

Noncognitivism in Ethics, by Mark Schroeder. London: Routledge, 251 pp.

Noncognitivism in Ethics is Mark Schroeder's third book in four years. That is very impressive. What is even more impressive is that all his books are exceptional. All of them are worth reading, and his work on expressivism is clearly among the best ever written on this topic. This is also true of *Noncognitivism in Ethics* (henceforth NE). Although simpler than *Being For: Evaluating the Semantic Program of Expressivism*, it is still well worth the read even for professional philosophers.

NE is an introduction to the problems and prospects of noncognitivism in ethics. It is specifically written with teaching in mind. Each chapter contains suggestions for further reading and an exercise section, followed by some hints as to the answers. It is unusual to find exercises in a philosophy (as opposed to logic) book and they force one to think hard about its contents. This is bound to pay off in better understanding. Some of the exercises are pretty difficult, but Schroeder warns us in advance by classifying them as either Easy, Medium, Difficult or Advanced. I do think he is a little stingy with the hints sometimes, so that not everyone may be able to take full advantage of the points he has in mind. This, in my view, is the main shortcoming of NE.

On the whole, though, Schroeder's book succeeds in its dual aim 'of pedagogy and of consolidation'. Consolidation is achieved when there is 'a shared understanding of where we are and what investigation to date has accomplished: an appreciation, at the least, of the relative costs and advantages of different sorts of [noncognitivism], and ideally, a clearer sense of what work remains' (NE, p. xii). I think it's fair to say that Schroeder has done an extraordinary amount to explicate the nature of different views, the problems that they face and what possible solutions need to do.

What is nice about NE is its energy and freshness. It is a great invitation to philosophy. It shows that progress can be made and how we might achieve it ourselves. So I don't have much to criticize. In the rest of this review, I shall quickly run through the chapters and raise some minor points along the way.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the problems of metaethics. The next describes noncognitivism as a response to these, including Ayer's, Stevenson's and Hare's versions. Schroeder loosely defines noncognitivism as the claim that moral language is not *about* something (i.e. that moral words do not refer to properties or objects). He also gives a useful explanation of truth-conditional semantics and why it is so

promising as a theory of meaning. In chapter 3, Schroeder introduces the Frege-Geach problem and Hare's response to it. It is often assumed that truth-conditional semantics does not have this problem, but you rarely find an explanation. I am glad that Schroeder offers one. He also shows how truth-conditional semantics explains various semantic properties of sentences. (Small point: Schroeder's explanation of the validity of *modus ponens* proceeds on the assumption that the truth-table for 'if-then' explicates its meaning. But almost no one thinks this is correct for natural languages. This makes you wonder how successful truth-conditional semantics really is in this respect. But Schroeder can hardly be expected to embark on a discussion of different approaches to conditionals, so that his toy-explanation is the better choice.) Very nice is the discussion of the "license for optimism" that Hare thought he found for his view in the fact that imperatives stand in relations of (in)compatibility and allow embedding in conjunctions and disjunctions.

I have a quibble with some of the exposition in chapter 3, which I might as well state since there is so little to complain about otherwise. On p. 45, Schroeder lists a number of sentences in which 'stealing money is wrong' occurs:

- 3 Stealing money is wrong.
- 4 Is it the case that stealing money is wrong?
- 5 If stealing money is wrong, then killing is definitely wrong.
- 6 I wonder whether stealing money is wrong.
- 7 It is not the case that stealing money is wrong.

He then gives the following 'argument that 'stealing money is wrong' must mean the same thing when it appears as part of a more complex sentence, as when it appears all by itself' (NE, p. 47):

'It is our ability to understand the meaning of 'stealing money is wrong', along with our ability to understand the meanings of the other words in those sentences, that allows us to understand the meanings of sentences 4-7. But in order for us to do that, of course, we have to know what 'stealing money is wrong' does mean – *even in those sentences*. It is our grasp of this *single* meaning of 'stealing money is wrong' that we employ in determining the meanings of sentences 4-7.' (NE, p. 47, emphases added)

Peter Geach of course famously argued that noncognitivism entails that embedded moral sentences do *not* mean the same as unembedded ones. After all, the meaning of ‘stealing money is wrong’ is explained in terms of a speech act performed by this sentence (say, condemnation). But since nothing is condemned in ‘If stealing is wrong, then P’, it cannot mean the same in the conditional.

Over the next few paragraphs, Schroeder describes Hare’s response to this problem. It is to point out that noncognitivists, like truth-conditional theorists, ‘can provide recipes which tell us how to determine the meaning of a complex sentence on the basis of the meanings of its parts’ (NE, p. 48). Since Hare wants to explain the meaning of a simple sentence containing moral words in terms of a speech act performed by that sentence (or a speech act it is *suit*ed to perform), he will want to explain the meaning of a complex sentence involving moral words in terms of a speech-act performed by that complex sentence. The sort of recipe he needs will then look something like this (I take inspiration from Schroeder’s “crummy” recipes for ‘not’ on p. 49):

Recipe for ‘ \vee ’: ‘For any sentence ‘P’ that is suited to perform speech act X, ‘ $P\vee Q$ ’ is suited to perform speech act Y.

But why would such a recipe guarantee that ‘stealing is wrong’ means the same in 4-7 as it does in 3? If the meaning of ‘ $P\vee Q$ ’ is given by the speech act it is suited to perform, and this speech act is different than the speech act ‘P’ is suited to perform, then it is not clear why the recipe would guarantee that ‘P’ would mean the same in ‘P’ and ‘ $P\vee Q$ ’. In fact, it seems to follow that they do *not* mean the same.

Of course, Schroeder does put additional constraints on *successful* compositional rules. For example, he says they should explain why certain arguments are valid, or why certain sentences are inconsistent with certain other sentences. But from what has gone before, it’s not clear why a rule which satisfies these additional constraints would thereby guarantee that ‘stealing money is wrong’ means the same in embedded and unembedded contexts.

I have a similar problem with Schroeder’s remarks in *Being For*. There, he describes Hare’s response to the Frege-Geach problem as follows:

‘[His] answer is that normative sentences have the same meaning when embedded as when unembedded because the meaning of the complex sentence is a *function* of the meaning of its parts.’ ((2008), p. 20)

It is not immediately clear (at least to me) why the fact that the meaning of a complex expression is a function of the meanings of its constituents WHEN CONSIDERED IN ISOLATION would entail that they retain their meaning WHEN PART OF A WHOLE. This is not, of course, a big concern. I suppose the only sense in which constituents have to retain their meaning is that we recognize their isolated meanings even in the complex whole, and use this recognition to calculate the meaning of the whole by means of our knowledge of the functions denoted by words like ‘not’ and ‘or’.

So let’s move on to chapter 4. Here, Schroeder introduces expressivism as a special kind of noncognitivism (favoured by Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard, among others). Schroeder thinks its distinguishing feature is this: expressivists seek to explain the meaning of a moral sentence ‘P’ directly in terms of the mental state that it conventionally expresses. In other words: they explain the meaning of ‘P’ by an account of what it is to *think* that P. Schroeder believes this distinguishes it from earlier forms of noncognitivism, which are *speech act theories*. These explain the meaning of moral sentences in terms of a speech they are suited to perform. But since one can also *think* that P (without performing any speech act), they leave an important explanatory task hanging: what is it to *think* that P? Since the problems of moral thought and language appear to be intimately linked, it is an advantage of expressivism that it tackles both at once.

Chapter 5 introduces some central problems faced by expressivist accounts of moral thought. For instance, they need to explain why someone who accepts that stealing is wrong disagrees with someone who accepts that it is not wrong, and why it is inconsistent to accept both. Another problem is the *multiple kinds problem*, which starts with the observation that expressivists have to allow two kinds of belief, ordinary belief and moral “belief”. After all, expressivists deny that “believing” that stealing is wrong is the same kind of mental state as believing that the sun shines. But they also need two kinds of desire, hope, wonder, dread, etc. (two for each propositional attitude). The problem consists in explaining why the moral kinds share so many properties with the ordinary kinds if they are fundamentally different types of

mental state. This is an important problem, and one that (I believe) Schroeder is the first to uncover.

In chapter 6, he returns to the Frege-Geach problem and discusses early solutions to it by Simon Blackburn. Useful and important is Schroeder's clear distinction between different types of properties of valid arguments. The first is the *inconsistency property*, which is the property of its being inconsistent to accept the premises of, say, a *modus ponens* argument but to deny its conclusion. The second is the *inference-licensing property*, which is that accepting the premises of a valid argument commits you to accepting the conclusion (so that someone who accepted the premises, but accepted neither the conclusion nor its negation would be irrational in some way other than by being inconsistent). Both of these properties need to be accounted for and Schroeder does a great job revealing the shortcomings in Blackburn's early work.

Chapter 7 is the most difficult one in the book (as Schroeder realizes). He discusses Gibbard's solution to the Frege-Geach problem and explains why it amounts to no more than a list of criteria for mental states that would be expressed by moral judgments *if* expressivism were true (another original and important point of Schroeder's). He then moves on to the problem of negation. The problem here is this: if the meaning of 'murdering is wrong' is explained by the fact that it expresses disapproval of murdering, then we know what to make of 'not murdering is wrong' (it expresses disapproval of not murdering). But what about 'murdering is not wrong'? This sentence does not express a state of disapproval. If so, then its meaning has to be explained by means of a *different* mental state (say, one of *tolerance*). But 'murdering is wrong' is inconsistent with 'murdering is not wrong' and the inconsistency cannot be explained by the fact that they express the same type of mental state with respect to inconsistent contents. Presumably, then, there is no informative story about *why* tolerance of murdering is inconsistent with disapproval of it. It has to be accepted as a brute fact. This might be ok, if there was a limit to the number of distinct mental states needed to explain the logical relations between moral sentences. But Schroeder argues that we quickly reach infinity.

It is remarkable how much of the information in "*How Expressivists Can and Should Solve their Problem with Negation*" is packed into chapter 7. This is all great stuff, but the exercises are demanding and Schroeder is not lavish with his hints. I also found that things move rather quickly in section 7.5, where he argues that something

like the negation problem arises for lots of complex moral sentences, including those involving ‘and’ and ‘or’. I would welcome a little explanation to help the reader see the problem here.

Once you’ve dealt with chapter 7, the rest of the book is relatively easy. But there is always lots of interest to be found. Schroeder’s way of writing an introduction is not (just) to summarize the existing literature, but to add to it and raise new problems of his own.

Chapter 8 discusses prospects and problems of a deflationary understanding of truth (favoured by many noncognitivists), while chapter 9 deals with the problem of wishful thinking (introduced by Cian Dorr (2002)). What’s fun about including this problem is that it is relatively new, easy to understand and not (yet) much discussed. An opportunity for students. In chapter 10, Schroeder discusses hybrid versions of expressivism, according to which moral statements express *both* beliefs and desire-like states. Schroeder explains why they solve (or avoid) some of the classical problems for noncognitivism. But he also explains why some problems are not immediately solved just by going hybrid. For example, it is not so clear why accepting the premises of a *modus ponens* argument would commit you to accepting the conclusion (why they have the inference-licensing property), if moral premises and conclusions express both beliefs *and* desire-like attitudes. You would have to explain why being in the belief and desire-like states expressed by the premises would commit you to being in the desire-like state expressed by the conclusion. Schroeder suggests that the easiest way to do this is to model hybrid expressivism on the basis of slurs, like ‘fag’ for homosexual and ‘wop’ for Italians (an approach advocated by Daniel Boisvert (2008)). Slurs are examples of words whose truth-conditional content (arguably) does not exhaust their meaning (though see Anderson & Lepore (forthcoming)). In addition to referring to a group of people, they also communicate a negative attitude towards that group. What’s more, slurs have the property of expressing a negative attitude *wherever they occur*: even though someone who says ‘If John is a fag, then he is a member of a minority’ is not *asserting* that John is a fag, s/he nevertheless displays a negative attitude towards gay people. Non-(or anti)homophobic people would not use this word at all. It is clear why accepting the premises of a *modus ponens* argument commits you to being in the desire-like state expressed by the conclusion, if that desire-like state is the *same* as that expressed by the premises (although it seems to make accepting the conclusion strangely irrelevant to your attitudinal commitments).

Despite this advantage, I find it curious to suggest that moral words are like slurs, precisely *because* it would commit us to the view that the same desire-like attitude is expressed by all occurrences of moral words. Wasn't Geach's original point that someone who asserts 'If stealing is wrong, then P' does *not* express disapproval of stealing? (I don't think it matters that Geach's primary target were speech act theories.) But this is not, of course, Schroeder's problem. (A note on exercises here: some in chapter 10 are designed to get us to discover for ourselves some of the points that Schroeder makes in his (2009). I think that might be optimistic, since the hints are scant again.)

The final chapter contains an indication of possible solutions to some problems of expressivism (discussed at length in *Being For*) and a bird's-eye view of applications outside ethics, like epistemic modals and conditionals. It is very readable, but sometimes very quick. I'll dwell on one example. Section 11.3 discusses the application of expressivism to epistemic modals, like 'Max might be in Carpinteria'. Schroeder explains very clearly why relativists avoid certain problems that contextualists face. But then he raises a concern.

Relativists claim that 'Max might be in Carpinteria' expresses the same context-independent proposition regardless of the information of the speaker. But it is true or false only *relative* to an informational background. This explains why someone who considers the statement 'Max might be in Carpinteria' can say that it is false, even if the background of the *makers* of the statement allows that Max might be in Carpinteria. But Schroeder argues that relativism leads to a violation of the *principle of reflection*.

This principle says that 'if you know that in the future you will have some belief, and you know that the only thing that will happen between now and that time in the future is that you will come by some more information and respond to it rationally, then the rational thing for you to do is to already have that belief' (NE, p. 218). Now suppose you don't know where Max is and therefore accept the proposition expressed by 'Max might be in Carpinteria or he might not be in Carpinteria'. (This proposition is presumably just as context-independent as the one expressed by 'Max might be in Carpinteria'.) Further suppose that you expect a call from him in the next few minutes, and that he will either tell you that he is in Carpinteria or that he isn't. Assuming that you respond rationally to that information, you will then reject 'Max might be in Carpinteria or he might not be in Carpinteria'.

But if you now know that you will in the future believe (rationally) that it is not the case that Max might be in Carpinteria and that he might not be in Carpinteria, then the principle of reflection tells you that you should also believe this now. But that is odd. So relativism seems to lead to a violation of the principle of reflection.

Schroeder goes on to suggest that expressivism about epistemic modals might avoid this problem. He tells us that expressivists believe that ‘Max might be in Carpinteria’ expresses a certain positive level of confidence in the proposition that Max is in Carpinteria (as opposed to the belief that he might be). And that’s all we get in terms of explanation. But why does that avoid the problem? Is the idea that the principle of reflection applies only to beliefs? I guess it is. But surely there are analogues of it (as should be allowed by expressivists who think there is a point to epistemology). If ‘Max might be in Carpinteria’ expresses a certain level of confidence that Max is in Carpinteria, then ‘Max might be in Carpinteria or he might not be in Carpinteria’ expresses a certain level of confidence in some other proposition. If I know that I will reasonably lack that level of confidence in the future, wouldn’t it be odd for me not to lack it now? (I take it that ‘Max might be in Carpinteria or he might not be’ expresses a low level of confidence in the proposition that he is in Carpinteria and a low level of confidence in the proposition that he isn’t; not a low level of confidence in the proposition that he either is or isn’t.)

Still, even if this discussion is quick, that is not exactly terrible. The final chapter provides fast food for thought and does so with the same energy that permeates the rest. On the whole, then, NE is great. Easily as great as William Lycan’s introduction to the philosophy of language, which is also very great. It is an exciting book that teaches everyone how to do philosophy, and how to do it well.

References

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