

# Emotivism and its critics

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September 19, 2011

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## 1. THE PROJECT OF ANALYZING ETHICAL TERMS

Much of 20th century moral philosophy was concerned with the analysis of ethical terms. Why pursue an analysis of terms like ‘good’? Stevenson: “Ethical questions arise first in the form ‘Is so and so good?’ . . . These questions are difficult partly because we don’t quite know what we are seeking. We are asking, ‘Is there a needle in that haystack?’ without even knowing just what a needle is. So the first thing we must do is examine the questions themselves” (289).

As Stevenson recognizes, there’s an intuitive problem with this project of analysis. On the one hand, it does not seem that we can require that everyone who understands “good” will be able to recognize a correct analysis, for this would make informative analyses impossible. On the other hand, we need some way to check whether our analysis is correct. (This is one version of the ‘paradox of analysis.’)

Stevenson’s solution: the analysis must be *relevant*, in the sense that any legitimate question or claim which can be made with the old term should be possible with its analysis. This is reasonable as far as it goes — even if it leaves unanswered the central question of how we are supposed to tell when we are able to ask or claim all of the things we were able to ask and claim with the term to be analyzed.

## 2. INTEREST THEORIES OF GOODNESS

‘Good’ has often been analyzed in terms of approval and similar attitudes. (15) According to Stevenson, Hobbes claims ‘good’ means ‘desired by me’, whereas Hume claimed that ‘good’ means ‘desired by most people’.

Set aside the question of whether these are the right interpretations of Hobbes and Hume. Stevenson thinks that these proposed analyses of ‘good’ are certainly *partially* relevant. But, Stevenson claims, three arguments show that interest theories like these cannot be the whole story.

1. *Ethical disagreement.* It seems possible for people to disagree about what is good. But, as Stevenson says, this possibility seems to rule out Hobbes’s version of the interest theory: “For consider the following argument: ‘This is good.’ ‘That isn’t so; it’s not good.’ As translated by Hobbes, this becomes: ‘I desire this.’ ‘That isn’t so, for I don’t.’ The speakers are not contradicting one another, and think they are, only because of an elementary confusion in the use of pronouns.” (16) Stevenson notes that disagreement between members of different communities seems to rule out Hume’s version in just the same way.
2. *Motivational force of judgements about the good.* As Stevenson says, “a person who recognizes X to be ‘good’ must ipso facto acquire a stronger tendency to act in its favor than he otherwise would have.” (16) (This is one thing that is meant by ‘internalism’ about ethical judgements.)
3. *Unverifiability.* Stevenson claims that “the ‘goodness’ of anything must not be verifiable solely by use of the scientific method.” (16) Relationship to the open question argument.

Stevenson goes on to give his own analysis of ‘good’ at this point, after refuting interest theories. This indicates that he takes interest theories to be the main alternative to the theory that he presents. But there are also a host of traditional analyses of ‘good’: in terms of divine will, a moral law, maximization of pleasure . . . One question to ask about Stevenson’s article: does he take his three arguments against interest theories to also rule out these traditional views? Do they rule out these traditional views?

## 3. STEVENSON’S EMOTIVIST ANALYSIS OF ‘GOOD’

### 3.1. *Dynamic and descriptive uses, and emotive meaning*

Stevenson held that these problems were fatal for interest theories as they had been traditionally developed. But he claimed that a new kind of interest theory could meet these three objections to interest-based analyses of ‘good.’ He claimed:

“I believe that the three requirements, given above, are perfectly sensible; that there is some one sense of ‘good’ which satisfies all three requirements; and that no traditional interest theory satisfies them all. But this does not imply that ‘good’ must be explained in terms of a Platonic Idea, or of a Categorical Imperative, or of an unique, unanalyzable property. On the contrary, the three requirements can be met by a kind of interest theory. But we must give up a presupposition which all the traditional interest theories have made.

Traditional interest theories hold that ethical statements are descriptive of the existing state of interests — that they simply give information about interests. ...It is this emphasis on description, on information, which leads to their incomplete relevance. Doubtless there is always some element of description in ethical judgements, but this is by no means all. Their major use is not to indicate facts, but to create an influence. Instead of merely describing people’s interests, they change or intensify them. They recommend an interest in an object, rather than state that the interest already exists.” (18-19)

The key here is Stevenson’s distinction between descriptive and dynamic uses of language as a function of the purposes of the speaker. (21) This is part of Stevenson’s psychological/causal view of meaning: the meaning of an expression is defined in terms of which effects uses of it tend to bring about. This leads to a definition of *emotive meaning*:

“The emotive meaning of a word is a tendency of a word, arising through the history of its usage, to produce ...affective responses in people. It is the immediate aura of feeling which hovers about a word.” (23)

### 3.2. *Stevenson’s analysis of ‘good’*

By now it should be clear that Stevenson thinks that ‘good’ and ‘right’ and other such terms have an emotive meaning. But what, exactly, is this meaning? He says:

“As a preliminary definition, let us take an inaccurate approximation. It may be more misleading than helpful, but will do to begin with. Roughly, then, the sentence ‘X is good’ means *We like X*.” (24)

Why does Stevenson say that this analysis may be misleading? Immediately after giving it, he considers an objection: if someone says to me ‘X is good’ then, if Stevenson’s analysis were correct, it would be appropriate for me to respond by saying: “But I don’t like it. What led you to believe that I did?” But this is clearly not appropriate. (Note that this is a version of the first argument above that Stevenson gave against interest theories.)

Stevenson replies that this objection rests on a misunderstanding of his theory. He is not, like previous interest theorists, saying that the meanings of ethical claims are descriptive of our likes, interests, and desires; rather, he is suggesting that ‘X is good’ means something like what ‘We like X’ means, when the latter is used dynamically.

We’ll return later to the question of what, exactly, this means. But the basic idea is that in uttering ‘X is good’ we are not trying to describe the world as being a certain way, but rather trying to bring about a certain change in the world.

### *3.3. Stevenson’s analysis and the arguments against interest theories*

*Response to argument 1:* Why one might think that an emotivist theory like Stevenson’s has, like interest theories, trouble making sense of cases of moral disagreement. Stevenson’s reply: the distinction between disagreement in belief and disagreement in interest.

The emotivist might also press this point further, and say that emotivism is not only consistent with the existence of ethical disagreement, but also provides a very neat explanation of one salient feature of ethical disagreement: its intractability. If ethical disagreements are not disagreements about any matter of fact, wouldn’t this explain the persistence of ethical disagreements between subjects who agree on all relevant matters of fact?

*Response to argument 2:* since part of Stevenson’s theory is that someone who judges ‘X is good’ expresses interest in or approval of X, this accounts for ‘the magnetism of the good.’ This is often taken to be one of the main strengths of emotivist theories: they make sense of internalist theses without positing any strange “magnetic” properties of things.

*Response to argument 3:* why “the empirical method” is not sufficient to give us agreement in interest; this is just a special case of the fact that agreement in belief is not sufficient for agreement in interest.

## 4. OBJECTIONS TO STEVENSON’S EMOTIVISM

### *4.1. Geach’s critique of ‘ascriptivism’*

Geach characterizes ascriptivism as follows:

“Ascriptivists hold that to say that an action x was voluntary on the part of an agent A is not to describe the act in any way, but to ascribe it to A, to hold A responsible for it.” (221)

Given this characterization, it is fair to say that Stevenson holds a version of ascriptivism applied to ethics.

Geach gives the following parody of ascriptivism about action claims (and emotivism about ethical claims):

“I said that ascriptivism naturally thrives in the present climate of opinion . . . It is really quite easy to construct theories on this pattern; here is a new one that has occurred to me. “To call a man happy is not to characterize or describe his condition; macarizing a man” (that is, calling him happy: the words “macarize” and “macarism” are in the O.E.D.) “is a special non-descriptive use of language. If we consider such typical examples of macarism as the Beatitudes, or again such proverbial expressions as ‘happy is the bride that the sun shines on; happy are the dead that the rain rains on,’ we can surely say that these sentences are not used to convey propositions. . . . to speak of people’s happiness is to macarize them, not to describe their state.” ...There you are; I make a free gift of the idea to anyone who likes it.”

Geach’s worry is, in part, that emotivism can only seem plausible because of an idiosyncratic choice of examples. Geach quotes Wittgenstein approvingly: “when put on an unbalanced diet of examples philosophy suffers from deficiency diseases.”

Geach’s example of a use which is not explained by Stevenson’s theory is a conditional: ‘If gambling is bad, inviting people to gamble is bad.’ Here ‘bad’ is predicated of gambling; but the speaker does not assert that gambling is bad, nor does he condemn gambling. So how can the emotivist make sense of this sort of use of ethical terms?

Geach does not just offer counterexamples to this sort of theory; he also offers an explanation of why these counterexamples arise. Geach thinks that emotivism ignores the distinction between predication and assertion. This, as you may recall, is Frege’s distinction, emphasized in ‘Thought’, between the thought expressed by a sentence and the act of asserting it. As Geach says in “Assertion”,

“A thought may have just the same content whether you assent to its truth or not; a proposition may occur in discourse now asserted, now unasserted, and yet be recognizably the same proposition. . . . I shall call this point about assertion *the Frege point*. . .  
The magnitude and variety of philosophical errors that result from not seeing the Frege point justifies a missionary zeal in the matter.”

In these terms, Geach’s criticism is that emotivism ignores the Frege point.

#### 4.2. *Problems understanding “dynamic meaning”*

Another of the worries Geach has in mind is a worry about understanding exactly what interpretation the emotivist is giving to ethical claims. We might say that to say “X is bad” is to condemn something; but what does this mean? One might, after all, naturally think that to condemn something is just to make a certain descriptive claim.

Here two possibilities naturally present themselves. One is that when we say “X is bad” we are adopting a primitive emotive attitude toward X — much like when we say “Boo!” at a sports game. The other — which Stevenson has in mind when he talks about the “quasi-imperative” meaning of ethical terms — is that “X is bad” is an imperative, much like “Don’t do X!”

But either way we go here, if we keep the Frege point in mind, we get absurd results. Consider claims about the past. If I say

The 19th century slave trade was a great evil.

could I really be saying

Boo! 19th century slave traders.

or

19th century people: don’t deal in slavery!

Or consider again Geach’s example of the conditional, ‘If gambling is bad, inviting people to gamble is bad.’ It does not seem that this is adequately rendered by either of

If Boo! gambling, then Boo! inviting people to gamble.

If don’t gamble, then don’t invite people to gamble.

Neither of these is even an intelligible sentence.

Many contemporary ethicists have views which are descendants of emotivism — though usually these views are called “non-cognitivist” rather than “emotivist.” These ethicists have tried to develop response to Geach’s criticism and variants thereof; it’s still an open question whether these responses are satisfactory. But it is pretty much universally agreed that this is one of the main challenges facing views to the effect that ethical sentences and the like are non-fact-stating.

### *4.3. Doubts about internalism*

One might also question the internalist theses which are among the principal motivations for emotivism. The example of the amoralist and doubts about whether it is really impossible for someone to claim 'X is good.' while having no inclination at all to pursue X.

### *4.4. The fact/value distinction*

Emotivism about ethical claims relies on a distinction between two sorts of sentences: descriptive sentences, on the one hand, and evaluative or normative sentences on the other. (This is one thing that goes under the heading, "the fact/value distinction.")

But one might question whether this background picture, which involves there being a clean break between factual and evaluative claims, can be sustained. An example: claims about epistemic rationality. Can these be understood in emotivist terms?