

Lecture 18: Old-School Expressivism: Ayer's Emotivism

I. Background: Logical Positivism

Logical positivism was a philosophical movement associated with the ideas and attitudes of a study group from the 1920s known as the *Vienna Circle* (M. Schlick, R. Carnap, H. Feigl, O. Neurath, and others).

The central claim of logical positivism was the *principle of verification*, which A. J. Ayer formulates as follows:

the principle of verification: Every literally meaningful statement is either *empirically verifiable* or *analytic*.

Logical positivists used the principle of verification to argue that many metaphysical, theological, aesthetic, and ethical claims are *literally meaningless*, and so neither true nor false.

II. Ayer's Emotivism Introduced

Suppose I utter the words, "Stealing is wrong." It does not appear that I have said anything analytically true or empirically verifiable. So is this a counterexample to the principle of verification? Not if we deny that my utterance was literally meaningful.

Ayer's suggestion is that such an utterance, rather than *describing* how the world is, instead merely *expresses* my attitudes (feelings, sentiments) about the world:

"... 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" (p. 107).

This implies that moral utterances (and moral judgments more generally) are not *truth-apt*:

"If a sentence makes no statement at all, there is obviously no sense in asking whether what it says is true or false. And we have seen that sentences which simply express moral judgments do not say anything. They are pure expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood" (p. 108).

In addition to expressing feelings, moral utterances can also be used to incite certain feelings in others:

"... ethical terms do not serve only to express feeling. They are calculated also to arouse feeling, and so to stimulate action. ... Thus the sentence 'You ought to tell the truth' may be regarded both as the expression of a certain sort of ethical feeling about truthfulness and as an expression of the command, 'Tell the truth'" (p. 108).

Putting these elements together, we may formulate Ayer's brand of emotivism as follows:

emotivism: Moral judgments do not express beliefs that are truth-apt, but rather serve to express the judge's attitudes of approval and disapproval, and to arouse similar feelings in others.

Expressivism is the more modern term for any theory according to which moral judgments express attitudes rather than beliefs.

Non-cognitivism used to be the general term for any view according to which moral judgments do not express cognitive, belief-like states that can count as knowledge, but contemporary expressivists resist that label, since many of them hold that moral knowledge is in fact possible.

III. Four Advantages of Emotivism

Some advantages of emotivism:

- *It is fully compatible with the scientific conception of the world* (no metaphysical or epistemological queerness, can respond to Harman's explanatory argument, etc.).
- *It can account for an internal connection between moral judgment and motivation.*
- *It allows us to go on using moral predicates and to go on uttering moral sentences* (no need to jettison moral discourse as a whole).
- *It can explain why there seems to be widespread, intractable moral disagreement.*

IV. The Frege–Geach Problem

Peter Geach attributes the following point to Frege:

the Frege point: Sentences can occur in free-standing (or “asserted”) contexts and embedded (or “unasserted”) contexts without changing in meaning.

For example, it appears that “plagiarizing is wrong” has the same meaning in each of the following sentences:

“Plagiarizing is wrong.”

“It’s not the case that plagiarizing is wrong.”

“Is it case that plagiarizing is wrong?”

“If plagiarizing is wrong, then allowing someone to plagiarize your paper is wrong.”

“A. J. hopes that plagiarizing is wrong.”

This raises a dilemma for the emotivist:

- *first horn:* Insist that “plagiarizing is wrong” has the same meaning in all contexts.
Then “It’s not the case that plagiarizing is wrong” appears to be as nonsensical as “It’s not the case that boo plagiarizing!” (and similarly for other embedded contexts).
- *second horn:* Insist that “plagiarizing is wrong” has a different meaning in free-standing and embedded contexts.

Then the following argument seems to commit the fallacy of equivocation:

1. Plagiarizing is wrong. [*premise*]
2. If plagiarizing is wrong, then allowing someone to plagiarize your paper is wrong. [*premise*]
3. So, allowing someone to plagiarize your paper is wrong. [*follows from 1, 2*]

Similarly, “Plagiarizing is wrong” would not be an answer to the question “Is it the case that plagiarizing is wrong?”; one could not deny an utterance of “Plagiarizing is wrong” by stating, “It’s not the case that plagiarizing is wrong”; and so on.

V. The Moral Attitude Problem

When I say, “Donating to charity is good,” what attitude am I expressing?

- *answer 1:* Garden-variety approval. (Then we can’t account for the difference in meaning between “Donating to charity is good,” “Donating to charity is mandatory,” “Donating to charity is supererogatory,” “Donating to charity is morally admirable,” and so on.)
- *answer 2:* An irreducible, *sui generis* feeling of moral approval. (So there is an irreducible feeling corresponding to every possible moral predicate?)
- *answer 3:* A feeling that is reducible to some conglomeration of other non-moral feelings. (Okay, then show us the money: which ones?)