Ayer's emotivist theory of value

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November 26, 2004

1 The problem posed by ethical claims

Ayer's philosophical system, as we've discussed it so far, divides sentences into three categories: the verifiable, the logical/analytic, and the meaningless. But there is a problem in seeing how ethical claims fit into any of these three categories. Ethical claims do not seem to be verifiable in any way; they are certainly not in general truths of logic; and it does not seem as plausible to claim that they are completely meaningless as it was to claim that metaphysical sentences like "The Absolute is lazy" are meaningless. As Ayer says,

> "It will be said that 'statements of value' are genuine synthetic propositions, but that they cannot with any show of justice be represented as hypotheses, which are used to predict the course of our sensations; and, accordingly, that the existence of ethics and aesthetics as branches of speculative knowledge presents an insuperable objection to oour radical empiricist thesis.
>
> In face of this objection, it is our business to give an account of 'judgements of value' which is both satisfactory in itself and consistent with our general empiricist principles. ..." (102-3)

Another way to put this is that Ayer's aim is to come up with an explanation of the fact that ethical claims are clearly useful in some cases without claiming that they are fact-stating claims which correspond to a verification-transcendent reality.

2   Four classes of ethical sentences

Ayer says that the claims made in ethical treatises usually falll into four classes:

1. Definitions of ethical terms.

2. Descriptions of 'moral experience.'

3. Exhortations to ethical virtue.

4. Ethical judgements.

Ayer is really concerned only with the fourth of these, since (in his view) this is the only class that reallly poses a special problem for his radical empiricism. The first class is just concerned with claims about the meanings of words, which is not a particular ethical subject matter. The second class are just claims about a certain class of perceptions, and accordingly falls under the philosophy of perception. The third class are obviously not fact-stating claims at all; they are, rather, imperatives, like 'Be honest!'

The fourth class concerns sentences like 'Killing innocent people for fun is wrong.' These sentences are problematic because (i) unlike 'Be honest', they appear to be making factual claims, (ii) unlike 'The Absolute is lazy,' they appear to be sentences with some kind of meaning, and (iii) unlike 'This is red,' they do not seem to describe any verifiable matter of fact.

3   The reduction of ethics

One response to this problem, which has been historically important, is to say that, contrary to experiences, ethical sentences do correspond to observable matters of fact. On this view, ethical claims are genuinely fact-stating in just the way that the claims of science are; but this does not pose any problem for radical empiricism.

The way to give such a view, Ayer says, is to see whether ethical terms like 'good' can be translated into non-ethical terms. He says:

> "What we are interested in is the possibility of reducing the whole sphere of ethical terms tto non-ethical terms. We are enquiring whether statements of ethical value can be translated into statements of empirical fact." (104)

Why this would resolve the problem about the status of ethical claims.

To pursue this reductionist strategy, one has to come up with some non-ethical definition of words like 'good' and 'right.' One popular strategy for doing this, which Ayer discusses, is a kind of *consequentialism*. On this strategy, one defines right action as action which produces the most in the way of good consequences, and then offers a definition of 'good.'

The two kinds of consequentialism Ayer discusses are *utilitarianism* and *subjectivism*:

> "...the utilitarian defines the rightness of actions, and the goodness of ends, in terms of the pleasure, or happiness, or satisfaction, to which they give rise; the subjectivist, in terms of the feelings of approval which a certain person, or group of people, has towards them." (104)

But Ayer thinks that there is a general problem which shows that no reductionist view of this kind can be correct. This is what he says:

> "Nevertheless we shall not adopt either a subjectivist or a utilitarian analysis of ethical terms. 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 a similar argument is fatal to utilitarianism ..." (104-105)

This argument is of the following general form:

1. If some reduction of ethics to a non-ethical subject matter is true, then for any ethical sentence S there is some synonymous non-ethical sentence $S*$.
2. If any two sentences S and $S*$ are synonymous, then the conjunction of one with the negation of the other is a contradiction.
3. But for any ethical sentence S, the conjunction of S with the negation of its supposed non-ethical translation is never contradictory.
   C. No reduction of ethics to a non-ethical subject matter can be correct.

Another alleged problem with the view that ethical sentences are fact-stating which was prominent at the time was the challenge posed by a form of 'internalism', which holds that there is an internal, or necessary, connection between some class of ethical facts or ethical judgements and the motivations of agents. E.g., according to one simple version of the view, the following is a necessary truth:

> If an agent judges that ϕing is good, then the agent must be motivated to ϕ.

But many have thought that this kind of necessary connection would be mysterious if ethical sentences were fact-stating.

4   Ethical absolutism

Since it seems that ethical sentences are fact-stating, if we conclude that ethical sentences do not talk about some non-ethical subject matter, it is tempting to conclude that ethical sentences correspond to a special ethical reality. Ayer says,

> In admitting that normative ethical concepts are irreducible to empirical concepts, we seem to be leaving the way clear for the 'absolutist' view of ethics –

that is, the view that statements of value are not controlled by observation, as ordinary empirical propositions are, but only by a mysterious 'intellectual intuition.' A feature of this theory, which is seldom recognized by its advocates, is that it makes statements of value unverifiable." (106)

Why Ayer cannot accept the absolutist view of ethics. Epistemological problems with the absolutist view.

The dilemma with which rejection of the absolutist view and reductionist views leaves us.

5   Ayer's emotivist alternative

Ayer expresses the heart of his theory on p. 107:

"We begin by admitting that the fundamental ethical concepts are unanalysable . . . But, unlike the absolutists, we are able to give an explanation of this fact about ethical concepts. We say that the reason why they are unanalysable is that they are mere pseudo-concepts. 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."

The difference between assertions about emotion and expressions of emotion. Why the latter rather than the former figures in Ayer's theory.

6   The problem of moral disagreement

Often, we seem to argue over what is right and wrong, good or bad. But if ethical claims have 'no objective validity' at all, how can we make sense of this fact? (See pp. 110 ff.)