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# *Meaning, Morals, and Mistakes\**

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## *Introduction*

In the paper “Meaning and Morals” (hereafter MM), Lars Bergström considers the following claims:

- (1) “Right” means the same as “generally approved.”
- (2) If an action is generally approved, then it is right.

The question he wants to explore is whether (2) follows logically from (1). According to Bergström, although many prominent philosophers have held the opposite view, the answer to this question is No: (2) doesn’t follow. In this paper, I am going to question the case Bergström tries to make for that position and to show that (2) can, after all, be derived from (1).

## *Bergström’s argument*

In support of the view that (2) doesn’t follow from (1), it might be tempting to appeal to Hume’s law and to argue that (2) cannot follow on the ground that (1) is a factual claim whereas (2) is a normative claim. Another possibility is to invoke the non-cognitivist idea that (2) is neither true nor false and the assumption that logical relations only hold between claims that are truth apt. However, Bergström does not want to appeal to any of these ideas (see MM, p. 186). In what follows, I shall therefore assume that claims such as (2) can be true and false.

Before stating his argument, Bergström offers two suggestions about what it means for something to follow logically from something else. The first pertains to cases where the relation in question is supposed to hold between *statements* whereas the second concerns cases where it rather holds between *sentences*. Bergström takes a sentence to be “a linguistic entity, a sequence of words, which belongs to some particular language”. A statement, by contrast, “is something that may be expressed

by a sentence. It is not a linguistic entity; it does not consist of words; it is not a part of any language.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, when Bergström writes about “statements”, he seems to mean what many philosophers would refer to as “propositions”.

According to Bergström, a statement  $p$  follows from (or is a logical consequence of) another statement  $q$  if and only if  $q$  is inconsistent with every statement which is inconsistent with  $p$  (MM, 191). The definition he offers of what it means for a *sentence* to follow from another sentence is slightly more complex. However, since this definition in turn presupposes the definition that applies to statements, and since the complexity has no implications for his main argument, I am going to ignore it.

The argument Bergström offers is simple. He stresses that there are statements which are inconsistent with (2) but which are not inconsistent with (1), and mentions in this connection the statement that some actions which are generally approved are not right. In support of thinking that this statement is not inconsistent with (1), he points out that they “are about wholly different subjects”. Thus, while (1) “says something about the expressions ‘right’ and ‘generally approved’”, the statement that some actions which are generally approved are not right does not “say anything at all” about those expressions. Conversely, while the latter thesis “says something about actions” (1) does not. He concludes that (2) does not follow from (1) (See MM, p. 193, for this reasoning).

#### *Implications of Bergström’s argument*

Before assessing Bergström’s argument, I wish to mention two implications of it. First, notice that it is completely general, and that the fact that (1) concerns evaluative expressions and that (2) is a normative claim is not really essential. The same point could be made about non-evaluative examples, such as, for example, the following:

- (A) “The triangle X is equiangular” means the same as “X has angles that are all equal”
- (B) If the triangle X has angles that are all equal then X is equiangular.

If Bergström’s argument is sound, then it also shows that (B) doesn’t follow from (A), which may come as a surprise for school pupils who tries to solve the problems they are given partly by consulting mathematical dictionaries.

Second, if Bergström's argument is sound, then it completely undermines Moore's famous "open question argument". Roughly, according to Moore, we should reject (1) on the ground that the question of whether it is the case that all actions that are generally approved are right seem "open" or meaningful (unlike the question of whether all action that are generally approved are generally approved).<sup>ii</sup> The underlying idea is that (1) excludes that the pertinent question is thus "open". However, if Bergström is right, this argument is not compelling. For if (1) is compatible with the claim that some actions which are generally approved are not right then it *is* an open question whether it is the case that all actions that are generally approved are right even given (1). In other words, if (2) doesn't follow from (1), then the truth of (1) does not exclude that the question is open, and cannot, therefore, be refuted on the ground that it *seems* open.

#### *How to derive (2) from (1)*

In order to assess Bergström's argument, one needs to consider (1) more closely. One strange thing about it has to do with the fact that claims about the meanings of linguistic expressions are often supposed to involve a kind of relativization which is not visible in Bergström's formulation, namely a relativization to speakers or languages. Presumably, two expressions could mean the same in one idiolect even if they don't mean the same in another. In support of the view that some philosophers have in fact held that (2) follows from (1), Bergström appeals to a number of quotes. For example, he mentions the following remark by G.E. Moore:

Thus, if, when I assert an action to be right, I am merely asserting that it is generally approved in the society to which I belong, it follows, of course, that if it is generally approved by my society, my assertion is true, and the action really is right.<sup>iii</sup>

Unlike in the case of (1), in this quote, the pertinent relativization is made explicit (( "...when *I* assert..."). (1) should therefore be rephrased so as to bring that out. For the sake of simplicity, I shall assume that (1) should be relativized to a language rather than to speakers or idiolects. although my argument works just as well given the other kind of relativization. This should be acceptable to Bergström. As we have

seen, Bergström stresses that a sentence is “a linguistic entity, a sequence of words, which belongs to some particular language”. Presumably, just like sentences, expressions such as “generally approved” also belong to particular languages.

The question is, then: For what language is (1) supposed to hold? A natural answer is: English. We may therefore replace (1) with the following formulation:

(1\*) “Right” means, in English, the same as what “generally approved” means, in English.

Now, on a common view, the meaning of a term determines the truth conditions of sentences that use the term as a predicate. Given this view, (1\*) may be taken to imply the following claim:

(i) “X is right” is true, in English, if and only if, “X is generally approved” is true, in English.

Whether two sentences have the same truth conditions in a given language depends in turn on which truth conditions they do have, in that language. We may state their truth conditions by using a language we understand (such as English). Presumably, the following hold:

(ii) “The action X is generally approved” is true, in English, if and only if, X is generally approved.

(iii) “The action X is right” is true, in English, if and only if X is right.

And, from (i), (ii) and (iii) we may, through simple substitution, infer:

(iv) An action X is right if and only if X is generally approved.

And (iv) obviously implies:

(2) If an action is generally approved, then it is right.

In other words, *pace* Bergström, (2) can easily be derived from (1), at least after having noted the relativization that claims such as (1) involve and after having consulted our knowledge of English.

### *An objection*

Bergström might object that, since I presuppose (ii), (iii) and the idea about the connection between meanings and truth conditions that I invoke in order to get from (1\*) to (i), I haven't shown that (2) follows from (1) *alone*. However, notice that Bergström wants to attack a position that has actually been *held* by some philosophers. And attributing to these philosophers the view that (2) follows from (1) alone is uncharitable, to put it charitably. It is more reasonable to assume that they, in thinking that (2) can be derived from (1), implicitly rely on assumptions of the kind that I have invoked.

Moreover, and more importantly, none of the additional assumptions constitutes a straightforward normative claim. The step from (1\*) to (i) rests on a general meaning-theoretical view, and (ii) and (iii) represent bits of knowledge about English. The issue of whether (2) can be derived from (1) has some philosophical interest mainly because it is supposed to be relevant to the question of how to settle normative and evaluative issues. For example, when Moore stresses that claims such as (1) are refuted by his open question argument, he sees this as an important result because it blocks a certain type of argument. Thus, in connection with the idea that “good” means the same as “desired”, he writes:

...if I am right, then nobody can foist upon us such an axiom as that ‘Pleasure is the only good’ or that ‘The good is the desired’ on the pretence that this is ‘the very meaning of the word’ (p. 7).

Presumably, the idea is that if (1) were established, then, given that (2) follows from (1), this would motivate revisions of the ways in which we try to settle normative issues. Perhaps it means that we should use questionnaires or empirical methods more often than we presently think appropriate? I am skeptical towards that idea, for reason

that I will hint at below. However, it seems clear that it is not undermined by the mere fact that we, in deriving (2) from (1), must rely on (ii) and (iii).

### *Conclusion*

What is the upshot of this? Well, what I am challenging, in effect, is Bergström's confident ideas about what claims such as (1) are and are not "about". Bergström thinks that (2) does not follow from (1) on the ground that (1) is not about actions. It might plausibly be objected that this argument blatantly begs the question, as asking what a claim is about and asking what it logically implies seem to amount to more or less the same thing. Moreover, given that the extension of "generally approved" (in English) includes actions, then (1) is clearly (in at least some sense) "about" actions, as (1) plausibly implies that the items that belong to the extension of "generally approved" also belong to the extension (in English) of "right". More generally, Bergström seems to assume is that there is a very sharp distinction between claims about the meanings of certain linguistic expressions and substantial claims about the items to which these expressions refer. As Quine and numerous others have made clear, however, and as some of what I have written above illustrates, this distinction is difficult to uphold.<sup>iv</sup> Consequently, whether the fact that (2) can be derived from (1) really does motivate any significant revisions of the methods we use when assessing normative claims is far from clear.

### *Notes*

\* It is of course optimal if a contribution to a *festschrift* engages with the work of the person who is the subject of the volume. However, I have chosen to instead go to the root of "the problem" (joke), by criticizing Lars Bergström (the supervisor of Eric Carlson's doctoral dissertation).

<sup>i</sup> The quotes are from MM, p. 190. MM was published already in 1972 (in R. E. Olson and A. M. Paul (eds.), *Contemporary Philosophy in Scandinavia*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press), but similar thoughts are expressed in Bergström's Swedish textbook *Grundbok i värdeteori* (Thales, 1990). See especially pp. 48f.

<sup>ii</sup> Moore develops this argument in section 13 of *Principia Ethica*.

<sup>iii</sup> Moore, G.E., *Ethics*, London: The Home University Library, 1912, 108.

<sup>iv</sup> See further Tersman, F., *Moral Disagreement*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

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