

# Unit VIII: The emotivist analysis of ‘good’ and its critics

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## 1 The project of analyzing ethical terms

Why pursue an analysis of ‘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).

The constraints on analysis:

1. We should not require that an analysis of ‘good’ state exactly the meaning of ‘good,’ so that everyone will immediately recognize the equivalence of the original expression and its analysis.
2. But we also cannot replace questions about goodness with some completely unrelated question.

3. 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.

## 2 Interest theories of goodness

'Good' has often been defined 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*.

These proposed analyses of good are certainly partially relevant, in Stevenson's sense: there are some uses of 'good' which these capture.

But, Stevenson claims, three arguments show that interest theories like these cannot be the whole story.

Three arguments against these interest theories:

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) As Stevenson says, this seems to rule out Hume's definition; does it also rule out Hobbes's?

3. *Unverifiability*. Stevenson claims that "the 'goodness' of anything must not be verifiable solely by use of the scientific method." (16) Why does he claim this? 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 revision of interest theories

#### 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) But Stevenson distinguishes between the meanings of words and this distinction between two different kinds of uses of words. (Compare: Donnellan.) So we should ask: what does his claim about the dynamic usage of ethical claims have to do with the meaning of ethical terms?

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)

Example: ‘old maid’ and ‘elderly spinster.’ Differ in some kind of meaning, but not descriptive meaning.

Given all this, what is the connection between the dynamic usage of ethical claims and the emotive meaning of ethical terms?

### 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*. (See the example on the top of p. 25.)

The emotive meaning of ‘good’ is, he says, “a pleasing emotive meaning which fits it especially for the dynamic use of suggesting favorable interest” (25). It is hard to say more than this, since “no two words have quite the same emotive meaning.”

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

Response to argument 1: the distinction between disagreement in belief and disagreement in interest.

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.’

Response to argument 3: the empirical method is no more sufficient for attaining ethical agreement than agreement in belief is sufficient for agreement in interest.

#### 4 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 *de*scribe the act in any way, but to *a*scribe 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.

We can break the skepticism about emotivism here expressed into three parts:

1. Emotivism only seemed 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."
2. We have no real grip on what macarism is apart from making a certain factual claim about someone. (Compare 'thick' evaluative concepts.)
3. Most fundamentally, emotivism and ascriptivism ignore the distinction between *predication* and *assertion*. (This is Frege's distinction, emphasized in 'Thought', between the thought expressed by a sentence and the act of asserting it. Recall, e.g., the distinction between sense and force.) Sometimes a

term is predicated of something without being asserted to hold of the thing. Geach's example is a conditional: 'If gambling is bad, inviting people to gamble is bad.' Here 'bad' is predicates of gambling; but the speaker does not assert that gambling is bad, nor does he condemn gambling.

We can generalize Geach's third worry.

## 5 Doubts about the motivations behind emotivism

### 5.1 *The amoralist and doubts about internalism*

Is it really impossible for someone to claim 'X is good.' while having no inclination at all to pursue X?

### 5.2 *Worries about the open question argument*

A mathematical example to cast doubt on the open question argument.

### 5.3 *Is there a clean distinction between evaluative and non-evaluative claims?*

One of the intuitions which sometimes supports emotivism is that our world is a world of *facts* rather than *values*. When we list all the things that are true or real, the goodness or rightness of things will not be on the list. Emotivism can then come in to explain the usefulness of claims about ethics in a world where there are no ethical facts. But one might question whether this background picture, which involves there being a clean break between factual and evaluative claims, can be sustained.