

THE ARGUMENT FROM PERSONALISATION

Individualist subjectivism is a position in metaethics which falls under the category of *minimal moral realism*; that is, it accepts that moral claims represent truth-apt propositions, and that some of them are true, without commitment to a metaphysical basis to the truth. It states that a moral proposition, such as ‘murder is wrong,’ simply means ‘I disapprove of murder.’ This is similar to, but not to be confused with expressivism, which states that moral claims are *expressions* of attitude (like a smile or cheer), whereas individualist subjectivism views them as *descriptions* of it. This form specifically is a relativist one, and the critiques here will not apply to non-relativistic subjectivism (divine command and ideal observer theories).

In this article I will present a new argument against it: The argument from personalisation. Put simply, it is the following: When one refers to oneself with the word ‘I’, it is a shorthand for just saying one’s name; somebody called Jamie saying, “I went to the shop,” is the same as anybody saying “Jamie went to the shop.” They are the same proposition, with ‘I’ just becoming a shorthand to refer to the speaker. So, if ‘murder is wrong’ necessarily refers to oneself, as individualist subjectivism would claim, how does one refer to the moral truth local to another’s experience? That is, Jamie can say in moral language, ‘I disapprove of murder’, however nobody else can say ‘Jamie disapproves of murder’ in moral language, despite them meaning the exact same thing. Jamie saying ‘I disapprove of murder’ and Sarah saying ‘Jamie disapproves of murder’ are the same thing, and yet moral language does not allow for the latter. The individualist subjectivist would either have to concede that Jamie’s saying ‘I disapprove of murder’ does not refer to Jamie with the ‘I’ or that the statement ‘Jamie disapproves of murder’ means different things when different people say it, both of which are hard bullets to bite.

The first premise is relatively simple; it is an intuitive fact about language that when somebody called Jamie says 'I', he is simply saying 'Jamie' in a simpler way. That is, referring to yourself in the first person is equivalent to referring to you in the third person: Jamie saying 'I went to the shop' is equivalent to *anybody*, including Jamie himself, saying 'Jamie went to the shop'. The 'self' that one refers to with words like 'me' and 'I' are not representing anything different to what one refers to with one's name. It should be noted that acting like there is requires a commitment to something unique to the speaker. If, when I say 'I went to the shop', my reference to 'I' is something which only I have access to but is not represented by *me* as is viewed by others, this would imply that it is not something which everybody has. If everybody had their own, unique, immaterial, necessary thing which only they had access to, which they referred to when they said 'I', it would surely be considered part of themselves. In fact, this thing would be the very essence of the self.

We can call the process of specifying a claim which refers to the self (like changing Jamie's saying of 'I went to the shop' to 'Jamie went to the shop') as *personalisation*. Given the truth of what was said in the last paragraph, this must be doable for *all* claims which refer to oneself.

Under individualist subjectivism, moral claims must necessarily refer to the self, as making a moral claim is one describing one's attitudes. As noted earlier, 'murder is wrong' would simply mean '*I* disapprove of murder'. So this begs the question: How do we personalise moral claims? It seems that Jamie can express 'I disapprove of murder' in moral language, and yet 'Jamie disapproves of murder' is not expressible by a third party in moral language, despite them representing the same proposition.

Given what was said earlier, Jamie saying 'I disapprove of murder' means 'Jamie disapproves of murder'. Thus, we can say that, under individualist subjectivism, Jamie saying

'murder is wrong', is the same as him saying 'Jamie disapproves of murder'. However, as pointed out above, a third party could not refer to the local moral truth of another party. This would mean that 'Jamie disapproves of murder' has a different meaning when Jamie says it than when somebody else says it. This, however, cannot be true, as it has been personalised; the ambiguity of the word 'I' has been removed. It is no longer a context-dependent proposition. This means that the individualist subjectivist must concede that 'Jamie disapproves of murder' means different things when different people say it.

An option which may get past this issue, as mentioned earlier, is the idea that when Jamie says 'I', he is not referring to Jamie. As pointed out earlier, the denial of this would commit one to something resembling metaphysical solipsism, and even then, the issue isn't completely gone. It may be simpler to simply observe the usage of language. I would like to issue a challenge: to find a single possible instance of a man named Jamie saying 'I', in an isolated proposition, in which 'I' could not be replaced with 'Jamie' (purely in terms of what the proposition represents, outside of minor grammatical issues).

Another objection may be to represent Jamie's local moral truth as 'Murder is wrong *from within Jamie's frame of reference*'. This, however, would still have the issue that if moral truth claims truly are descriptions of attitude, the addendum of specifying the frame of reference is redundant. 'Jamie disapproves of murder' is true from Verity's frame of reference too. The only way in which this could solve the issue in some sense is by creating some kind of gap between the description of attitude and the moral truth; it would have to be that the moral obligation on someone is what it is because you ought to act in alignment with your desires and attitudes rather than saying a description of these attitudes is what moral claims necessarily represent.

It seems to me that the only way to overcome these problems is to accept the existence of some difference between the description of one's attitude towards an action, and a moral claim about it.

So, what is a better interpretation of the meaning of moral claims? Noncognitivism is long since dead due to the Frege-Geach problem. I believe the best step forward is a clear, normative cognitivism. 'Murder is wrong' means 'one ought not murder', taken literally, or in other words, 'there are valid reasons to not murder regardless of if you want to or not'. If murder is evil, there is an imperative to not murder: a categorical (independent of one's desires) reason. This is both clearly in-line with how moral language is used, but also where moral truth lies; if there are true moral claims, in the sense in which I am defining them, some other theory, like noncognitivism, won't pose a meaningful threat, and moral realists are generally justifying 'ought' claims. The realist could technically just derive truth per their cognitivist theory, and just use different words for it.

The argument presented in this article is not only applicable to the concept of local moral truth, but generally other relativisms which include reference to the speaker in their description of claims, such as some forms of aesthetic relativism.