II SUBJECTIVISM & EXPRESSIVISM

EXPRESSIVISM

Expressivism is the view that moral statements are not really descriptive statements at all. They do not describe the world; they do not have truth values. Rather they simply serve to express various attitudes, much as the cry ‘Ouch’ can express pain, or, in rather stylized circumstances ‘Hurrah’ can express approval. Some theorists make a careful distinction between expressivism in general, and the particular version of it which holds that the attitudes expressed are emotions; this they term ‘Emotivism’. Others use the terms ‘Expressivism’ and ‘Emotivism’ pretty much interchangeably. Sometimes people use the term ‘Non-factualism’. The central idea is that people use moral statements to express (not to state) their disapproval of an action, and their desire that it not be performed.

Distinguish expressivism from subjectivism (also sometimes called moral relativism; the terminology here is not at all constant). Subjectivists hold, roughly, that

1. Eating meat is wrong

means the same as

2. I disapprove of eating meat

But 2 is a perfectly factual statement. If subjectivist are right then, moral claims have truth conditions, just not the truth conditions that objectivists think they have. Whereas if expressivists are right, they don’t have truth conditions at all.

Both expressivists and subjectivists escape the moral problem, since they both reject objectivism. Moreover, they can both give a good explanation of the apparent truth of internalism: moral judgements seem to motivate us to act because they are really just the expression of, or statement of, desires. It is the desires that are really moving us. (Is this to agree with internalism, or just to explain it away?) In fact it is rather implausible that A.J. Ayer, the main expressivist that Smith discusses, was primarily motivated by a desire to avoid the moral problem as Smith conceives of it. Rather he was concerned to give an account of our moral practice that meshed with logical positivism, i.e. the doctrine that every meaningful statement is either a tautology (i.e. true in virtue of meaning) or is an empirical observation.. Ayer held that moral statements are neither, and so are strictly not meaningful, in just the same way that ‘Ouch’ is not really meaningful. But logical positivism is now a generally discredited doctrine. To get a sense of its problems consider its central claim that every meaningful statement is either a tautology or an empirical statement. Is that claim itself a tautology, or else empirical? It appears not. So by the theory’s own lights it is meaningless.

PROBLEMS

Smith doesn’t really discuss the problems with either expressivism or subjectivism. His chapter on the former is mainly concerned with refuting A.J. Ayer’s argument that expressivism is inescapable. That chapter is quite hard going (probably the hardest thing in the book, so don’t be put off). I’ll discuss some of the points it raises, but only after talking about some of the problems raised by both subjectivism and expressivism.
Moral disagreement Neither theory can make much sense of moral disagreement. On a subjectivist view, people who seem to disagree about moral claims are just talking past each other, since their claims are not really in conflict. (It is quite possible for one person to approve of something while another doesn’t; there is no conflict there.) On an expressivist view, people apparently arguing with each other about moral issues are not really arguing at all.

The phenomenology of moral experience Neither theory can give any account of the impression we have that we are trying to find the truth when we wrestle with a moral problem.

The Frege-Geach problem This is just a problem for expressivism. It comes from the following observation: sometimes we use moral statements in a way in which they don’t express our attitudes. For instance if I thought that both adultery and pre-marital sex were morally fine, I might nonetheless accept ‘If premarital sex is wrong, then so is adultery’. But then how are we to understand this utterance? The Expressivist has given us no account of it, since I am not actually expressing an attitude to either of the sentences it contains. If we try to understand it as being of the form ‘If I were to think that premarital sex were wrong, then I would think that adultery is wrong’ then we are faced with problems explaining how this can fit into standard arguments, e.g.:

If premarital sex is wrong, then so is adultery
Premarital sex is wrong
Therefore Adultery is wrong

THE OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT

One issue discussed at some length by Smith in his chapter on expressivism is the Open Question Argument (see §2.6, 2.7). The argument, first presented by Moore in Principia Ethica in 1903, has been extremely influential. Moore used it to argue against any attempt to give a naturalistic account of good. Thus suppose that we try to define ‘good’ as meaning ‘tending to promote the greatest happiness’. Then Moore claimed that we could still ask of an act: ‘This tends to promote the greatest happiness, but is it good?’ That remains an ‘open question’. From that Moore concluded that the analysis cannot be right, for if it were the question should be non-sensical; and likewise for any other naturalistic analysis. However, as Smith points out, the Open Question Argument seems to prove too much. For even correct analyses can be non-obvious, so the question of whether they were correct would still be open. Perhaps though there is a way of understanding the Open Question Argument that fits it into the structure that we have presented. Perhaps the real force of it is that, for any attempted analysis of good, P, we can always ask: ‘This act is P, but why should I be motivated to do it?’ Whereas, if we accept internalism, it seems that we cannot sensibly ask: ‘This act is good, but why should I be motivated to do it?’ And the appeal to unobvious analyses does not seem to help here. The former question still seems good, however well we understand P.

SUPERVENIENCE OF THE MORAL ON THE NON-MORAL

One further issue discussed by Smith in Ch 2 (§2.4) is worth pursuing. This is the idea that it is implausible to think that moral facts are completely independent of non-moral (natural) facts, and that we identify them by means of a faculty of moral intuition. The argument is a simple one: it seems to be an a priori truth that any two situation that are exactly the same in their non-moral (natural) features must be the same in their moral features. To use the technical term the moral supervenes on the non-moral. But that means that moral facts cannot be independent of non-moral facts. (Note that the postulation of a faculty of moral intuition that enabled us to perceive a realm of independent moral facts still wouldn’t explain why such perceptions were motivating. So even if the supervenience argument broke down, that wouldn’t give an answer to the Moral Problem.)