

Meta-Ethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism

Problem: Is there a difference between moral realism and irrealism? If so, what is it?

I. The Usual Distinction and its Problems

- Two kinds of irrealists
 - Non-factualists or Anti-realists say that moral judgements do not express any sort of proposition.
 - Error theorists say that moral judgements do express propositions but uniformly (or almost uniformly) false ones. Moral talk is like talk about astrology.
- Two problems for the usual distinction
 - Accommodation of moral language
 - Ordinary people speak of moral facts, truths, and properties, and expressivists don't want to be revisionists about moral language. When people say "It's *true* that slavery is wrong" or "It's a *fact* that slavery is wrong", these seem to just be emphatic ways of saying "slavery is wrong".
 - Why do expressivists want to vindicate ordinary use? For one, you might think that the principle of charity would favor some account of moral language that doesn't say that people are wrong when they say "it's true that slavery is wrong." All other things being equal, it seems like a theoretical virtue for a semantic theory to be less revisionary about the language they are trying to give an account of.
 - Creeping minimalism
 - Truth: All there is to know about truth is the schema: 'S' is true iff S.
 - Propositions: The expression "the proposition that" just serves as a logical-grammatical device to form noun phrases out of sentences, helpful for generalizing. Since there are meaningful ethical sentences, there are ethical propositions.
 - Properties: "x has the property of being F iff x is F". There is a property for each intelligible predicate, but no ontological commitment involved in accepting these minimal, deflated properties. Since "wrong" behaves as a predicate, there trivially is such a thing as the property of wrongness.

II. Direction of Fit distinction

- Realism vs Expressivism: Is the state of mind expressed by ordinary moral judgement have a mind to world or world to mind direction of fit? Are they more like beliefs or desires?
- Problem: "Cognitivist Expressivism" accepts the view that moral statements are assertions that express beliefs.

- Minimalism about Assertions: Why think there can't be non-descriptive assertions? "There is no interesting deep property that marks the genuinely asserteric from the non-assertoric, but only the grammatical features that a sentence wears on its sleeve"
- Minimalism about Beliefs: "Assertion has the following analytical tie to belief: if someone makes an assertion, and is supposed sincere, it follows that she has a belief whose content can be captured by means of the sentence used".
- Can't one still say that only realists think moral statements *describe* and *represent* the world?
 - Minimalism about describing/representing: "If someone asked you to describe Macbeth, you might say he is a good man turned bad by ambition". There is a plain, ordinary sense of "representation" for which moral language clearly describes.
 - But do moral statements describe mind-independent parts of the world? Well, ordinary people wouldn't say that slavery would be fine if "slavery-haters mellowed out", so apparently they do.

III. Interlude on the problem

- Can't we still distinguish error theorists from realists? So, the problem isn't really whether there's a distinction between realism and irrealism, but whether there's a distinction between realism and expressivism.
- Accommodation: Isn't there a problem here about the boundary of ethics and meta-ethics? Expressivists are expressivists *about ethics*, and hence should try to accommodate ethical discourse (like "slavery is wrong"), but presumably they are not expressivists about meta-ethics (which would be a separate meta-meta-ethical view), so they shouldn't try to accommodate meta-ethical discourse (like "there are mind-independent moral properties", "moral judgements represent the world", etc.) They should be fine in saying that realist views are just mistaken. In fact, plenty of "ordinary people" also say things like "morality is all relative and not mind-independent", "morality is just a fiction" etc. So, it seems impossible to accommodate all the meta-ethical talk among ordinary people. So, accommodation shouldn't pressure expressivists to change their meta-ethical view to match the realist's.
- Minimalism: It's hard to see how debates over minimalism could have much relevance to the disagreement between the expressivist and the realist. Presumably expressivists are motivated to pursue expressivism (at least in part) because they think realism has unwanted *metaphysical* commitments (of the sort Schroeder goes through in Chapter 1 – how there can be intrinsically motivating mind-independent properties, commitments to "non-naturalism" etc.). So, the distinction between the two views should make it evident that realists are committed to different metaphysical views. But debates about minimalism are debates in the philosophy of language about how to best understand the meaning of words like "true", "proposition", "belief", "assertion", etc. in ordinary language. But surely how to best understand those words is completely independent of the sort of metaphysical worries the expressivist has. Basically, whether there is a

distinction (and exactly what it is) between expressivism and realism should be independent of debates of minimalism, and we should be able to capture the distinction (if there is one) without presupposing any view in these debates about minimalism.

- Empirical distinction?: Here's another worry about any philosophical argument trying to establish that there's no distinction between expressivism and realism. It seems an open empirical possibility that there be evidence favoring expressivism over realism. This is sufficient for there to be a distinction (so, whether or not there's a distinction can't turn on any delicate metaphysical issues, as Dreier will say it does). A crucial expressivist claim is that making a moral judgement is more similar to a desire-like or intention/planning state. Realists say it's more like ordinary descriptive beliefs. Presumably there can be empirical evidence about what sort of mental state we are in when we acquire moral beliefs, make moral judgements, and engage in moral discourse (e.g. where/how our brain stores such information, which parts of our brain are active, etc) It might turn out that the brain treats moral beliefs/judgement/discourse very similarly to desire-like states like plans or intentions, or it might turn out that the brain treats moral matters in just the same way as descriptive matters. Wouldn't this empirical evidence at least be *relevant* to the debate between expressivism vs realism?

IV. How to formulate the distinction

- Hawthorne/Price on *functional pluralism*: "The non-cognitivists essential claim is that the function of ethical discourse is different from that of, say, scientific discourse, in some philosophically significant respect". "Realists...think that we can best understand normative belief by understanding its special objects. Irrationalists...think that what's special about normative believe is not its object, but ... its special function."
- Fine on Realism: Take an embedded normative statement like

(E) Edith says that abortion is wrong

Each theorist will fill in the blank differently

(G) Its being the case that (E) consists of nothing more than _____.

Where (G) is supposed to be a statement of ground. The blank is supposed to be filled with "the most fundamental" or "most illuminating" explanation available (Dreier glosses over these two characterizations, but they seem distinct...) Expressivists will fill it with, say, "Edith expressing her shame-related attitude towards abortion." Realists have to fill it with something that essentially appeals to normative concepts.

- Why use embedded normative claims? First, the expressivist might think that normative sentences like "Slavery is wrong" on their own are not the sort of things that are apt to be grounded. Also, if they were to ground those in certain mental facts about us, then expressivists would seem to be committed to unwanted mental counterfactuals of the form "If we had different mental states, slavery wouldn't be wrong". That would be bad for them.

- Gibbard on Explanation: “An irrealist says that the best explanation of normative thought and talk involves no reference to the normative properties themselves, while a realist disagrees.”
- Dreier’s synthesis: “expressivists are distinguished by their claim that there is nothing to making a normative judgement over and above being in a state that plays a certain “non-cognitive” psychological role, a role more like desire than it is like factual belief. In particular, to explain what it is to make a moral judgement, we need not mention any normative properties.”
 - Crucially, “explain” here is not “causally explain”, but “metaphysically” explain.
- Is there a deflationist/minimalist worry here about “explanation” vs “EXPLANATION”?