

WJEC A Level R.S. Unit 4 Religion and Ethics Knowledge Organiser:

Theme 1C Ethical Thought - Meta-ethical approaches - Emotivism

Key concepts:

- **Meta-Ethics** is a discipline in ethics that attempts to understand the nature of ethical statements, attitudes, properties and judgements.
- **Emotivism** is a meta-ethical theory that claims there are no objective moral values (**Anti-Realism**) and that no one can have knowledge of moral facts (**non-cognitivism**).
- Based on the work of scholars such as Hume, Wittgenstein, Russell and the **Logical Positivists**, emotivism claims that moral statements are factually meaningless.
- The **verification principle** says there are only two types of meaningful statement: 1. **Analytic** statements that are self-evident e.g. **tautologies** and mathematical statements and 2. **Synthetic** statements that can be checked with **empirical** evidence. Ethical statements are neither of these types.
- Ethical statements express the feelings of the speaker and nothing more.
- Emotivism has become known as the 'boo/hurrah' theory since moral propositions express nothing more than personal approval or disapproval.
- This explains why people disagree about morality because everyone has different emotional responses that can be subject to change and no **universal** statement can ever be agreed upon.

Challenges:

- Emotivism is too **reductionist**. It reduces moral statements to emotional utterances, meaning that there is no basis for forming moral principles to live our lives by. They also give no basis for resolving moral differences.
- Ethical debate becomes pointless. It is nothing more than a shouting match in which agents compete to shout the loudest because nothing can be proven. Some would argue that ethical debate is more than this.
- Emotivism makes all **normative** theories mistaken and does not allow for any act to be **universally** right or wrong. This is useless for ordinary life and fails to make any distinction between disliking genocide and disliking curry.

- A.J. Ayer agreed with the Logical Positivists that moral statements are neither analytic nor synthetic.
- 'Stealing is wrong' contains no more factual information than if I said 'stealing' with a look of horror on my face.
- Ethical language is factually and scientifically meaningless but still serves the purpose to persuade others to feel the same way.
- The words chosen to express the feeling indicate the strength of feeling (like an exclamation mark or underlining.)
- This is different to **subjectivism**. Subjectivism says that ethical statements are propositions about a person's emotional state that can be verified and change the moral worth of an action. Emotivism says these statements are just emotional utterances.
- Ethical propositions are **pseudo-concepts** that look like real concepts but cannot be verified.
- Meta-ethics is the only type of ethical study that is philosophically meaningful.

Key quotes:

'Questions as to "value" lie wholly outside the domain of knowledge.' Russell

'In saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making any factual statement, nor even a statement about my own state of mind.' A.J. Ayer

'They are calculated also to arouse feeling and so to stimulate action.' A.J. Ayer

Issues for analysis and evaluation:

Key arguments/debates

Whether ethical statements are just expressions of our emotions.

Whether ethical language is factually meaningless.

Whether emotivism is a useful theory in ethical philosophy.

Key questions

Is there any more to a moral statement than simply uttering a feeling?

What is the purpose of moral debate?

Key words:

Meta Ethics	emotivism	Anti-Realism
non-cognitivism	Logical Positivists	verification principle
analytic	tautologies	synthetic
empirical	universal	Subjectivism
pseudo-concepts	reductionist	normative