

Humberstone on Ayer's Emotivism

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Abstract: In *The Connectives*, Lloyd Humberstone offers an interpretation of A. J. Ayer's emotivism using W. S. Cooper's semantics for ordinary logic. In this discussion note, I argue that this proposed interpretation fails to stay true to Ayer's view.

Keywords: Classical logic; dual content; emotivism; ordinary logic; transparent semantics.


1. Introduction

Ayer's emotivist account of the 'meaning' of moral sentences could arguably be summed up in the following passage:

The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. Thus, if I say to someone, 'You acted wrongly in stealing that money', I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, 'You stole that money'. In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it (Ayer 1952, 107).

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Humberstone interprets this passage as an analysis of a particular type of moral sentences that we may call instantiated moral sentences. For example, an instantiated moral sentence like:

You acted wrongly in stealing the money.

is analysed as the conjunction:

You stole the money and that action is wrong.

According to Humberstone, the first conjunct is cognitively significant – it can be judged as true or false depending on the obtaining fact. If it is a fact that you stole the money, then it is true that you stole the money; otherwise, it is false that you stole the money. The second conjunct, on the other hand, is devoid of cognitive meaning. This is so following Ayer’s theory that moral sentences only evince a subject’s approval or disapproval; thus, are neither true nor false.

Humberstone’s interpretation does not end there, however. For him, the penultimate sentence of Ayer’s passage (above) suggests that the whole conjunction makes the same claim as the first conjunct. That is, if the first conjunct is true, then the whole conjunction is true; on the other hand, if it is false, then the conjunction is false (Humberstone, 2011, 1051). We may take this interpretation as assigning (classical) semantic values to instantiated moral sentences.

In this paper, I explore the semantic framework behind Humberstone’s proposed interpretation of Ayer’s emotivism. Then I show some problems with this interpretation. In particular, I argue that it fails to adequately model Ayer’s brand of emotivism.

2. Humberstone’s interpretation

Humberstone’s interpretation of Ayer’s emotivism is based on the semantic framework of ‘ordinary logic’ (OL) due to Cooper (1968).¹ OL consists of a countable set of atomic sentences $\{A, B, C, \dots\}$ and the set of

¹ It is interesting to note that Cooper’s (1968) OL is similar to the three-valued logics proposed by C. S. Peirce and Sobociński (1952). For a discussion of Peirce’s

Boolean connectives $\{\neg, \vee, \wedge\}$. Boolean-made compounds (i.e., $\neg A$ (negation), $A \vee B$ (disjunction), and $A \wedge B$ (conjunction)) are defined in the usual recursive way.

OL is a three-valued semantics, where each atomic sentence, A maps into a trivalent set of semantic values, $V = \{1, 0.5, 0\}$. ‘1’ and ‘0’ represent the *classical* values: ‘true’ and ‘false’, respectively, and ‘0.5’ represents the *non-classical* value of being neither true nor false.² Table 1 represents the OL semantics for Boolean compounds:

\neg		\vee	1	0.5	0	\wedge	1	0.5	0
1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
0.5	0.5	0.5	1	0.5	0	0.5	1	0.5	0
0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 1: OL Truth-tables for Boolean compounds

Note how sentences that have the 0.5 value behave in these OL truth tables. A true sentence conjoined or disjoined with a sentence that has the 0.5 value results in a true compound sentence. On the other hand, a false sentence conjoined or disjoined with a sentence that has the 0.5 results in a false sentence. The only time that compound sentences have the 0.5 value is when their constituent sentences have the 0.5 value. This latter observation does not only apply to binary connectives but also to negations. Finally, notice that dropping the 0.5 value in these OL truth-tables results in the standard Boolean truth tables in classical logic. This is right since OL is a sub-classical logic.

For Humberstone, the OL semantics, especially the truth-table for conjunction, captures the main intent of Ayer’s view about instantiated moral sentences. Since the moral sentence ‘You acted wrongly in stealing the money’ just means ‘You stole the money and that action is wrong’, it follows

logic, see (Belikov, 2021) and (Fisch and Turquette, 1966); for Sobociński’s logic, see (Da Ré and Szmuc, 2021) and (Joaquin, 2021).

² Cooper uses ‘T’, ‘G’, and ‘F’ to represent ‘true’, ‘gap’, and ‘false’, respectively (Cooper, 1968, 305). On the other hand, Humberstone uses ‘1’, ‘2’, and ‘3’ (Humberstone, 2011, 1044). For our purposes, we follow the semantic representation by (Joaquin, 2021) and (Da Ré and Szmuc, 2021).

that, given the semantics, if the first conjunct is true, then the moral sentence is true; if it is false, then the moral sentence is false.

Humberstone's analysis implies then that all instantiated moral sentences have a cognitive content (that is either 1 or 0) and a non-cognitive content (that always has the 0.5 value). Let us call this the dual-content feature of instantiated moral sentences. Moreover, the semantic value of instantiated moral sentences depends on the semantic value of their cognitive content. That is, for any instantiated moral sentence M , if its cognitive content has the value 1, then M has the value 1; otherwise, M has the value 0. Thus, there is no case where M has a 0.5 value. Let us call this the transparency feature of instantiated moral sentences.

Let us distinguish instantiated moral sentences from more general moral sentences like, 'Stealing money is wrong'. Unlike the former, the latter type of moral sentences does not have a cognitive content; they only have an emotive, non-cognitive content. Given the OL semantics, this means that any general moral sentence G will always have the 0.5 value.³

3. Some problems with Humberstone's interpretation

Humberstone's interpretation of Ayer's emotivism is not beyond criticism. First, even if we suppose that general moral sentences always have the 0.5 value, there is still the problem of how to make sense of their negations. Let us call this the negation problem. Given the OL semantics, if 'Stealing money is wrong' has the value of 0.5, then its negation – 'Stealing is not wrong' – must have the 0.5 value. But if this so, how then could the OL semantics differentiate the emotive content of 'Stealing is wrong' from 'Stealing is not wrong'? More generally, the OL semantics does not seem to have the semantic resources to distinguish between a general moral sentence G and its negation $\neg G$ since both have the same 0.5 value.

The negation problem is not only a problem for Humberstone's interpretation of Ayer's emotivism, but for expressivists (and noncognitivists)

³ Humberstone reports that although Ayer takes this line for the case of general moral sentences, he would use the conjunctive analysis (discussed above) for the case of instantiated moral sentences.

who aim to provide a logic of moral sentences. The challenge is to find a non-cognitive account of how negation functions over moral sentences in a given language.⁴ Ayer's intellectual heirs tried to address the problem in various ways. For example, Gibbard (1990) defined $\neg G$ in terms of normative worlds where a person disapproves G , while Blackburn (1993) defined it in terms of a person booing G . Weintraub (2011) defined $\neg G$ in terms of a preferential ordering, while Schroeder (2008a) defined it in terms of an even higher-order attitude of being for disapproving the G .

The basic strategy here is to treat a non-cognitive attitude as an attitudinal operator that ranges over a sentence. For example, following Blackburn (1993), let 'H!' be a positive attitude towards some action and 'B!' a negative attitude. Accordingly, 'B!(stealing money)' expresses the negative attitude towards the act of stealing money, while H!(stealing money) expresses a positive attitude towards it. Now since H! and B! are incompatible non-cognitive attitudes, it follows that expressing 'B!(stealing money) and H!(stealing money)' would be logically inconsistent.

This kind of response to the negation problem, however, does not seem to be available for Ayer and his intellectual heirs since the very notion of incompatibility seems to require even a minimal notion of cognitive content (i.e., the notion that moral sentences are truth-evaluable). Furthermore, as Roojen (1996) argued, the incompatibility of H! and B! might be more pragmatic than logical. This means that while expressing 'B!(stealing money) and H!(stealing money)' might be pragmatically inconsistent, they might not be logically inconsistent.

Second, the dual-content and transparency features of instantiated moral sentences seem to go against the main intent of Ayer's emotivism. Recall that an instantiated moral sentence M has a cognitive content and a non-cognitive, emotive content, and M 's semantic value always follows its cognitive content. Thus, a conjunction like 'You acted wrongly in stealing the money and $7 + 5 = 12$ ' is true just in case the first conjunct's cognitive content, viz., 'You stole the money', has the value 1. On the other hand, 'You acted wrongly in stealing the money or $7 + 5 = 11$ ' is false if 'You stole the money' has the value 0. This idea seems to be motivated by the

⁴ For further discussions of the negation problem, see (Schroeder, 2008b).

thought that the emotive content of an instantiated moral sentence adds nothing to its semantic value. That is, the semantic value of such a moral sentence is simply identical with its cognitive content (Humberstone, 2011, 1052).

However, if this is right, then it seems to go against Ayer's view that moral sentences are pseudo-sentences that express no proposition that can be either true or false (Ayer, 1952, 106). Ayer's reason for this is that there is simply no criterion by which such pseudo-sentences could be verified as true or false. One may of course resist Ayer's implied verificationism; yet, it is beside the point. The ultimate point being stressed here is that Humberstone's interpretation does not stay true to Ayer's emotivism since it implies that an instantiated moral sentence can be judged as true or false. Arguably, this implication is something that Ayer will not be happy about.⁵

4. Conclusion

Humberstone's interpretation of Ayer's emotivism is an innovative one. But as the foregoing discussions have shown, it is not without problems. And these problems stem from how general and instantiated moral sentences behave in his preferred OL semantics. It would be interesting to see how Humberstone will respond to these problems using the resources of the semantics. But until then, these problems remain unresolved.

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⁵ This is in response to Humberstone's claim that 'Ayer is happy to treat "You acted wrongly in stealing the mone" as amounting to the conjunction: "You stole the money and that action was wrong"' (Humberstone, 2011, 1051).

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