Carnap’s Non-Cognitivism as an Alternative to Both Value-Absolutism and Value-Relativism

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Carnap’s Non-Cognitivism as a Better Account of Value-Relativism

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Carnap’s writings on philosophy of values


Cf. also:
Carnap on Kraus on Carnap on values

„[In one of his seminars in Prague around 1935] Oskar Kraus, the leading representative of the philosophy of Franz Brentano [...] characterized my thesis of the nature of value statements so dangerous for the morality of youth that he had seriously pondered the question whether it was not his duty to call on the state authorities to put me in jail. But, he said, he finally came to the conclusion that this would not be the right thing to do because, though my doctrine was very wrong, I was not actually a wicked man.“ (Schilpp 1963, 82)
Carnap’s non-cognitivism (the formal account)

• Statements such as „You might not kill“ are non-cognitive
• They express emotions or attitudes of certain persons or groups but not sentences that receive a truth value
• Formally speaking, values are attributes (properties) of persons or groups (rather than sentences)
• Thus, a value V has to be formalized as a predicate that ranges over the set of all persons and groups
Cognitivism

„You might not kill“

TRUE

FALSE

Non-Cognitivism

„You might not kill“

\{x \mid x \text{ hold } \text{„You might not kill“}\}
But this is not the whole story!

• The philosophical gimmick just mentioned is nice and interesting ...

• ... but it does not tell us too much about Carnap’s philosophy of values

• Thus, we are not interested here in non-cognitivism$_1$ but rather in a different, much stronger conception non-cognitivism$_2$ that also can be found in Carnap’s philosophy of values
Carnap’s non-cognitivism$_2$
(the anti-foundationalist account)

• For Carnap the crucial motive for non-cognitivism (viz. non-cognitivism$_2$) is to **rule out any attempt to sift out the true (real, right, correct) values by means of any method (of science or philosophy or religion or myth or commonsense or subjectivity etc.)**

• This establishes a profoundly anti-foundationalist (anti-scientistic, anti-metaphysical, anti-religious, anti-commonsensical, anti-subjectivist) understanding of values

• There is no justification of values

• Rather, values are a product of our culture, our personal taste or character, i.e., we have to follow our intuitions here, but there is no authority that justifies them (even and in particular not intuition in itself)
Non-cognitivism\textsubscript{2} is stronger than non-cognitivism\textsubscript{1}

• If you adopt non-cognitivism\textsubscript{2} you might also have to adopt non-cognitivism\textsubscript{1}. But not vice-versa.
• As we will see later, there are cases of philosophers who adopt non-cognitivism\textsubscript{1} but reject non-cognitivism\textsubscript{2} (and adopt cognitivism\textsubscript{2}, instead)
Values and science: 
Perfectly rational value functions

• To reject any and even scientific forms of justification of values does not imply that science becomes irrelevant for value discussions!

• For Carnap, science is crucial for value theoretic decisions, but it can only support our decisions, rather than justifying them

• There might be a huge amount of scientific criteria that allow us to establish the notion of a “perfectly rational value function” (Carnap/Carus, 2015)

• Non-cognitivism\textsubscript{2} recommends to reject any value function that does not fulfill these criteria

• Insofar, \textit{non-cognitivism\textsubscript{2} is based on science}
Example 1: an inconsistent value function

• A person $p$ might affirm a certain historical phenomenon (e.g., Hitler) and reject another phenomenon (e.g., the Holocaust) while the latter is causally related to the former.

• Science teaches us that $p$ uses an inconsistent value function.

• If $p$ sticks to use this inconsistent function we might identify a case of the disease of “illogical reasoning” (and hand over $p$ to a psychiatrist).

• But $p$ might make some corrections and the improved value function might appear to be “perfectly rational”.

• Note also, however, that such a value function not necessarily is compatible with your values:
Example 2: insoluble disagreement

• p might use a “perfectly rational” value function that affirms both Hitler and the holocaust
• You might use, in turn, a “perfectly rational” value function that emphatically rejects both Hitler and the holocaust
• You and p might discuss the issue and it might turn out that there is no way to resolve the conflict
• At the end, you might have to decide to imprison p or to commit war against p
• In other words, there might exist value conflicts that at least recently turn out to be unresolvable, even if we accept the non-cognitivist criteria for “perfectly rational” value functions
Example 3: Absolutism and Relativism

• A non-cognitivist very well might be either an absolutist or a relativist, inside of the realm of her non-cognitivist understanding of values

• She might decide to defend her values unconditionally and to reject any deviant value system from scratch (say, because of her stubborn character/cultural background)

• Or she might be willing to consider deviant value systems, to take them seriously and even to adopt certain aspects of them (because of her tolerant character/cultural background)

• Absolutism and relativism become questions of culture here, or even of personal character
Is non-cognitivism$^2$ a meaningful value-theoretical position after all?

- If non-cognitivists$^2$ are allowed to be either relativists or absolutists and to defend all kinds of (rational) value functions, doesn’t this imply that everyone fulfills the criteria to be a non-cognitivist$^2$?

- Absolutely not! There is both a positive and a negative criterion that non-cognitivism provides for value-systems:
  - **Value systems (1)** have to be consistent but there is (2) no consistent value system that can be either justified or ruled out
  - This leads to the question of how to specify cognitivism$^2$
Cognitivism$_2 = \neg$ non-Cognitivism$_2$

• A cognitivist$_2$ conception of meta-ethics, in the sense of a negation of Carnap’s conception, must claim that the epistemic status of values (relativism, absolutism, etc.) is something that can be carried out in a scientific or philosophical or religious or commonsensical or intuitive or subjective (...) way, i.e., there is justification of some kind

• The most straightforward scenario for cognitivism$_2$ is certainly cognitive$_2$ absolutism

• We consider two possible scenarios for cognitive$_2$ absolutism:
  – The phenomenological option (Kraus)
  – The analytical option (Boghossian)
Cognitive$_2$ Absolutism I: Kraus

• In Kraus (1937, 439-441) he entirely agrees with non-cognitivism$_1$, i.e., „the assumption of objective values who belong to some third Reich [...] we proved to be chimeric“

• However, for Kraus only a certain family of right emotions [richtige Emotionen] and the resulting values are acceptable (right [richtig])

• Because the philosopher is the one who is able to identify right emotions Kraus’ account though committed to non-cognitivism$_1$ is clearly an example for cognitivism$_2$ (namely, a metaphysical account of values)
Cognitive$_2$ Absolutism II: Boghossian

• We might rephrase Boghossians moral absolutism in the following way (cf. Fear of Knowledge, p.51):

B. „There are absolute moral facts which can confirm absolute moral judgments.“

• Unlike Kraus’s account, this is clearly an instance of cognitivism$_1$, because it affirms the idea of moral facts and moral judgments that can be absolutely true/false.

• Moreover, we assume that what Boghossian wants to have is also (and primarily) cognitivism$_2$, i.e., an absolutism that allows us to carry out and justify the true values on a scientific (or philosophical, commonsensical, intuitive) basis
Cognitive\textsubscript{2} Relativism I: \( \neg \) Kraus

- There is \textit{no} right emotion whatsoever and, as a consequence of this, an “emotivist” conception has to accept all kinds of emotions and values unconditionally
- (A relativism of that kind would be presumably similar to Ayer’s conception of non-cognitivism in Ayer (1936))
- On the other hand, a relativism of that kind is certainly \textit{not} identical with Carnap’s conception, because Carnap by no means claims that we might have to accept all kinds of moral intuitions (he rather rejects the whole idea that intuition may justify values)
- Carnap (and most other value relativists) wouldn’t like cognitive\textsubscript{2} relativism I
Cognitive\textsubscript{2} Relativism II: $\neg$ Boghossian

$\neg$ B „There are no absolute moral facts which can confirm absolute moral judgments.“

- This position deserves qualification, because a relativist who defends $\neg$ B will defend a cognitivist\textsubscript{2} variety of relativism (rather than a non-cognitivist\textsubscript{2} variety), only if we add to $\neg$ B something like:

  - Science/philosophy allows us to carry out the relativity of all moral systems and as a consequence of this no value can be defended unconditionally

  - Again, this is a position that is by no means identical with Carnap’s account and hardly would be affirmed by any other value relativist
What kind of „relativism“?

• The whole story I told here seems to point to a certain ambiguity in the term „relativism“
• The question is, **what kind of absolutism** a relativist intends to reject
• Is the aim to reject cognitive$_2$ absolutism and to affirm cognitive$_2$ relativism?
• Or is the aim rather to reject cognitivism$_2$ as a whole (as a new form of absolutism) and to affirm non-cognitivism$_2$ (as a new form of relativism)?
• The Carnapian point of view strongly recommends the second option
An improper account of value-absolutism/relativism

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<tr>
<th>Cognitivist$_2$ Absolutism</th>
<th>Cognitivist$_2$ Relativism</th>
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<td>Non-Cognitivism$_2$ (that also allows certain varieties of absolutism/relativism)</td>
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Value-absolutism/relativism, properly defined

Value-Absolutism

Cognitivist\textsubscript{2} Absolutism  Cognitivist\textsubscript{2} Relativism

Non-Cognitivism\textsubscript{2} (that also allows certain varieties of absolutism/relativism)

Value-Relativism