

Philosophy 3100: Ethical Theory

Topic 2 - Non-Cognitivism:

I. What is Non-Cognitivism?

II. The Motivational Judgment Internalist
Argument for Non-Cognitivism

III. Why Ayer Is A Non-Cognitivist

a. The Analytic/Synthetic Distinction

b. The *A Priori*/Empirical Distinction

c. Ayer's Empiricism

d. Why Moral Statements Are a Potential
Problem for Ayer's Empiricism

IV. Problems for Non-Cognitivism

What is Non-Cognitivism?

Cognitivism:

- (i) Moral statements assert propositions;
- (ii) Moral judgments are beliefs;
- (iii) The function of moral language is (at least in part) to express these beliefs.

Propositions are, by definition:

- things that are true or false;
- what declarative sentences stand for or mean;
- the objects of our beliefs, hopes, fears, etc. – i.e., they are *what* we believe, *what* we hope, etc.

We can refer to propositions using ‘that’-clauses.

What is Non-Cognitivism?

Cognitivism:

- (i) Moral statements assert propositions;
- (ii) Moral judgments are beliefs;
- (iii) The function of moral language is (at least in part) to express these beliefs.

‘Moral Judgment’ is just the name we give to whatever state of mind we are in when we sincerely utter a moral statement.
(The term is just a “placeholder” for whatever these states turn out to be.)

What is Non-Cognitivism?

Non-Cognitivism:

- (i) Moral statements do not assert propositions (and so are not true or false);
- (ii) Moral judgments are not beliefs; instead, they are some kind of “non-cognitive” attitude (e.g., a desire, an emotion, a state of approval or disapproval);
- (iii) The whole function of moral language is to express these non-cognitive attitudes, to get others to share them, and/or to get people to act in certain ways (moral language has no meaning beyond this; it does not represent reality as being any way).

The MJJ Argument for Non-Cog.

Huemer, p. 19:

... admittedly there are other considerations relevant to assessing ethical non-cognitivism besides that of whether we treat ethical statements like assertions. Usually, philosophers rely on broader theoretical considerations, such as the supposed desirability, in general, of maintaining a ‘naturalistic worldview’ (avoiding ‘weird’ things that scientists don’t talk about), the alleged untenability of alternative metaethical theories, and the ability of non-cognitivism to explain why we are *motivated* to act in the ways we consider moral.

The MJJ Argument for Non-Cog.

Huemer, p. 19:

... admittedly there are other considerations relevant to assessing ethical non-cognitivism besides that of whether we treat ethical statements like assertions. Usually, philosophers rely on broader theoretical considerations, such as the supposed desirability, in general, of maintaining a ‘naturalistic worldview’ (avoiding ‘weird’ things that scientists don’t talk about), the alleged untenability of alternative metaethical theories, and **the ability of non-cognitivism to explain why we are *motivated* to act in the ways we consider moral.**

The MJI Argument for Non-Cog.

The Argument from Motivational Judgment Internalism for Non-Cognitivism:

(P1) If one sincerely judges an action to be the morally right thing to do, then necessarily one has at least some motivation to do that act.

[**Motivational Judgment Internalism (MJI)**]

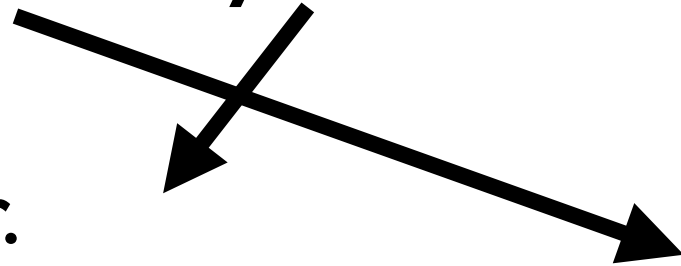
(P2) Beliefs, on their own, can never motivate us to do anything.

[Part of the “Humean Theory of Motivation”]

(C) Therefore, moral judgments are not beliefs.

Why Ayer Is A Non-Cognitivist

The Analytic/Synthetic Distinction



All cats purr.

All bachelors have
messy apartments.

It's raining.

When people run,
they get tired.

If Ted killed Ned, Ted feels bad.

If Tina is taller than Sally, then
Tina is heavier than Sally.

All cats are cats.

All bachelors are unmarried.

Either it's raining or it's not raining.

When people run,
they move their bodies.

If Ted killed Ned, Ned is dead.

If Tina is taller than Sally, then
Sally is not taller than Tina.

The Analytic/Synthetic Distinction

“Rough-and-Ready” Definition of Analyticity:

An analytic truth is a statement that is true just in virtue of the meanings of the terms in it; it is “true by definition.”

Other things you might hear about analytic truths:

They are mere “relations of ideas.” (Hume)

The predicate is “contained” in the subject. (Kant)

Denying them is a contradiction in terms.

The Analytic/Synthetic Distinction

“Rough-and-Ready” Definition of Analyticity:

An analytic truth is a statement that is true just in virtue of the meanings of the terms in it; it is “true by definition.

Frege’s Definition of Analyticity (and our official definition:

An **analytic truth** is one whose negation entails a contradiction, using only definitions and logic.

The Analytic/Synthetic Distinction

Illustrating Frege's Definition (analytic truth = one whose negation entails a contradiction, using only definitions and logic)

Candidate analytic truth:

“All bachelors are unmarried.”



Its negation:

“Not all bachelors are unmarried.”

This entails, using the definition of ‘bachelors’:

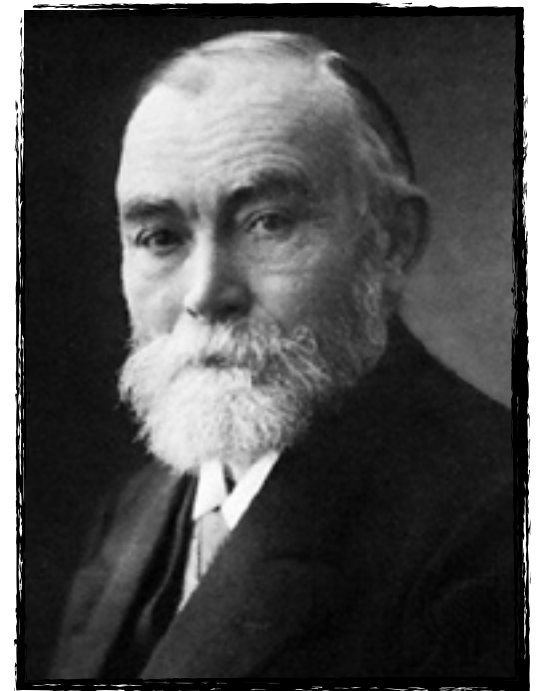
“Not all unmarried men are unmarried.”

This entails, using logic:

“There exists an unmarried man who is not unmarried.”

Which entails, using logic:

“There exists something that is both unmarried and not unmarried.”



Gottlob Frege
founder of modern logic

The Analytic/Synthetic Distinction

An **analytic truth** is one whose negation entails a contradiction, using only definitions and logic.

A **synthetic truth** is simply one that is not analytic; that is, though it is true, denying it is not contradictory; denying it at least consistent.

NOTE: 'analytic' does not mean *obvious*.
There are obvious synthetic truths.
And there are non-obvious analytic truths.

*Can
you
think of
some?*

The *A Priori*/ Empirical Distinction

A truth is **empirical** just in case it can be known empirically — that is, known either

- (a) through the senses (i.e., sight, sound, touch, smell, etc.);
- (b) through introspection; or
- (c) through reasoning from facts known as in (a) or (b).

E.g.: “There is a cat before me.” (sight)
“There is gasoline on this cat.” (smell)
“The cat is on fire.” (sound)
“The cat is in pain.” (reasoning: last fact + ...)
“I feel bad for the cat.” (introspection)

The *A Priori*/Empirical Distinction

A truth is *a priori* just in case it can be known *a priori* — that is, known either

(a) simply by understanding it; or

(b) through reasoning from facts known as in

(a) using rules of inference whose validity can be known as in (a).

E.g.: “All cats are cats.”

“All triangles have three sides.”

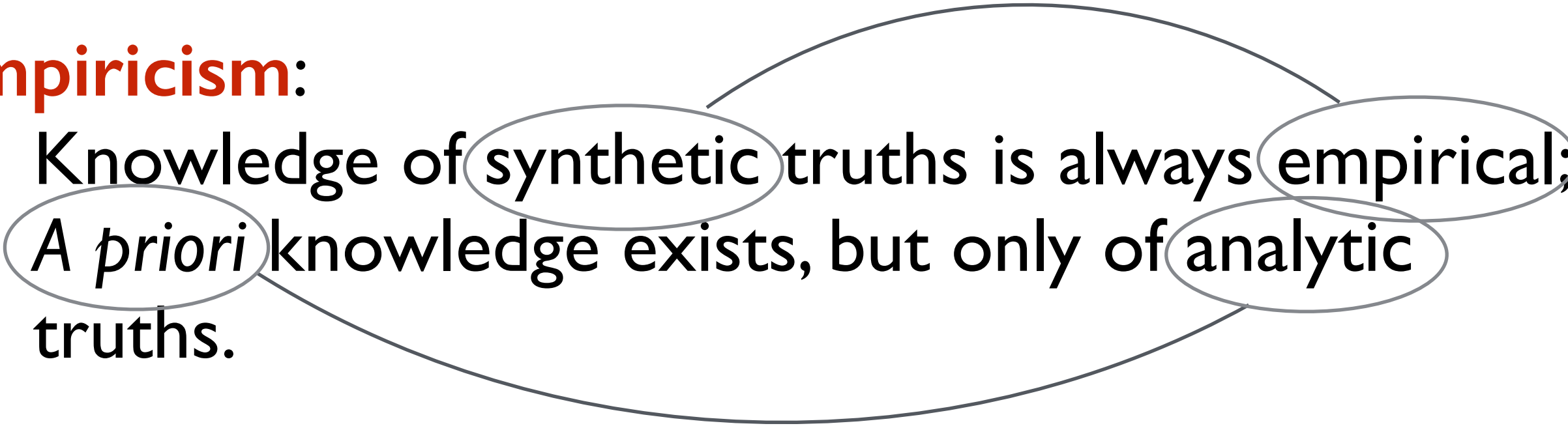
“The internal angles of any triangle add up to 180°.”

“Nothing is both red and green all over at the same time.”

“Enjoyment is better than suffering.” (???)

Ayer's Empiricism

Empiricism:

- (i) Knowledge of synthetic truths is always empirical;
 - (ii) *A priori* knowledge exists, but only of analytic truths.
- 

Rationalism:

There is synthetic *a priori* knowledge.

Ayer's Empiricism

“The existence of ethics and aesthetics as branches of speculative knowledge presents an insuperable objection to our radical empiricist thesis.”



— A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (p. 102)

What is the problem that moral statements pose for empiricism?

Why Moral Statements Are a Problem for Ayer's Empiricism

Consider a moral statement that seems pretty clearly true:

“All acts of causing pain purely for fun are wrong.”

Now ask: *Is this statement analytic?*

ANSWER: It would seem “No.”

So then what are Empiricists committed to saying about this statement?

ANSWER: that we can know it *empirically* (if we can know it at all).

But can we know it empirically?

Why Moral Statements Are a Problem for Ayer's Empiricism

“Take any action allow'd to be vicious: wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. ... The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object.”



— David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738)

What's An Empiricist To Do?



A.J. Ayer

Non-Cognitivism to the rescue!

If Non-Cognitivism is true,
we don't need to explain how
moral knowledge is possible,
because there is none:
there is nothing there to be
known!

A final question:

Nihilists can say this, too.

But why might one prefer to be a Non-Cognitivist?