

# Expressivism/non-cognitivism

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# The classic version

- "X is wrong" doesn't report that X has a property.
- It isn't in the reporting business. It expresses an attitude of the speaker.
- (Contrast: "Snow is white" does report that snow has a property, and expresses a speaker's belief that snow is white.)
- What does "X is wrong" express? An attitude of (comparative) disapproval; a decision against X (X isn't the thing to do); a disvaluing of X; a decision to recommend against X; ....
- "X is wrong" lacks truth conditions.
- If it had truth conditions, they could only be: "X is wrong" is true iff X has the property of being wrong (in the inclusive sense of "property").
- Mutatis mutandis for "X is right/good".

# The classic version

- Expressivism isn't a version of subjectivism.
- Subjectivism is the thesis that "X is wrong" reports something about attitudes to X.
- = expresses the belief that X is wrong.
- There is no such thing as the belief that X is wrong, for that could only be the belief that X has the property of being wrong.
- (Expressivism  $\neq$  anti-realism.)
- The classic model for thinking about non-cognitivism: "Boo" and "Hooray"; wincing etc.
- The importance of this model—it is a kind of possibility proof.

# The classic version

- It isn't important that "hooray" etc aren't indicative sentences. Consider "She's a saint" or 'He's as crooked as a dog's hind leg" or 'They are one-eyed'.
- A second kind of possibility proof: a common view about indicative conditionals.
- No truth theories of indicative conditionals are real contenders.
- (I think, however, that they are false, or maybe it is vague whether they are).
- They remind us that sentences can have all the 'marks' of the truth apt while failing to be truth apt.

# Imperatives as a third kind of possibility proof?

- Think of 'X is wrong' as like an order not to do X?
- Two problems.
  - It isn't obvious that imperatives don't have truth conditions.
  - More importantly. This doesn't help explain the big difference between expressivism and subjectivism.
- The way orders work is by making public what we want.
- The difference between "If your room is untidy, you will be fined" and "Tidy your room" is that the first says nothing per se about what we want, whereas the second does.
- There is no such thing as 'ungrounded' prescription.

# A big problem

- Clearly, the production of ethical sentences is a species of intentional action, and one that has some intimate relationship to attitudes if non-cognitivism is true.
- What might that relation be? (A word isn't an answer – the French use a different word).
- It is hard to say and it is a curious fact is that this issue hasn't received more attention. Maybe the reason is that people thought there was an easy answer.
- We all agree that "Snow is white" expresses the belief that snow is white but does not report the belief. ("I believe that snow is white" does the second.)

# A big problem

- We all agree that "More ice cream" expresses the desire for more ice cream but does not report the desire. ("I desire more ice cream" does that.)
- So let's say: "X is good" expresses a pro-attitude but does not report it, where 'expresses' means what it does in the previous two dot points.
- Trouble: we know what makes it true that "More ice cream" expresses my desire for more ice cream – the fact that "More ice cream" reports the content of my desire. Mutatis mutandis in the belief case.
- But this sense of 'expresses' isn't/cannot be the one at work when an expressivist says that 'X is good' expresses a pro-attitude towards X.
- No-one thinks that 'X is good' reports that X will happen.

- "Expressivism, critics have charged over and over again, is committed to the view that what is wrong somehow depends on or at least correlates with the attitudes that we have toward it. Arguments to this effect are sometimes subtle, and sometimes rely on fancy machinery, but they all share a common flaw. They all fail to respect *the fundamental idea of expressivism: that 'stealing is wrong' bears exactly the same relationship to disapproval of stealing as 'grass is green' bears to the belief that grass is green.*" (Mark Schroeder, "Does expressivism have subjectivist consequences?" p. 1—Full disclosure: Philip and I are targets)
- But the bit in italics is mistaken.
- The content of 'grass is green' = the content of the belief that grass is green.
- The content of 'stealing is wrong' isn't the content of disapproval of stealing. The content of disapproval of stealing is what is disapproved of, namely stealing happening.



# Why this point matters

- If the contents of mental states match up with the contents of sentences, we can use the mental states to nail down the contents of the sentences and the references of the words in the sentences.
- Someone produces 'A is F' when B is in full view and obviously has the property of being G.
- It is clear that they believe that B is G.
- You infer that 'A' refers to B, and that 'F' refers to being G.
- How then do we solve the puzzle set by 'If Obama was there, Romney wasn't'? Isn't 'Obama was there' supposed to express the belief that Obama was there, but one who produces the conditional doesn't believe that Obama was there?
- By telling the standard story about reference and combinatorial semantics.
- One way of stating the Frege-Geach problem for is to note that this answer isn't available to non-cognitivists. Reason: normative terms aren't in the content clauses for mental states.

A connection with p. 108 of Mark Schroeder,  
"Expression for expressivists".

- The idea is this. Every sentence in the language is associated with conditions in which it is semantically correct to use that sentence assertorically. But we are not to think of those conditions as truth conditions so much as use conditions. After all, a speaker who is mistaken about who is president of the United States, believing it to be John McCain, is not making a linguistic mistake by asserting, “the president of the United States is John McCain.”
- Comment: use conditions that mention belief automatically generate truth conditions.
- (Here is where he misreads Philip and me – we meant use conditions in the above sense.)

# The causal connections between mental states and sentences

- Maybe, the key idea is that the causal connection between belief that grass is green and producing "Grass is green" is mirrored in the causal connection between disapproval of stealing and producing "Stealing is wrong".
- The belief that grass is green sometimes causes the production of "I believe that grass is green" and sometimes "Grass is green".
- Neither looks like a good model for non-cognitivists for the relation between disapproval and "Stealing is wrong".
- The first case would make "Stealing is wrong" a report of disapproval; the second would make it have the content of the attitude (that stealing not happen).

## Why believe non-cognitivism – metaphysics

- The non-moral nature of our world is the total nature of our world.
- Analyses of the moral in terms of the non-moral are hopeless.
- Identifications of the moral in terms of the non-moral fall to the open question argument or some variation thereof.
- Error theories cannot say wherein the error consists.
- (Analogy with philosophy of conditionals.)

## Why believe it--internalism?

- It explains the conceptual connection between judging that X is wrong and being against doing X.
- But note that this cannot be quite the right way for non-cognitivists to say it. When they deny that there are moral beliefs, that's meant (should be meant) as a denial that there are moral cognitive attitudes in general, not as a bias against belief.
- (Point for later, what about those who say that non-cognitivists identify believing X is right with, say, approving of X?)

- But can a cognitivist who includes a subjectivist element in their view do equally well?
- Suppose that to believe that X is right is to believe that you approve of X, or would approve of X in such and such idealised conditions.
- If anything like that is right, fallibilism about one's beliefs (and especially about one's beliefs about one's desires) tells us the connection between judging that X is right and being motivated towards it is contingent.

# Why believe non-cognitivism?

- All the same, if subjectivism is true, if you are invited to perform an imaginative exercise to test whether or not you can sincerely judge that X is right while having no positive feelings towards X, you'll find this hard to do.
- Imagining a case where X is right will involve imagining a case where you are aware that you take it that X is right, but then you'll be aware of positive feelings towards X.
- NB. Being aware of positive feelings towards X is like something's looking red to one. It's all in the way the item in question presents itself to you.
- Diaphanousness is as true of 'moral sentiment' as it is of perceptual experience.

# Why believe it–disagreement?

- It explains disagreement in a way that subjectivism cannot.
- Here we need to ask, What does 'disagreement' mean in these contexts?
- Often, what is meant is something like: X and Y disagree iff they each make a claim about how things are, and if one claim is true, the other is false. (Except that it isn't essential that they utter.)
- But we do allow that, e.g., difference in belief can amount to disagreement in some reasonable sense. How so?
- Is it just a matter of inconsistency in the *content* of belief, in which case it wouldn't be a new way to disagree.



- Not always. What then is going on?
- There's a constraint on belief. You should collect new information until the cost outweighs the return.
- The disagreement can then be over whether the tipping point has been reached.
- A subjectivist can borrow from this idea. Not all desires are equal. The desires that we report when we use moral terms are ones that pass certain tests – the one's that can be universalised, the one's it is rational to have, the one's that ... .
- However, the key point is that disagreement is 'in the head'. Uttering makes disagreement salient; it doesn't create it.

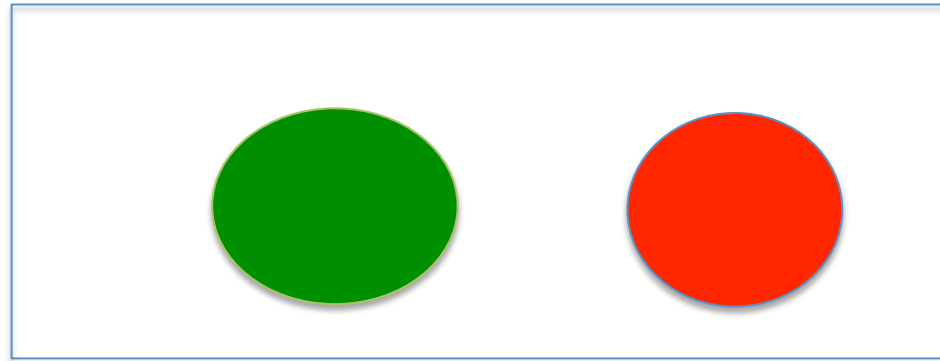
- But non-cognitivism doesn't traffic in new mental states – better, classical non-cognitivism doesn't.
- They both agree that there are: states of approval and disapproval, states of valuing, such a thing as settling on a course of action as the thing to do, having various beliefs about ones attitudes and those one's friends and ones 'better self', desires that things happen or not happen, etc.
- The difference lies entirely in the connections between these agreed mental states and the sentences that come out of our mouths.

# Complications

- Minimalism about truth
- "Does this mean that there are no facts of what I ought to do, no truths and falsehoods? Previously I thought so, but other philosophers challenged me to say what this denial could mean. In this book, I withdraw the denial and turn non-committal. In one sense there clearly are “facts” of what a person ought to do, and in a sense of the word ‘true’ there is a truth of the matter. That’s a minimalist sense, in which “It’s true that pain is to be avoided” just amounts to saying that pain is to be avoided—and likewise for “It’s a fact that”. Perhaps, as I used to think, there are senses too in which we can sensibly debate whether ought conclusions are true or false." A. Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live*, p. x.

# A way to think about this issue

- The truth of sentences and of beliefs supervenes on being. That's the non-minimalist sense of 'truth'.



- The green worlds are those where sentence, S, or belief, B, is true; the red ones those where the sentence or belief is false.
- The supervenience of truth on being says that the two sets of worlds differ in a respect over and above the difference in truth value of the sentence or belief.

- How then might one doubt that indicative conditionals, say, have truth conditions? By doubting that there is any principled way to say how the worlds differ.
- But this leaves us with a question.

- How come: "If it rains, the match will be cancelled" = "It is a fact that if it rains, the match will be cancelled" = "If it rains, the match will be cancelled" is true?
- Obviously, we cannot give the standard answer:
- "If it rains, the match will be cancelled" is true iff if it rains, the match will be cancelled

is true because the LHS is true iff things are as "If it rains then the match will be cancelled" represents things to be, and that is given by the RHS.

- What we have to say is that the equivalences reflect a fact about English usage, not to be understood as a fact about the property of being true as applied to sentences.
- This is not the same as an explanation in terms of truth as a device of semantic ascent.

## A second complication

- Classical non-cognitivism says that there is no such animal as the belief that stealing is wrong. (And the same goes for thinking or judging that stealing is wrong.)
- What then are we to make of:
- "...the expressivist thinks that we can say interestingly what is involved for a subject *S* to *think* that *X* is good. It is for *S* to value it, ..." (Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, p. 50, my emphasis)
- To *judge* that *X* is right is to decide that *X* is the thing to do. (Suggested by some words of Gibbard's)
- *Believing* that stealing is wrong = disapproval of stealing (from a paper by Mark Schroeder)

- Suppose in a mind seminar someone said 'Disapproval of stealing is a belief'. Wouldn't you tell them they'd made a simple mistake. Disapproval is one thing; belief is another.
- What then might be being said when (some) non-cognitivists say that disapproval of stealing is the belief that stealing is wrong?
- Something about word usage. We talk of accepting a proposition and of accepting a donation. Maybe 'belief' when attached to moral terms has a special meaning. On this reading, there's no substantive change from the classical version of non-cognitivism.
- A claim that there are states that are simultaneously beliefs and states of disapproval, where the beliefs are beliefs proper – they take propositional objects.



- But now it is obscure why this isn't a version of cognitivism with a claim about the nature of what's believed when one has a belief of the kind captured by moral terms.
- A thesis of the kind discussed when people talk about besires and all that.