

Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism

One cannot justify their adherence to an ethical theory without referring or alluding to a meta-ethical position. Be it a minor reference or an important source, I assert that this is true of all arguments for an ethical theory. This obviously necessitates the examination of meta-ethical theories. Cognitivism and non-cognitivism are two eminent meta-ethical positions. After examining the differences between the two it is obvious that these theses are diametrically opposed and as such it is impossible to sit somewhere between the two. That is, it is a binary choice. In exemplifying this, I will clarify the difference between these theories concerning moral cognition and those of the moral realist and the anti-realist; through this I can clarify the difference between cognitivism and non-cognitivism. Following that, I will draw the reader's attention to a more specific difference in these theories' respective beliefs about the meaning of normative statements. Due to my own lack of understanding, I will not endeavour to use the Frege-Geach objection in illustrating the difference between non-cognitivism and cognitivism, however helpful it may be. In this capacity, I will discuss the difference between the theories and conclude with a statement concerning my own alignment and justify it given my analysis of the theories.

The difference between cognitivism and non-cognitivism does not manifest as a case of the realist vis-à-vis the antirealist. While the differences are substantial, there is more nuance to them than the simple assertion that objective moral values either exist or do not exist. A better way to explain the dynamic between the cognitivist and the non-cognitivist is to state that: Cognitivism posits that moral sentences are propositions with truth conditions that describe mental states, thus we can ascribe truth-aptness to them; non-cognitivism declares that moral sentences are simply expressions of non-belief states like emotion (Honerich, 2005), and because we cannot evaluate the rationality of emotions, we can not ascribe truth-aptness to them. (Fisher, 2014). Hence, to the non-cognitivist a moral statement can not be known as true or false. Furthermore, non-cognitivism is to some extent merely the belief that people do not truly mean what they say, because any moral claim represents an emotion, not the rational attitude of the person that states it. Cognitivism denies these assertions, for they believe that propositions are meaningful declarations that bear truth conditions. From this, one should be able to ascertain a clearer understanding of the opposing beliefs of these theories.

Another example of a difference between the two theories can be found in their respective beliefs about the meaning of normative statements. To elucidate the non-cognitivist's conception of meaning in normative statements as well as highlight a key point of contention, we can refer to A.J. Ayer's version of non-cognitivism as expressed in *Language, Truth and Logic*. Here we find that he maintains that the meaning of a normative term consists in the type of emotion it expresses (happiness, sadness, anger, etc.) (Ayer, 1946). This conception, however, is problematic as Shafer-Landau remarks in *Moral Realism: A Defence*: "If, as it seems, we convey and mean something slightly different when we say of an action that it is virtuous, right, mandatory, [...], then non-cognitivist must explain this by citing a different attitude that received expression in each case." (Shafer-Landau, 2003). Thus, if statements are merely expressions of emotions and attitudes as Ayer believes, there must be an inconceivable number of emotions and attitudes that receive expression in all these different cases. This is a problem for non-cognitivism because it is very difficult to verify the logical behaviour of normative statements (Wedgwood, 1997), and so a satisfactory and consistent account of moral judgements can not be given under the non-cognitivist thesis (van Roojen, 2016). In simpler terms, the logical inconsistencies present in the foundation of non-cognitivism undermine any attempt to provide a consistent description of moral judgements. It also provides further illustration of the difference between it and cognitivism. That is, it clarifies what is meant by the cognitivist's belief that emotions and attitudes are indeed cognitive functions and not merely conations. Therefore, cognitivists understand a normative term to be an expression in and of itself. This highlights another

major difference between non-cognitivism and cognitivism, as well as a problem within non-cognitivism.

Now that I have demonstrated the differences between cognitivism and non-cognitivism, I establish myself as a cognitivist. In my endeavour to elucidate the differences between the two by addressing the non-cognitivist's objection, it became clear that over time several inconsistencies and problems have been identified in the claims of non-cognitivism. Thus, it seems clear to me that non-cognitivism is a weaker theory and is much harder to defend than cognitivism. In a debate, I suspect that non-cognitivism would be far more susceptible to an argument based on 'reduction to absurdity' than cognitivism ever would, because its principles are far less consistent. While one might counter this by remarking that I have made not nearly as much of an effort to test the foundations of cognitivism, I would remind them that it is difficult to critique what is an intuitive and natural belief. Furthermore, non-cognitivism is essentially an objection to cognitivism: the burden is on the non-cognitive theorists to show that we are wrong in our primordial and intuitive beliefs. From this, I believe that I have justified my identification as a cognitivist.

The differences between cognitivism and non-cognitivism are numerous as well as vast, especially considering that they are effectively diametrically opposed theses. I suspect that without room for a voluminous essay, one cannot truly do justice to the gravity of such differences. Nonetheless, I believe that I have elucidated the key differences between the theories as well as having had made a fair go at justifying my own alignment.

References

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