

Lockean and logical truth conditions

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1. In 'A problem for expressivism' Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit argue 'that expressivists do not have a persuasive story to tell about how ethical sentences can express attitudes without reporting them and, in particular, without being true or false' (1998: 240). Briefly: expressivists say that ethical sentences serve to *express* non-cognitive attitudes, but that these sentences do not *report* non-cognitive attitudes. The view that ethical sentences do report non-cognitive attitudes is not Expressivism (and not non-cognitivism), but rather a version of cognitivism. According to (what we'll call) Subjectivism, a typical ethical sentence like 'Abortion is wrong' reports the speaker's non-cognitive attitude toward abortion; it says, in effect, that abortion is the object of some attitude of the speaker's. Expressivists, by contrast, say that the sentence expresses a non-cognitive attitude toward abortion, but does not *say* that the speaker has it. Ayer put it this way: I can *say* that I am bored by uttering the sentence 'I am bored', but I can *express* boredom, without *saying* that I am bored, by yawning (Ayer 1952: 109).

As Jackson and Pettit see it, a certain plausible Lockean story about how sentences come to express beliefs, and so how they come to have truth conditions and truth values, will cast serious doubt on the Expressivist claim that some sentences express attitudes without reporting them. The main Lockean idea starts from the uncontroversial point that bits of language get their meaning from conventions. What conventional facts give a sentence of the form '*x* is square' its meaning? The fact that we have (implicitly) agreed 'to use "*x* is square" as a way of conveying our taking it to be the case that *x* is square' (Jackson and Pettit 2003: 86).

Distinguish the assertibility conditions of a sentence from its success conditions. (For ordinary declarative sentences, the success conditions will be the truth conditions, but we want to allow the possibility of success conditions for sentences that lack truth conditions.) The conventions that give sentences meanings had better be conventions governing their assertibility

conditions, because those are the conditions to which we have access. For example, the convention giving meaning to sentences of the form ‘ x is square’ is that we are to use it ‘as a way of conveying our taking it to be the case that x is square’ (Jackson and Pettit 2003: 86). When you utter the sentence ‘ x is square’ you are not *saying* that you take it to be the case that x is square, of course; you are saying that x is square. But you can sincerely assert the sentence just when you do take x to be square. The meaning of the sentence emerges from the convention: it comes to mean that x is square by being a product of the convention that we shall assert it just when we believe that x is square.

Now suppose that the Lockean story is generally correct. Suppose also that Expressivists are correct when they say that ‘ x is right’ expresses a non-cognitive attitude, approval, toward x . It must do this expressing by convention (unlike the way a yawn expresses boredom, I presume). What could the convention be? We cannot simply agree to say ‘ x is right’ when we approve of x . The assertibility condition must be one of our doxastic states. So, we must agree to say ‘ x is right’ when we believe that we approve of x . But the Lockean story then implies that ‘ x is right’ means that the speaker approves of x . So Expressivism undercuts the distinctive negative claim that is supposed to distinguish it from Subjectivism.

Following Smith and Stoljar (2003), Jackson and Pettit (2003) put the Lockean argument like this:

- (A₁) *Locke’s Claim (square)* What it would be to use ‘ x is square’ to stand for x ’s being such and such is to agree to use ‘ x is square’ when we believe that x is such and such and that conditions are right for communicating this fact.
- (B₁) *Belief Claim (square)* We agreed to use ‘ x is square’ when we believe that x is square and that conditions are right for communicating this fact.
- (C₁) *Agreement Claim (square)* We agreed to use ‘ x is square’ for x ’s being square.

(A₁) seems plausible, which means that the general Lockean Claim looks plausible when applied to ‘square’. But then this plausibility ought to carry over to:

- (A₂) *Locke’s Claim (good)* What it would be to use ‘ x is good’ to stand for x ’s being such and such is to agree to use ‘ x is good’ when we believe that x is such and such and that conditions are right for communicating this fact.
- (B₂) *Belief Claim (good)* We agreed to use ‘ x is good’ when we believe that we approve of x and that conditions are right for communicating this fact.

(C₂) *Agreement Claim (good)* We agreed to use ‘x is good’ for x’s being approved of by us.

To see whether the plausibility does carry over, let’s revisit an objection to the Lockean argument considered by Jackson and Pettit (1998) and see why they reject it.

2. *Esoteric truth conditions*

Jackson and Pettit note that an Expressivist might say that ‘the sense in which ethical sentences express attitudes without thereby having truth conditions’ is like the sense in which commands may express desires without having truth conditions. ‘They may hold that my “ethical” pro-attitude to X stands to “X is right” as my desire that the door is shut stands to the order “Shut the door”’ (1998: 248). Jackson and Pettit reply, rather surprisingly, that ‘it is very plausible that orders have truth conditions in the relevant sense’ (248). That we do not, in ordinary language, call imperatives true and false is irrelevant, they say.¹ They accept the consequence of their Lockean view: imperatives do have truth conditions.

Since ordinary speakers of English are not aware that imperatives have truth conditions,² I’ll call them *esoteric truth conditions*. Lockean arguments appear to establish (at most) that the kinds of sentences in question have esoteric truth conditions. So, the Lockean argument about ‘good’ can establish at most that ethical sentences have esoteric truth conditions. Maybe this result shouldn’t bother an Expressivist. Indeed, if the main point of denying the existence of truth conditions for ethical sentences is to distinguish Expressivism from Subjectivism, then it looks as if esoteric truth conditions might be irrelevant. Subjectivism implies that ethical sentences have *facial* truth conditions – truth conditions that ordinary speakers are aware of in virtue of their linguistic competence. So Expressivism could still be distinguished from Subjectivism: the latter implies that ethical

¹ For the record, my own view is that it is not relevant to the truth-aptness of a sentence whether it embeds grammatically into the context ‘It is true that ...’, but I am not sure whether it is relevant that we would never call a certain kind of sentence true or false. The former is a question of syntax, and like Jackson and Pettit I doubt that syntax alone could determine truth-aptness. It is not clear to me whether the latter is a question of syntax alone.

² At least, there is a straightforward sense in which ordinary speakers are unaware that imperatives have truth conditions, namely, if you ask them under what conditions ‘Shut the door’ will be true, they will be at a loss. Jackson and Pettit could say that there is also some sense in which ordinary speakers grasp the truth conditions of imperatives as soon as they understand the assertibility conditions.

judgments have facial truth conditions involving the speaker's psychological states, while the former does not.

Just what are the truth conditions of imperatives supposed to be? Here is what Jackson and Pettit say:

Every competent English speaker knows that producing the words 'Shut the door' in the right circumstances is *ipso facto* to command that the door be shut; that's what is being done. And that is to say that it makes no difference whether I say 'Shut the door' or I say 'I command that the door be shut' – a point that is independently plausible. But 'I command that the door be shut' obviously has truth conditions. And so it follows that 'Shut the door' has truth conditions too: it is true in *S*'s mouth at *t* just if *S* did indeed command at *t* that the door be shut. (1998: 248)

They think that the Lockean story gives the same result.

Ordering is something we learn to do, and recognize one another as doing, through our shared mastery of the voluntary conventions that settle when we are, and when we are not, ordering. The possibility of this rests on our knowing when we are ordering and when not. And so it is plausible that when I use a sentence like 'Shut the door', I believe that I am giving an order and that I am intentionally producing the sentence as a conventional sign of giving an order. (Jackson and Pettit 1998: 248)³

The general Lockean picture does have the consequence that imperatives have as their truth conditions the occurrence of the speaker's issuing the very command, and this matches the consequence of supposing that 'Shut the door' and 'I command that the door be shut' have the same meaning.⁴

3. *Truth conditions in the web of inference*

In so far as Jackson and Pettit are right about the truth conditions of imperatives, we can see that there really are two different kinds of truth conditions.⁵ For suppose I give the following argument (at noon):

³ This story has about the same form as the official-looking A-B-C style Lockean arguments, and the official-looking style is remarkably infelicitous for 'Shut the door', so I'll omit it.

⁴ Strictly speaking, Jackson and Pettit claim that the two have the same meaning when they are used to give orders, though not when they are embedded in other contexts. That's because the embedding properties have to do with other, non-truth-conditional features of the meaning.

⁵ It is a bit sloppy to speak of two kinds of truth conditions. What I really mean is that there are two different ways that a sentence can be related to a truth condition.

Door Argument

Shut the door.

Therefore, I have commanded something.

This argument, I take it, is not valid; it is a non sequitur. Indeed, it is so badly invalid that it is hard to see it as an argument at all. But according to the Lockean story, the premiss has a truth condition: that I commanded (at noon) that the door be shut. And that does strictly imply that I have commanded something. What does this show? One way to put it is to say that the Lockean truth conditions do not underwrite logical inferences. That is something we expect truth conditions to do. Indeed, one of the *points* of ascribing truth conditions to sentences is to display their ‘logical form’. Truth conditions, we might say, are supposed to capture the position that what is said has in the web of inference. But Lockean truth conditions apparently do not perform this function.

Here is another example of the same disability of Lockean truth conditions. Suppose Alice says, ‘Go away, Betty.’ Carol overhears. ‘What is Alice’s evidence for that?’ she asks. Now, there is certainly evidence for (the obtaining of) the Lockean truth conditions of Alice’s sentence. Alice heard herself speaking, she remembers that she was perfectly serious, she knows English. Her evidence and her background knowledge together strongly justify the claim that Alice commanded that Betty go away. But none of this, I take it, is evidence for what Alice said. We have no idea how to answer Carol’s question. Indeed, we would strongly suspect that Carol misunderstood. There isn’t any such thing as evidence for an imperative. But aren’t truth conditions supposed to bear some clear relation to the evidence relevant to what was said? Shouldn’t evidence for (the obtaining of) the truth conditions of a sentence be precisely evidence for what the speaker said? In so far as truth conditions capture the position that what is said has in the web of inference, of course. But Lockean truth conditions apparently do not perform this function.

Return to the *Door Argument*. I said that it is plainly not valid. Let me briefly consider two objections to my claim.⁶ First, it might be objected that my claim begs the question against Jackson and Pettit, since after

Suppose truth conditions are sets of possible worlds; then what I mean is that there are two different relations that a sentence might bear to a set of possible worlds, and a given sentence might bear each relation to a different set, so that each of those different sets might be called the sentence’s truth conditions. Since the proper way of putting it is cumbersome, I will continue to put it in the sloppy way.

⁶ An anonymous referee suggested the first objection to me; Philip Pettit suggested the second.

all their Lockean view implies that ‘Shut the door’ shares truth conditions with ‘I command that you shut the door’, so *they* will think that the inference *is* valid. I reply that the invalidity of the argument is a datum, not a deliverance of a theory. The validity of Andrew Wiles’s proof of Fermat’s Last Theorem is (to say the least) unobvious, and for a time was a matter over which reasonable people could disagree, but the validity of a one-premiss inference like the *Door Argument* must be a plain matter.

But second, a fan of the Lockean theory might give an argument that the *Door Argument* really is valid in a relevant sense, despite appearances. Anyone who understands ‘Shut the door’, a Lockean might say, understands enough to be able to know that the person uttering those words in a normal context will have given a command. Thus, on the Lockean view, there is an a priori entailment from ‘Shut the door’ to ‘I have commanded something’. My reply is that there is only a relative of entailment at work here, only a relative of validity. The relative might be called ‘Moore-validity’, because it stands to validity as Moorean paradox stands to contradiction (see Moore 1962: 277). ‘It is raining but I don’t believe it’ is Moore-paradoxical, though it is not a contradiction; ‘It is raining, so I believe that it is raining’ is Moore-valid in that the conjunction of its premiss with the denial of its conclusion is Moore-paradoxical, but it is not valid. It is true that anyone who understands ‘Shut the door’ can deduce from its (sincere, normal) utterance that the speaker has commanded something, but in the same way anyone who understands ‘It is raining’ can deduce from its (sincere, normal) utterance that the speaker believes that it is raining. Lockeans, apparently, have mistaken Moorean-validity for validity, a mistake akin to confusing Moore-paradox with contradiction.

We might now deny that Lockean truth conditions are genuine truth conditions at all, on the grounds that they do not capture the logical role of their sentences. That’s a pretty good ground, so the denial is plausible. But we need not stick our neck out. Let us grant that sentences have Lockean truth conditions that deserve the name. What is clear is that Lockean truth conditions need not match logical truth conditions. As it turns out, the Lockean truth conditions of ‘ x is square’ do match up just right with its logical truth conditions, since the Lockean truth conditions of ‘ x is square’ turn out to be just the condition of x ’s being square. But this match is, as it were, a coincidence.

4. Which kind of truth condition matters?

The distinction between logical and Lockean truth conditions helps Expressivism to distinguish itself from Subjectivism. Expressivism is the

view that moral judgments lack logical truth conditions.⁷ Subjectivism says that moral judgments have logical truth conditions involving the speaker's attitudes. Both theories may allow that moral judgments have Lockean truth conditions involving the speaker's attitudes.

Does Expressivism give away too much by conceding that moral judgments have the Lockean truth conditions that Subjectivists say they have? That depends on what the point was of denying truth conditions to moral judgments in the first place. Jackson and Pettit point to Ayer's view that Expressivism is an improvement on Subjectivism because it substitutes Subjectivism's *reporting* function for moral sentences with an *expressing* function. But why exactly was this supposed to be an advantage? Jackson and Pettit mention perhaps the most famous: that Expressivism was supposed to solve the Disagreement Problem, upon which Subjectivism foundered (1998: 240). The Disagreement Problem is that when I say 'Abortion is wrong' and you say 'Abortion is not wrong', we are disagreeing, whereas Subjectivism implies that we are making perfectly compatible claims, each about our own psychological state. The Expressivist says that although we do not state incompatible facts, we express incompatible attitudes. So Expressivism is supposed to solve a problem for Subjectivism. But Jackson and Pettit plausibly argue that there is no Disagreement Problem that Expressivism solves and Subjectivism can't (1998: 250–51). I don't take issue with their point. However, there are a couple of other improvements that Expressivism is supposed to have made over Subjectivism.

First, according to Subjectivism, when I say 'Abortion is wrong' I am saying that I have a certain negative attitude toward abortion. If someone were to ask me for evidence for my claim, I could then quite properly answer, 'Well, I was brought up Catholic and I have undergone no conversion.'⁸ That would be reasonably good evidence that I have the certain negative attitude toward abortion. It would not, though, count as evidence for what I said; the answer is in fact entirely inappropriate. So, Subjectivism is false.

⁷ At any rate, Expressivism denies that normative judgments have logical truth conditions that include anything to do with the speaker's own attitudes. Traditional non-cognitivism denies that moral judgments have any truth conditions at all, but latter-day Expressivists typically allow that normative sentences have deflationary truth conditions, given trivially by the sentences themselves. Gibbard (1991: ch. 6) assigns what he calls 'factual normative contents' to normative sentences to play the role that truth conditions ordinarily play in capturing the logical role the sentences play. These contents might be thought of as truth conditions, although I think it is more illuminating to think of them as functions from norms to truth conditions. See also Dreier 1999.

⁸ Well, anyway, I could properly say it if it were true, which it isn't.

Second, if Subjectivism were correct, then the following Abortion Argument would be a valid argument:

Abortion Argument

Abortion is wrong.

Therefore, I have at least one moral attitude.

But this argument is not valid. So, Subjectivism is false.

Expressivists say that Subjectivism falls prey to these two arguments because it has mistaken the state of mind expressed by a moral sentence for its truth conditions. If moral attitudes are merely expressed, and form no part of the truth conditions, then the false implications (that I can cite facts about my mental life as supporting evidence for my moral judgments, and that the Abortion argument is valid) are avoided. Now here's the payoff: the sorts of truth conditions in question in each objection are *logical* truth conditions. If Expressivism can say that moral sentences have Lockean truth conditions but not logical ones, then the false implications of Subjectivism are avoided.⁹

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⁹ Thanks to Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, Michael Smith and Daniel Stoljar for helpful discussion.