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Is it right to worry about the Frege-Geach problem?

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The Frege-Geach problem has been a significant point of contention in metaethical discourse for the past half-century. It stands as an example of one of the worst sorts of problems for any defender of a counter-intuitive position, being both simple to describe and seemingly intractable without recourse to uncomfortably complex maneuvers. Expressivists have therefore been right to take it seriously; it is a problem that demands a solution. That is, if it really is the problem it appears to be.

The Frege-Geach problem attacks the expressivist account of moral claims. On expressivism, moral claims are not truth-tracking propositions, rather they are expressions of non-cognitive states (such as emotions or desires). Thus, claiming ‘it was wrong to steal that pen’ amounts to something like ‘Boo! You stole that pen!’ or ‘you stole that pen!’ uttered in a disapproving tone of voice (Ayer 1936). This contrasts with the cognitivist account of moral language, which maintains that moral claims behave exactly as they appear, identifying some fact of the matter or picking out the property of ‘wrongness’ in the action of stealing.

There are many ways to formulate examples of the Frege-Geach problem in action, but the basic contention is this: if expressivism is true, then moral claims change their meaning in unasserted contexts. If this is indeed the case then seemingly straightforward deductive moral arguments are rendered invalid. A classic example runs as follows:

1. Lying is wrong.
 2. If lying is wrong, then getting your little brother to lie is wrong.
- Therefore:
3. Getting your little brother to lie is wrong.

This argument is clearly valid: if the premises are true then the conclusion must be true. However, if the expressivist account of moral discourse is correct then ‘lying is wrong’ has a

different meaning in (1) than it does in (2). In (2) it is a straightforward conditional; nothing is actually being asserted ('if lying is wrong...') Yet in (1), it is something akin to 'lying, boo!' So rather than presenting a valid deduction, we have actually committed a straightforward fallacy of equivocation and the argument does not hold up. It is as if we had argued:

1. A bank is the side of a river.
2. I keep my money in a bank.

Therefore:

3. I keep my money in the side of a river.

Similar charges can then be leveled against a whole range of seemingly straightforward everyday statements; consider the possible meanings of 'we have to discuss whether lying is wrong' or 'do you think lying is wrong?' if expressivism is true. As the cognitivist rightly observes, something has gone very wrong if such utterances are not in fact aiming at the truth.

There are at least two possible ways out of this. One way is to roll up our sleeves and get to work on formalizing a description of expressivist language that preserves the appearance of truth-claims. This project – broadly referred to as *quasi-realism* – can range from fairly modest beginnings such as 'hooray!' and 'boo!' operators (Blackburn 1984):

- (1) B!(Lying)
- (2) H![[B!(lying)]; [B!(getting LB to lie)]]

Therefore:

- (3) B!(getting LB to lie)

to the complex formulation of 'cognitivist expressivism' defined by Horgan and Timmons (2006), which presents an extremely detailed description of expressivist semantics that dwarfs all previous attempts. Debates about the success or otherwise of such approaches are live today, yet regardless of the outcome there is arguably something a little unsatisfactory about this whole approach. One cannot quite shake the feeling that such a huge amount of analytical heavy-lifting to account for the most mundane of everyday assertions such as 'stealing is wrong' may simply

be a stubborn refusal to look (moral) facts in the face. Maybe we really do just mean what we say.

There is however another way to attack the Frege-Geach problem which – if successful – is rather more straightforward, and that is to simply deny that the problem exists at all. In order to do this, we first have to ensure that both sides are playing by the same rules.

The first point to make is that ethical discourse should not automatically be treated differently than other topics of debate. If Frege-Geach presents a special problem for ethics, we should first make sure that it is not similarly destructive to (say) aesthetics. For example:

1. Apples are delicious.
 2. If apples are delicious, then apple pie is delicious.
- Therefore:
3. Apple pie is delicious.

Despite no-one making the claim that there is some objective fact of the matter regarding the deliciousness of apples, this is still a valid argument. There doesn't seem to be any particular problem in considering that an utterance such as 'mmm, apples!' would have an effectively equivalent content to the claim that 'apples are delicious.' Why are we not so concerned about this?

One explanation would be that in the realm of aesthetics we are far less concerned about conceding the relativistic nature of taste claims. While I may look quizzically at anyone who denies the deliciousness of apples, I am unlikely to be especially motivated to try to convince them otherwise. Of course, if someone were to claim that some grey paint accidentally spilled onto a canvas was a better work of art than the Mona Lisa, the feeling that they were in some sense *objectively* wrong would likely be rather more pronounced. Nevertheless, despite superficial similarities, perhaps our mere strength of feeling about the importance of ethical claims means that we should at least concede that the Frege-Geach challenge demands a more robust response.

However, the aesthetic realm may still shine some light toward a solution. One way to unpack the idea is to consider exactly what is happening when we make very basic judgments of beauty (or lack thereof). For example, it may be cliché to say that a sunset is ‘too beautiful to put into words’ but it is essentially an honest statement. A beautiful sunset elicits a subjective response that cannot be adequately described in such a way as to reproduce the same qualitative experience in another person. We describe the sunset as ‘beautiful’ and are perfectly justified in doing so, but this does not necessarily entail that there is some fact of the matter out there in the world that corresponds with the sunset ‘having the property of being beautiful.’ Nevertheless, we do have to notice that the quality of the sunset’s beauty supervenes on its natural properties (such as the hue of the sky and the structure of the clouds). This is where the moral realists may attempt to retake the reins. If our experience is subjective, but the properties under observation are simply natural facts of the matter, then – the realist may claim – clearly the latter should be the focus of our study. For some fields of investigation this is no doubt true. There is truth to be discovered in the way light refracts through the atmosphere, in the shapes of clouds, in the effects of moisture in the air. Yet this rather misses the point. Our non-cognitive attitude is *just what it is* for a sunset to be beautiful. The natural properties of a sunset may be out there in the world, but its *beauty* consists in feelings toward it, and this is (arguably) the more fitting side of the equation for philosophical investigation. This holds for art in the same way: analysis of the pigments, brushwork and compositional themes is a fascinating and informative exercise for the art historian, but for the observer of the work, nothing is added or taken away by describing these properties. So – the expressivist might claim – may it hold with moral observation.

G.E. Moore in his famous Open Question Argument (Moore 1903) suggested that the term ‘good’ is irreducible. No matter how we describe an action – as pleasurable, as charitable, as sympathetic – it will always remain open to us to question whether or not it is *good*. From this foundation, Moore developed a view toward a non-natural realism. Although this differs from the expressivist conclusion, and although Moore’s argument has been criticized (not least for seemingly begging the question), there still seems to be something right about this. It seems difficult if not impossible to reduce thin normative concepts such as *good* or *right* to more fundamental properties in any convincing way. The investigator is free to explore the idea that

the good is *that which possesses the property of goodness*, but for the observer of the sunset, the beautiful just is that which is beautiful, and the good is simply that which is good.

Here we pull into sight of the deflationary theory of truth that may give the expressivist an opportunity to dismiss the Frege-Geach problem outright. Consider:

It is wrong to Φ

If we unpack this claim according the expressivist account, the statement is an expression of an unfavorable attitude toward Φ , but from a deflationist viewpoint it is also (minimally) true. ‘It is wrong to Φ ’ is true just in case it *is* wrong to Φ .

We cannot however leave things here, since even on this account the Frege-Geach problem is still fully intact. Left unguarded, this maneuver will simply show that ‘it is wrong to Φ ’ *is* in fact a truth-tracking proposition, and this is what the expressivist explicitly denies. How then is this helpful?

As with the sunset, perhaps we need only accuse the proponents of the Frege-Geach problem of simply missing the bigger picture. That our language is superficially confusing is a criticism of our understanding and – more importantly – *powers of description* of the world, not of how the world actually is. If we observe someone in the act of stealing a pen, we are at least as likely to simply exclaim ‘hey, no!’ as we are to pronounce that ‘it is wrong to steal that pen.’ Yet in either case, our mental state – our *feeling of disapprobation* as Hume might say – is the same. We are *reacting*, not *reasoning*. It adds no more information about our feelings toward an action to say that it is wrong, or it is true that it is wrong, or it is a fact that is wrong. We make such linguistic embellishments *post-hoc*.

If this is indeed the case, then one may rightly wonder why our language takes the form that it does. Why have we adopted a seemingly cognitive framework for our moral claims? The simplest answer may be that language has evolved in this way merely in order to allow for moral discourse. Faced with someone who possesses the attitude that it is right to Φ , we naturally feel

compelled to get them to change, and we can only attempt to do this through argument. Simply shouting ‘boo!’ will not be enough. Our expressions must therefore adopt the *outward appearance* of being truth-apt; if they did not, no useful discussion could be engaged in. The realist will of course continue to view this account with some suspicion: if a moral debate is actually nothing more than a back-and-forth trade of expressions of attitude, what argument is really there to be had? Is it not the case that the debate can only be settled by locating the facts of matter and agreeing upon them, and that attitudes simply are not truth-apt? Unfortunately for the realist, such an objection assumes a denial of rationality that the expressivist is under no obligation to make. There is no claim being made here that our attitudes exist in complete isolation from our powers of reason. In both directions, our attitudes toward the world are inextricably connected to the way the world is. Wherever we look we find reasons to explain what is the case: the fields flooded because there was too much rain, or the government is dysfunctional, or the gods are angry. The merest amount of reflection reveals that this applies to the internal as well as the external: my desire for a glass of wine is to be expected because I recently saw a study that says it is good for me. Our non-cognitive states can be either supported or collapsed by bad reasoning, and these reasons must be carefully excavated by moral discourse in order to reveal the foundational attitudes that they rest upon.

We may justify our desire not to Φ in terms of it being illegal, unacceptable, harmful or improper, but many such justifications are constructed atop the fact that we simply have no desire to Φ . In its entirety, a moral debate may certainly include disagreement about what is factually the case, but it is precisely these empirical disagreements that must be resolved before our attitudes are exposed. The thief about to steal the pen may hold a false belief about whether it belongs to Alice or Bob (both strangers as far as he is concerned), but correcting this belief is unlikely to factor very much in his decision as to whether or not to go ahead and steal it. As so neatly phrased by Robert Nozick (1981):

Suppose we show [the immoral man] that some X he holds or accepts or does commits him to behaving morally. He must now give up at least one of the following: (a) behaving immorally, (b) maintaining X, (c) being consistent about

this matter in this respect. The immoral man tells us, “To tell you the truth, if I had to make the choice, I would give up being consistent.”

Thus expressivists may concede that moral disagreement can *in part* consist in dispute about the facts. But once the empirical work is done, will we not still hear the feint voice of Moore in the background urging us to ask one further question? ‘Yes, but is it *right*?’

Ultimately, the amount of analysis and debate over the Frege-Geach problem likely says far more about our own reluctance to admit the non-existence of moral facts than it does about the what is actually the case. It is unlikely that we humans would have made it this far as a species if we had to develop the ability to deliberate moral questions using structured language before we developed a non-cognitive disapproval of lying and stealing. So perhaps, rather than attempt to construct an increasingly complex account of moral semantics, it is sufficient for expressivists to simply speak of the Frege-Geach problem in a disapproving tone of voice.

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