Two objections to non-cognitivism

Theories of what morality is fall into two broad families - cognitivism and non-cognitivism. The distinction is now understood by philosophers to depend on whether one thinks that moral judgements express beliefs or not.

Cognitivism claims that ethical language expresses ethical beliefs about how the world is. To believe that murder is wrong is to believe that the sentence ‘Murder is wrong’ is true. So ethical language aims to describe the world, and so can be true or false.

Non-cognitivism claims that ethical language does not try to describe the world and cannot be true or false. It does not express beliefs, but some other, non-cognitive mental state. Different non-cognitivist theories disagree on exactly what this mental state is, but it is usually an attitude or feeling.

Any non-cognitivist theory faces two important objections.

THE AUTHORITY OF MORALITY

If there is no objective moral truth, does it follow that ‘anything goes’? If morality is a reflection of our emotions or attitudes, what authority does morality have over us? Why should we be moral? Where’s the obligation? What is so important about particular emotions? I can do whatever I like, as long as I don’t get caught. ‘Morality’ becomes no more obligatory than a matter of taste.

Non-cognitivists can argue that this is either an unfair simplification of their theories or a straightforward misunderstanding. Living as though there are no moral values is itself a choice or expression of feeling, and one that moral people will disapprove of morally. The theory that moral values are a reflection of our feelings does not imply that we should stop having moral feelings. We should disapprove of anyone who advocates that morality doesn’t matter or is just a matter of taste.

But can we really justify interfering with how other people behave - when they behave ‘immorally’ - just because their actions don’t accord with my feelings or choices? This seems very petty. But this isn’t the reason I am interfering, claims the non-cognitivist. It is not because it offends me, but because they are being racist or cruel or cowardly or whatever.

The difficulty here is that my taking racist discrimination as a good reason to prevent an action is itself an expression of my feelings or the standards on which I make prescriptions. For the cognitivist, by contrast, that this is a good reason to interfere is a fact about reasons. The cognitivist claims to have the backing of reality.
MORAL PROGRESS

If there is no moral reality, we can argue, then our moral views cannot become better or worse. Obviously, they have changed - people used to believe that slavery was morally acceptable and now they do not. But how can we say that this is progress if there is no objective moral truth? There are two responses non-cognitivists can give.

First, they can claim that there can be very real improvements in people’s moral views if they become more rational. This can happen in several different ways.

1. People may come to know certain facts that they didn’t know before. In the case of slavery, people believed many things about slaves that were not true (one popular false belief was that they were stupid). Moral progress here means basing one’s morality on the facts, not mistakes (Ayer).
2. People can become more consistent, more willing to universalize their principles (Hare). For example, Singer argues that if we were consistent in our feelings about preventing suffering, we would not eat meat. If he is right, then vegetarianism would be moral progress.
3. People can become more coherent in their moral judgements. Many of us have moral feelings that come into conflict with each other, e.g. over lying. Moral progress here would be a matter of working out the implications of our views, and changing what needed changing to make them coherent with each other (Stevenson).

Because people are ignorant, do not always think logically, and have not resolved the conflicts between their different feelings and conventions, there is plenty of room for moral progress. But moral progress just means becoming more rational in our moral thinking, not becoming more ‘correct’ in our moral judgements.

The second response non-cognitivists can give is this: if we disapprove of past moral codes and approve of our own moral code, then we will say that we have made moral progress. Society has moved from moral principles that were bad (i.e. principles we disapprove of) to moral principles that are good (i.e. principles we approve of). That is what moral progress is.

This response means that moral progress is relative to a particular moral point of view. If you disagree with me, you might claim that today’s moral principles are much worse than those 200 years ago and so we have not made moral progress. But this is now just the familiar problem of how to make sense of moral disagreement, not a special problem about moral progress.