Emotivism

Theories of what morality is fall into two broad families - cognitivism and non-cognitivism. The distinction is now understood by philosophers to depend on whether one thinks that moral judgements express beliefs or not.

Non-cognitivism claims that ethical language does not try to describe the world and cannot be true or false. It does not express beliefs, but some other, non-cognitive mental state. Different non-cognitivist theories disagree on exactly what this mental state is, but it is usually an attitude or feeling.

EMOTIVISM

Emotivism claims that moral judgements express the feeling or attitude of approval or disapproval. To say that ‘Murder is wrong’ is to express one’s disapproval of murder. Ethical language is ‘emotive’. So, in one sense, emotivism claims that morality is ‘subjective’. However, there is an important distinction between emotivism and the theory that is called ‘subjectivism’. Subjectivism claims that moral judgements assert or report approval or disapproval, and there is a difference between expressing disapproval and asserting it.

One form of subjectivism claims that to say ‘X is wrong’ is simply to say that it is generally disapproved of. But this can’t be right, because it is not a contradiction to say ‘Most people approve of X, but X is wrong nonetheless’. For example, racism has been very common historically. We may argue that ‘racism is wrong’ even while acknowledging that most people approved of it.

A second form of subjectivism, ‘speaker subjectivism’, claims that the meaning of ‘X is wrong’ is something like ‘I disapprove of X’ or again ‘I think X is wrong’. This is a fact about oneself, so the statement can be true or false and is verifiable. Speaker subjectivism, therefore, is an unusual form of cognitivism: the facts that make moral judgements true are facts about the individual speaker’s mind.

Speaker subjectivism entails that we cannot make mistakes about what is right or wrong. If I say ‘Murder is right’, I am simply stating ‘I approve of murder’. If I am sincere, then I do approve of murder, and so murder is, indeed, right (‘for me’, we might say). But we naturally think that people can make mistakes about morality. Speaker subjectivism makes no sense of deliberation, trying to figure out what is right or wrong. Why should I bother to deliberate? Whatever I come to feel will be right!

By contrast, emotivism claims that moral judgements do not express any kind of truth or falsehood, because they are not cognitive. It can explain the objections to subjectivism above. To say that ‘most people approve of racism’ does not contradict ‘racism is wrong’, because ‘racism is wrong’ doesn’t state something
true or false. And one cannot be infallible in the sense of getting the answer right, there are no moral truths.

AYER’S EMOTIVISM
Ayer’s verification principle claims that a statement only has meaning if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable. A statement is analytic if it is true or false just in virtue of the meanings of the words. A statement is empirically verifiable if empirical evidence would go towards establishing that the statement is true or false.

In Language, Truth and Logic, Ch. 6, Ayer also applies the principle to ethical language. If I say ‘murder is wrong’, this is not analytic, nor can any empirical investigation show this. We can show that murder causes grief and pain, or that it is often done out of anger. But we cannot demonstrate, in the same way, that it is wrong. Moral judgements don’t state truths or falsehoods, and are therefore literally meaningless.

Instead, Ayer argued, they express feelings: ‘If I say to someone, “You acted wrongly in stealing that money”...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’. But not only does moral language express our feelings, it also aims to arouse feelings in others, and so get them to act in certain ways.

In developing his theory, Ayer first distinguishes it from subjectivism. He then compares it to Moore’s intuitionism. He agrees with Moore that ‘X is wrong’ cannot mean ‘X would cause unhappiness’ (or any other proposition substituting a natural property for ‘wrong’). The open question argument shows that it is never a contradiction to say ‘X would cause unhappiness, but it is right to do it nonetheless’. So Ayer agrees that ethical naturalism is wrong.

But he also rejects non-naturalism. As an ethical non-naturalist, of course, Moore believed that moral judgements are about non-natural properties. While they are neither analytic nor empirically verifiable, they are nevertheless true or false. Ayer responds that Moore’s intuitionism is unsatisfactory. We can’t establish the truth or falsity of a moral claim by appealing to intuition unless we are able to provide some criterion for deciding between conflicting intuitions. Intuition itself is no way to verify a claim. Given the verification principle, only an empirical criterion will do. But there is no empirical test that will establish which intuition is correct and which is incorrect. And so, Ayer concludes, moral judgements are not genuinely meaningful, but simply express our feelings of approval or disapproval and arouse such feelings in others.

Rejecting the verification principle
Ayer’s theory depends on the verification principle. But the principle faces a famous objection. According to the verification principle, the principle itself is meaningless. The claim that “a statement only has meaning if it is analytic or can be verified empirically” is not analytic and cannot be verified empirically. But if the principle of verification is meaningless, then what it claims cannot be true. So if the principle is true, it is meaningless, and so not true. Obviously, if it is false, it
is false. Either way it is not true. Therefore, it does not give us any reason to believe that ethical language is meaningless.

Ayer claims that the principle is intended as a definition, not an empirical hypothesis about meaning. In other words, it is intended to reflect and clarify our understanding of ‘meaningful’ uses of words. Ayer accepts that the principle isn’t obviously an accurate criterion of ‘literal meaning’, but that is why he provides arguments in specific cases, such as ethical language, which support it.

But in that case, the verification principle is only as convincing as the arguments that are intended to show that it is the right definition of ‘meaningful’. If we do not find the arguments convincing, the principle provides no independent support.

STEVENSON’S EMOTIVISM

However, emotivism does not depend on the principle of verification nor on Hume’s theory of judgements of reason. As Warnock notes, emotivism as a theory really only developed with the work of Charles Stevenson. Warnock argues that Stevenson makes three central points.

First, Stevenson develops the distinction between beliefs and attitudes. We can understand the difference in terms of the idea of ‘direction of fit’.

A man goes shopping, taking his shopping list with him. When shopping, he uses his list to guide what he puts in his basket. At the end of the shop, what is in his basket should ‘fit’ his list. If it doesn’t, the mistake is with the basket, and the basket should be changed to fit the list. Now suppose that the man is being followed by a store detective. She makes a list of each thing that the man puts in his basket. At the end of the shop, her list should ‘fit’ his basket. If it doesn’t, the mistake is with her list, and the list should be changed to fit the basket.

The shopper’s list is a list of what he wants. Desires have a ‘world-to-mind’ direction of fit. We seek to change the world to fit our desires and thereby satisfy them. They are not true or false, but represent how the world should be. By contrast, the detective’s list is a list of what she believes is in the shopper’s basket. Beliefs have a ‘mind-to-world’ direction of fit. We change our beliefs to fit the world, and thereby have true beliefs. They represent how the world is, not how we want it to be. Stevenson argues that moral attitudes regard what is to be done - they have a world-to-mind ‘direction of fit’ and are non-cognitive.

Second, Stevenson develops the distinction between the descriptive and emotive meanings of words. He argues, quite independent of appeals to the verification principle or the scope of reason, that moral words have emotive meanings, which are neither descriptive nor analytic. The central ethical terms - ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ - only have emotive meanings, of expressing approval or disapproval. But many moral terms (‘steal’, ‘honesty’, ‘respect’) have both descriptive and emotive meanings. To be told that someone is ‘honest’ is to learn something about them. For instance, they can’t be honest while lying frequently! And whether someone lies frequently is a matter of fact. But the term ‘honest’ isn’t just a description; it also has an emotive meaning of approval.
Stevenson’s third claim analyses emotive meaning by connecting meaning to use. The purpose of moral judgements is not to state facts, but to influence how we behave through expressions of approval and disapproval. When we say that ‘x is good’, we do not understand the judgement just by noticing that the speaker approves of x or even by noticing which features of x the speaker approves of. ‘X is good’, and other moral judgements, are used both to express the speaker’s attitudes and to influence the attitudes of other people. Moral terms are ‘dynamic’, and the main purpose of making moral judgements is to ‘create an influence’.

One advantage of this theory is that it easily explains how and why it is that moral judgements motivate us. If moral language were just descriptive, stating how things are, why would that get us to act in certain ways? We need to care. And what we care about is captured in our attitudes to the world. Emotivism connects caring, approving, disapproving, with the very meaning of ethical words.

**OBJECTIONS TO EMOTIVISM**

Warnock argues that emotivism fails as an account of ethical language. First, being emotive and influencing people’s attitudes is something that lots of non-ethical language does as well, e.g. advertising. So we will need to say more to distinguish morality from advertising.

Second, ethical language doesn’t always function to ‘create an influence’. We may express our moral attitudes to others who already agree with them or that we know to be indifferent to our views - so influencing their attitudes is not the purpose. But this doesn’t show that we aren’t expressing a moral judgement.

Third, ethical language isn’t particularly or necessarily emotive. The key moral terms ‘good’, ‘right’, ‘wrong’ and ‘bad’ may arouse emotions in others or express ours, but again, this depends on context. We do not think that it is always good to arouse emotions in others on moral issues, especially by using emotive language. Moral discussion can be, and sometimes should be, dispassionate.

The emotivist could reply to Warnock’s objections by talking about ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ uses. The _purpose_ of ethical language, says emotivism, is to influence what people do. Without this, we would have no ethical language or judgements at all. However, that doesn’t mean that it _always_ has to be used for this purpose. This is normal - many types of language can be used in ‘non-standard’ ways in different situations. For example, it is possible to use fact-stating language to insult someone, e.g. ‘You have a big nose’. That it is an emotive statement on this occasion doesn’t make the _meaning_ of the sentence ‘emotive’ - it states a factual claim. Likewise, language which is standardly emotive can be deployed without the intention to arouse emotion or influence action. Warnock hasn’t shown that ethical language isn’t ‘essentially’ emotive, or that it isn’t always emotive.

There is, however, another objection that emotivism faces. What, _exactly_, is the emotion (or class of emotions) that moral judgements express? Can the emotivist
draw a distinction between moral approval and disapproval and, say, aesthetic approval and disapproval? What makes approval moral or not moral?

Nothing emotivism says places limits on what we can approve or disapprove of. It identifies moral judgements with a particular type of judgement, one that expresses approval, etc., rather than a particular content. Any judgement that expresses approval or disapproval counts as moral. But this can’t be right. Morality is about what is good or bad for human beings generally, given our nature and the types of problems life throws at us. It must relate in some way to what is good for people (or more broadly, animals, the environment, God).

**Moral argument**

One of the most powerful objections to emotivism is that it oversimplifies ethical discussion. If I say ‘abortion is wrong’ and you say ‘abortion is right’, it seems that I am just expressing my disapproval of it and you are expressing your approval. I’m just saying ‘Boo! to abortion’ and you’re saying ‘Hurrah! for abortion’. I am also trying to influence your attitudes. But I am not doing so rationally, or by appealing to facts about what is good or bad. Trying to influence people without reasoning is just a form of manipulation. Emotivism reduces moral argument to propaganda.

Ayer responds that moral arguments are not arguments over moral judgements, but over facts: ‘we do not attempt to show by our arguments that he has the “wrong” ethical feeling towards a situation whose nature he has correctly apprehended. What we attempt to show is that he is mistaken about the facts of the case.’ When arguing over animal rights, say, we are constantly drawing facts to each other’s attention. I point out how much animals suffer in factory farms. You point out how much more sophisticated human beings are than animals. I point out that it is unkind to kill animals for food. You respond that people are not motivated by unkindness, and indeed, farmers can be very kind to the animals when alive. And so on. But if we both agree on the facts, but still disagree morally, there is nothing left to discuss, says Ayer, no further argument can take place. Moral judgements always presuppose a system of values; but no arguments for these values can be given.

But if you and I disagree about a moral judgement, and moral judgements have no truth value, are we right to say that there is a ‘disagreement’ here at all? Isn’t a disagreement when you think some claim is true and I think it is false?

Stevenson responds that a moral disagreement is a disagreement in attitude. It is a practical disagreement - no one can live both by the attitude that ‘eating meat is wrong’ and by the attitude that ‘eating meat is right’. Attitudes can be discussed, because people do not have feelings or make choices in isolation. Any attitude has implications for other attitudes. If I disapprove of an action, I must also have similar feelings about similar actions, or my attitudes will not provide consistent guidance about how to live. Moral disagreement, then, can be about the relations between different attitudes. For example, deciding whether eating meat is right or wrong is complicated because there are many attitudes involved, sympathy towards the animal, attitudes towards death, feelings about the place of human beings in nature, and so on. It is difficult to work out how these attitudes can all be acted upon, and that is why people disagree.
We may still object that weighing up which attitudes to give up, which to keep, is a rational process. Emotivism does not give us an adequate account of deliberation. If you are unsure about whether something, lying say, is right or wrong, we can understand that you are trying to work out what your attitude towards lying should be. But why can’t you settle the question of whether lying is right or wrong by simply noting whatever attitude you already have towards it? If emotivism is right, it seems that thinking hard about the question is irrational. We can put the point another way: emotivism doesn’t explain how someone can rationally change their mind on a moral issue. First, they have one attitude, then they have another. But what reason do they have to change their mind?

Warnock develops the objection in a different way: if moral judgements and arguments are about influencing people’s attitudes, then a good moral argument will be one that is effective. That is all. There is no other, e.g. rational, criterion by which we might judge that it is a good or bad argument. Whatever I appeal to, to make you change your mind, no matter how irrelevant or far-fetched, if it makes you change your mind, it is a good argument. This is highly unsatisfactory.

We can take the point deeper still. We think of good arguments in terms of validity (for deductive arguments) and whether the premises give us a good reason to believe the conclusion. A valid argument is one in which if the premises are true, the conclusion has to be true. But according to non-cognitivism, moral judgements are not true (or false). So consider this argument:

1. It is wrong to murder.
2. If it is wrong to murder, then it is wrong to pay other people to murder for you.
3. Therefore, it is wrong to pay other people to murder for you.

We would normally say that this argument is valid. But according to emotivism, both (1) and (3) don’t state truths at all, they express attitudes. And so the argument is not valid. So if emotivism is right, there can be no moral arguments.