
Noncognitivism is a family of metaethical views according to which the meanings of moral sentences, such as ‘Stealing is wrong,’ are more like the emotive meanings typical of exclamative sentences (‘Shame on anyone who steals!’) or the prescriptive meanings of imperative sentences (‘Let us not steal’) than the descriptive meanings typical of nonmoral declarative sentences (‘Stealing is common’). Because language is intimately connected with thought, noncognitivism also holds that moral thoughts, such as the thought that stealing is wrong, are more like being against stealing or deciding to avoid stealing than believing that stealing has a certain characteristic. Noncognitivism has been central to philosophical ethics since at least the early twentieth century. However, despite its legacy and developments over the past forty years, not since J. O. Urmson’s *The Emotive Theory of Ethics* [London: Hutchinson, 1968] has there been an attempt to provide a comprehensive understanding of the varieties of noncognitivism and their respective motivations, challenges, and possibilities.

Schroeder’s *Noncognitivism in Ethics* skillfully fills this void while, somehow, accomplishing its other ambitious aim of being useful to “everyone from the uninitiated to the professional researcher” (p. xii). To do so, Schroeder takes us on a tour of interconnected philosophical problems, some motivating noncognitivism, most challenging it. Indeed, Schroeder leads us through, by my count, twenty-nine such problems—not including those suggested in each chapter’s set of increasingly complex exercises useful for both beginners and researchers—a strategy befitting the book’s role as part of Routledge’s New Problems of Philosophy series. However, if weaving through twenty-nine philosophical problems sounds exhausting or, perhaps, monotonous, it is not; Schroeder’s style is personable, the pace is steady, and each problem appears unobtrusively serving an appropriate purpose. This book is very good and will be of service to almost anyone interested in metaethics. The book contains eleven chapters that can usefully be understood as composing three parts and a conclusion. The first part introduces the field of metaethics and noncognitivism (Chapter 1); the early “speech-act” versions of noncognitivism offered by A. J. Ayer, C. L. Stevenson, and R. M. Hare, which held that understanding a moral sentence is to know what speech act the sentence is suited to perform (e.g., to express an attitude or to prescribe behavior) (Chapter 2); and the Frege-Geach Problem, noncognitivism’s perennial problem of adequately explaining how simpler moral language and thought (‘Stealing is wrong’) can compose in part more complex moral language and thought (‘If stealing is wrong, I won’t do it’) (Chapter 3). Although most researchers could probably skip this section, its explanations of the value of truth conditional theories of meaning, why noncognitivists cannot use these theories, and the force of the resulting Frege-Geach Problem are pedagogically invaluable. Even most of the uninitiated will, I believe, come away appreciating the motivations for noncognitivism’s most significant developments of the past forty years. Those developments have been spearheaded by those, such as Simon Blackburn, Allan Gibbard, and Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons, who advocate
an “expressivist” theory of meaning. Expressivism, on Schroeder’s use of the term, holds that understanding a sentence is to know what mental state it expresses. What expression is and how expressivist theories are motivated (Chapter 4); problems they face in the philosophy of mind (Chapter 5); their difficulties resolving the Frege-Geach Problem (Chapters 6 and 7); and their theoretical resources for explaining moral truth and objectivity (Chapter 8): these constitute the book’s second part. It is the heart of NIE, and Chapters 6-8 (and their exercises) are its most difficult. The book’s third part focuses on two recent developments in noncognitivism. One is an interesting epistemological dispute, whether noncognitivism succumbs to the “Wishful Thinking” problem (Chapter 9). At its most general, the problem is a dilemma: noncognitivism appears committed either to the rational acceptability of some (apparently) irrational inferences or to the rational unacceptability of some (apparently) rational inferences. Another is the recent move to hybrid forms of noncognitivism, which hold that moral language and thought, like that containing pejoratives and slurs (‘Sam is a ____’), have both cognitive and noncognitive elements (Chapter 10). Schroeder’s main objection to hybrid noncognitivism is that the features allowing it to resolve many of the problems facing “pure” noncognitivism also reintroduce some of the very problems that originally motivated noncognitivism; for example, hybrid theories reinvolve the heavy burden of providing an adequate account of the nature of moral properties.

Noncognitivists themselves will likely find this single-source compendium of their views, challenges, and possibilities most helpful. There are of course places to quibble. I’ll mention two. The first is an objection to Gibbard’s expressivism. Recall that expressivism holds that understanding a sentence is to know what mental state it expresses. A successful expressivist theory of meaning, then, must actually specify the mental states that sentences express. However, Schroeder objects, Gibbard never does tell us which mental states are expressed by moral sentences. Rather, he simply describes what such states would have to be like in order to resolve the Frege-Geach problem. Indeed, Schroeder claims, Gibbard gives us no reason at all to believe that there even are such states, but “merely hypothesizes that there are such states and hopes that its hypothesis is fulfilled” (p. 133). Now Gibbard certainly appears to be more committal than this. For example, in *Thinking How to Live* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. P., 2003], Gibbard focuses intently on intention-like plans, as Schroeder is well aware (Chapter 5). Plans can be more complex; for example deliberating whether to pack now or later, Holmes decides: *pack now if you can still catch the train*. Or simpler; Holmes finally decides: *pack now*. These are Gibbard’s plans. I am pretty sure Schroeder would agree that there are such states, that we have some grip on what they are, and that they differ from ordinary beliefs. Phenomenological reflection on our own decisions seems to lead to Gibbard’s view that all of this “[needs] no vindication” [THL, p. 196]. So Schroeder’s objection must be more pointed, that Gibbard offers no argument for the hypothesis that plans are what moral sentences express. But I take it that Gibbard’s overall argument in THL is an inference that this hypothesis is the best (or at least a good) explanation of a range of normative phenomena (see especially THL, Chapter 9). So, I do not think Schroeder’s objection that Gibbard “merely hypothesizes that there are such states and hopes that its hypothesis is fulfilled”