen by you). Indeed Ayer accepts this: “in all such cases we find that the dispute is not really about questions of value but about questions of fact” (1946:114). And so, argues Ayer “we argue that he has misconceived the agent’s motive, or that he has misjudged the effects; or that he has failed to take into account the circumstances” (1946:115). All these things are facts; yet the aim of employing these facts is to get him to adopt the same moral attitude as I do - and nothing else. I use facts to try to persuade and move someone to adopt my feelings.

Of course, someone may end up agreeing with me when all facts are known. This is because he or she has the same moral education into feelings of horror or approval. If when all facts are revealed, the person still disagrees with me it is because he or she has undergone a different process of **moral conditioning** to me and then “we abandon the attempt to convince him”, arguing that he (or she) has distorted or undeveloped moral sense; “which means merely that he employs a different set of values from our own”, but “we cannot bring forth any arguments to show that our system is superior,” (1946:115).

Ayer's conclusion is "that moral argument is possible only if some system of values is presupposed". We can argue about someone's consistency in applying their own principles correctly: but we cannot argue about the validity of the principles themselves.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis reveals that it is easy to misintepret what Ayer is saying. He is saying that argument is possible but only of a limited sort.

We can argue about the facts of a case (intentions, motives, circumstances, effects).

We can argue about the consistency with which a moral norm is applied, having identified what it is.

But we cannot argue about the validity of the **principle** itself.

In this sense, Ayer is a **relativist** and radical **non-naturalist**. He is relativist because he imputes moral values to social or cultural conditioning. And he is a non-naturalist because he argues there are no moral facts to appeal to, just descriptions of the situation. His argument stands against any absolutism in ethics, whether it comes from religion or the naturalism of the utilitarians or the non-naturalistic, **a priori** categories of Immanuel Kant.

Sources

AJ Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, Penguin, 2001