

Notes on Chapter 3 of Schroeder's *Noncognitivism in Ethics*  
("The Frege-Geach Problem, 1939-1970")

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September 8, 2016

## 1 Lead-up: Ayer, Stevenson, and Hare on the meaning of moral language

In the first two chapters, Schroeder discusses the noncognitivist views of Ayer, Stevenson, and Hare (regarding the meaning of moral language). Roughly, the meaning of (simple) moral assertions (*e.g.*, (1) " $\phi$ ing is good") comes down to their *use* in the performance of some speech act ( $\Phi$ ), which involves/can involve:

**Ayer:** the *expression* of (presumably, positive) emotions, feelings, or attitudes of the *speaker* (re  $\phi$ ing).

**Stevenson:** (a) the (factual) indication that the *speaker approves* of  $\phi$ ing, (b) the *endorsement* of this approval, and (c) the *encouragement/invoking/causing* of the *hearer* to approve of  $\phi$ ing as well.

**Hare:** the *commendation* of  $\phi$ ing (by the *speaker*). Commending is *distinct* from Ayer/Stevenson's *expressing* (speaker states of mind) and Stevenson's *encouraging/invoking/causing* (hearer approval).

## 2 The Frege-Geach Problem: The Basic Problem

The *embedding* of simple moral assertions in more complex expressions raises questions regarding noncognitivist strategies for *generalizing* accounts of the meanings of simple moral assertions to explications of the meanings of complex moral statements. *E.g.*, let  $P$  be some factual claim (*e.g.*, it's raining), and consider:

(2) *Either  $\phi$ ing is good, or  $P$ . [i.e., either (1) or  $P$ .]*

We know what Ayer, Stevenson, and Hare would say about the purpose/meaning — *in isolation* — of the simple moral assertion (1) that is the first disjunct of (2). For instance, Hare would say that " $\phi$ ing is good" — when uttered *in isolation* — involves *commending  $\phi$ ing*. But, presumably (*whatever* commending is, exactly), asserting (2) *need not* involve commending  $\phi$ ing (perhaps the speaker is undecided about whether to commend  $\phi$ ing, but they assert (2) because they believe that  $P$  is *true*). Similarly (*mutatis mutandis*) for the views of Ayer and Stevenson. More generally, we would (ideally) like some story which explains the relationship(s) between the meanings of simple moral assertions and complex moral (and morally/factually *mixed*) statements (ideally, it would be nice to have a *compositional* semantics for the entire language).

To be more specific, it is natural to wonder whether (1) *has the same meaning* when it occurs in isolation vs. when it occurs as a proper part of a more complex statement, *e.g.*, as the first disjunct of (2). Ross raised this more specific question as a challenge to noncognitivist views (specifically, his readings of Ayer and Carnap) many years before Geach was writing. According to Ross (*Foundations of Ethics*, p. 33),

... there is no doubt that such words as "you ought to do so-and-so" may be used as one means of so inducing a person to behave in a certain way. But if we are to do justice to the meaning of "right" or "ought," we must take account also of such modes of speech as ... "if this and that were the case, you ought to do so-and-so." ... it is easy to see that "ought" means the same in all these cases, and that if in some of them it does not express a command, it does not do so in any.

Here, Ross is worried about embeddings of simple moral assertions in (subjunctive) *conditionals*, but the (general) worry doesn't depend on one's choice of complex statement type. For it would seem that noncognitivist proposals regarding the meaning of (1) — *asserted in isolation* — do not plausibly carry over to the meaning of (1) when it occurs in *compound* statements like (2), or Ross's (mixed) conditionals.

### 3 Geach

Geach gave a nice generalization of the simple argument/worry that I stated above (and that Ross had expressed decades earlier). His argument begins with a schematic way of thinking about noncognitivist moral views (a schematic reconstruction of noncognitivist that Schroeder calls *performativism*).

**Geachian performativism:** what makes a particular utterance of (1) “ $\phi$ ing is good” mean that  $\phi$ ing is good, is that it in asserting that instance of (1) the speaker is (thereby) *performing some action*  $\Phi$ .

Geach then reasons as follows (roughly).

(I) “ $\phi$ ing is good” *means the same thing* when it occurs/is uttered in isolation and when it occurs/is uttered as the first disjunct of (2).

(II) Whatever action ( $\Phi$ ) is performed by someone who utters sentence (1) is *not* (generally/necessarily) performed by someone who utters sentence (2).

(III)  $\therefore$  What makes “ $\phi$ ing is good” mean that  $\phi$ ing is good is *not* what action it is used to perform.

This is a compelling argument against Geachian performativist interpretations of moral noncognitivism. But, (according to Schroeder) more sophisticated noncognitivists (*e.g.*, Hare) can sidestep this argument by moving to a more sophisticated account, according to which (and here I’m quoting Schroeder, *p.* 47)

... what makes a particular instance of “good” mean what it does is that it is used on that occasion to commend, but rather that the meaning of “good” is, at least in part, that it is *suited* for use in commendation, in the sort of way that the imperative mood is suited for issuing commands, even though imperative sentences are not always used to issue commands.

### 4 Hare and compositional semantics

Hare may be able to sidestep Geach’s argument by rejecting Geachian performativism in favor of a more subtle form of performativism, according to which the meaning of a sentence is not given by the (*actual*) speech acts it is *used* to perform, but rather the (set of possible?) speech acts it is *suited* to perform. But, this (alone) will not meet the deeper explanatory challenge posed by the Frege-Geach problem. What is needed to (fully) address the problem is a systematic/theoretical way of *explaining how* the meanings of complex (moral) sentences relate to (or are determined by) the meanings of the simple/atomic moral assertions that occur within them. What we need (and what Hare had hoped/wished for) are (general) *recipes* that will (again, quoting Schroeder, *p.* 48) “tell us how to get from the speech acts that the simpler sentences are suited to perform to the speech acts that the more complex sentences are suited to perform.” Of course, not any old recipe will do. Schroeder discusses some *crummy recipes*, *e.g.*,

**crummy recipe 2 for “not”:** For any sentence  $p$  that is suited to perform speech act  $\Phi$ , ‘it is not the case that  $p$ ’ is suited to perform the speech act of endorsing genocide.

This sure is a crummy recipe for negation. Are there *adequate, general* recipes (and not just for negation)?

### 5 The contrast with truth functions

The paradigm case of “compositional meaning recipes” is classical truth functional logic (or, if you prefer, classical truth functional semantics). Truth tables allow us to characterize (compositionally) the meanings (*viz.*, truth values) of complex statements in terms of the meanings (*viz.*, truth values) of their (atomic) constituents. This allows us to give *systematic explanations* of various semantic phenomena. To wit:

**The Law of Non-Contradiction.** For all sentences  $p$ , ‘ $p$  &  $\neg p$ ’ *cannot be true*.

In truth functional logic, this (semantic) Law can be demonstrated/explained by appealing to the truth table for (classical) negation ( $\neg$ ). Other logical/semantic laws can be established in similar ways. For instance:

**The Law of Disjunction Introduction.** For all sentences  $p$  and  $q$ , the argument ' $p \therefore p \vee q$ ' is valid (*i.e.*, all arguments with this sentential form are *necessarily truth preserving*).

This Law can be demonstrated/explained by appealing to the truth table for (classical) disjunction ( $\vee$ ).

This brings us back to Geach's first premise (I). In support of (I), a Geachian would argue (roughly) as follows.

(I.1) The argument from (1) to (2) is valid.

(I.2) If premise (I) is *false*, then the argument from (1) to (2) is a *fallacy* (of equivocation).

Therefore, (I) is true.

Someone who thinks moral claims *have truth values* can explain the validity of the argument from (1) to (2) *via* truth functional logic (*i.e.*, it is an instance of a generally *valid form* of argument: Disjunction Introduction). Noncognitivist cannot explain the intuitive judgment that that argument from (1) to (2) is valid in *this* way. Schroeder claims that it is an adequacy requirement on "nonscognitivist recipes" — that they undergird (*e.g.*) an explanation of the validity of (1)  $\therefore$  (2). I'd like to digress from the text for a moment to think more carefully about this claim and also Geach's argument for (I).

## 5.1 A Closer Look at Geach's Argument for (I) and Schroder's Adequacy Requirement

The argument above for Geach's premise (I) is problematic in a couple of ways. First, the premises of the argument only clearly make sense from a *truth conditional* (or, better still, *truth functional*) perspective. Consider premise (I.1). Traditionally (*i.e.*, from a truth conditional perspective), "valid" means *necessarily truth preserving*. And, on *that* reading, Premise (I.1) is clearly true. Of course, this *can't* be what noncognitivists mean by "valid," since (according to them) meanings of moral expressions can *not* be understood in terms of their truth conditions (presumably, they don't even *have* truth conditions). This raises two questions: (a) what *is* the proper way to understand "valid" from a noncognitivist perspective? and (b) on that understanding, does (I.1) come out true/plausible/acceptable? Unfortunately, when one looks at the contemporary philosophical literature on "validity" (*e.g.*, the recent work of MacFarlane, Field, Harman, Steinberger, *etc.*), the most popular recent alternative to the truth conditional understanding of "valid," takes "valid" *itself* to be a *normative* term (*viz.*, the slogan of this alternative view is: "logic is normative for thought"). Typically, according to such views, asserting that an argument from  $P$  to  $Q$  is "valid" involves committing oneself to some *epistemic norm/requirement* (involving  $P$  and  $Q$ ). For instance, asserting that ' $P \therefore Q$  is valid' may involve a commitment to the normative claim 'one ought not *believe*  $P$  while *disbelieving/rejecting*  $Q$ '. But it won't be very helpful for a noncognitivist (about normativity) to respond to Geach's argument in *this* way (this would seem to generate a *regress*, since now Frege-Geach problems would seem to re-arise in noncognitivist "meta-logic"). Even if we could come up with a noncognitivist way of explicating "valid" that makes premise (I.1) true/plausible/acceptable (and doesn't lead to a regress), there would still be problems with premise (I.2). As it stands, premise (I.2) doesn't seem quite right. Let's reconsider the instance of Disjunctive Syllogism that is at issue here: (1)  $\therefore$  either (1) or  $P$ . Strictly speaking, it doesn't follow from the fact that (1) means something different in the premise *vs.* the conclusion of this argument that the argument is fallacious (*i.e.*, invalid). For all we know, the argument could still be valid (*even truth functionally*). As such, I think a better reconstruction of Geach's argument for (I) would be as (something like) an *inference to the best explanation*. If the meaning of (1) *is the same* in both the premise and the conclusion of the argument in question, then this would (at least, from a truth functional point of view) undergird an *excellent explanation* of the argument's validity. But, if the meaning of (1) *varies* from premise to conclusion, then this leaves the validity of the argument *less well explained*. On this (IBE) interpretation of Geach's argument, (I.2) is:

(I.2\*) The *best explanation* of (I.1) appeals to/contains (I) as an (essential) *explanans*.

Therefore, it would seem that the noncognitivist has a couple of options. They could accept (I.1) as an *explanandum*, and try to give an explanation of it that rivals the traditional truth conditional explanation. Or, they could reject the demand for/importance of "explaining (I.1)" in the first place. As we'll see in later chapters (and in Dreier's work), expressivists (like Gibbard) have embraced the first horn of this dilemma.