

## VI Subjectivism, Non-Cognitivism, Expressivism

We've talked about the kinds of mental states involved in our ethical sensibilities, and have seen that there is evidence that they involve both beliefs and other states as well: emotions, empathetic imaginings, commitments and so on.

Now we are returning to the questions of meta-ethics. Some of these questions are primarily concerned with *language*—what do our ethical statements mean, are they descriptive claims, do they represent the world, are they true and false, and so on.

Closely connected with these questions are those about our corresponding *mental states*: are our moral judgements really beliefs, or are they emotional responses, imaginings etc., or some mixture of these.

Finally there are questions about the interactions between the two: are the states that we express when we sincerely utter declarative ethical statements beliefs, or are they something else? What is it for a sentence to represent a fact, and what is it for it to do some other thing?

Standardly the moral realist has straightforward answers to these questions. Moral judgements are *beliefs*, or as it is sometimes put, are *cognitive* states. They are descriptive; they represent the moral facts. We might have other moral attitudes at the same time as these beliefs (desires, emotions etc.), but when we utter standard moral assertions ('X is right', 'I must F', 'You should G' etc.) we are giving voice to the beliefs and not the other states.

But we saw that there are many problems with realism, including concerns about how it could fit ethics into a naturalistic picture, and how it could accommodate motivational internalism: the idea that coming to make a moral judgment will be enough to motivate someone, what Stevenson calls its magnetism. So what alternatives are open to us?

### Subjectivism

A first thought is that we might try to maintain the view that moral judgments are ordinary assertions, but put the claims about the desires, emotions etc. into the *content* of those claims.

Hobbes says that 'good and evil are names that signify our appetites' (*Leviathan* 15.40), and that whatever a person desires he 'calleth good' (6.7), which suggests that he thinks that to say that something is good is equivalent to saying that you desire it. (That's the standard interpretation, but there's actually some disagreement on whether this was what Hobbes meant; see Darwall 'Normativity and Projection in Hobbes's *Leviathan*'.) That gives us a first-person form of ethical subjectivism:

$$X \text{ is good} = I \text{ desire } X$$

Various other verbs could be substituted for 'desire': 'approve of'; 'have an emotional attraction to'; 'am committed to' etc.

This is quite good on explaining motivational internalism: it is no surprise that if you desire X you are motivated to get it (other substitutions for ‘desire’ do more or less well). The real problem for this approach is that it doesn’t explain disagreement. Two people should be able to disagree on whether X is good or not: one says that X is good, the other says that it isn’t. But on this approach their statements are not in conflict

Can we get around this by moving to a community-based subjectivism:

X is good = This community desires X

In many ways that is worse: we still have problems making sense of disagreement, only this time between communities; and now the motivation is less clear (why should the fact that my community thinks a certain way mean that I should?).

## Expressivism and Non-Cognitivism

We need a less flat-footed approach, and the standard one has been provided by various forms of expressivism at the level of language, and non-cognitivism at the level of thought. More explicitly:

Expressivism: At the level of language, our moral sentences primarily serve to express our moral attitudes; they don’t describe our moral attitudes, nor do they describe other features of the world;

Non-cognitivism: At the level of thought, our primary moral attitudes are non-cognitive: they are desires, emotions, commitments etc., and not beliefs.

These two claims don’t have to go together. Subjectivists, as we have seen, endorse the second but not the first. Alternatively, you might think that we do have genuine moral beliefs about moral facts, so rejecting the second, but that moral sentences don’t work to describe those facts, but to do something else. But for most thinkers these have gone together.

Although there are various historical precedences, the formulation of this approach that was initially influential was first sketched by Ogden and Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning* in 1923:

‘Good’ is alleged to stand for a unique, unanalyzable concept ... [which] is the subject matter of ethics. This peculiar ethical use of ‘good’ is, we suggest, a purely emotive use. ... Thus, when we so use it in the sentence, ‘This is good’, we merely refer to this, and the addition of ‘is good’ makes no difference whatever to our reference ... it serves only as an emotive sign expressing our attitude to this, and perhaps evoking similar attitudes in other persons, or inciting them to actions of one kind or another.

*Meaning of Meaning* p. 125

The idea got taken up by A.J. Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), and, with much greater refinement, by C.L. Stevenson. We’ll focus on Stevenson’s ‘The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms’ (1937). (Stevenson had been a student in Cambridge with Richards in the early 1930s.)

## Stevenson

Stevenson's basic question was: What do we *do* with our ethical words? Rather than starting with a prior conception of how ethical language must work, modelled on science, he wanted to examine how it actually works.

The central contention is that we use ethical language to create an influence; to recommend:

ethical terms are instruments used in the complicated interplay and readjustment of human interests. (p. 20)

In this it differs from scientific language:

Broadly speaking, there are two different purposes which lead us to use language. On the one hand we use words (as in science) to record, clarify, and communicate beliefs [these he calls the descriptive uses]. On the other hand we use words to give vent to our feelings (interjections), or to create moods (poetry), or to incite people to actions or attitudes (oratory) [these he calls the dynamic uses]. (p. 21)

The very same words can be used descriptively or dynamically; so we cannot generally see such uses as part of the meanings of words. Nevertheless, we can identify the meaning of a word with the *tendency* to produce certain effects in listeners:

Instead of identifying meaning with all the psychological causes and effects that attend a word's utterance, we must identify it with those that it has a tendency (causal property, dispositional property) to be connected with. The tendency must be of a particular kind, moreover. It must exist for all who speak the language; it must be persistent; and must be realizable more or less independently of determinate circumstances attending the word's utterance. There will be further restrictions dealing with the interrelation of words in different contexts. Moreover, we must include, under the psychological responses which the words tend to produce, not only immediately introspectable experiences, but dispositions to react in a given way with appropriate stimuli. (p. 22)

Understood in that way, he concludes that moral terms do have emotive meaning:

The emotive meaning of a word is a tendency of a word, arising through the history of its usage, to produce (result from) affective responses in people. It is the immediate aura of feeling which hovers about a word. Such tendencies to produce affective responses cling to words very tenaciously. It would be difficult, for instance, to express merriment by using the interjection "alas". Because of the persistence of such affective tendencies (among other reasons) it becomes feasible to classify them as "meanings". (p. 23)

But while insisting that ethical terms have emotive meaning, Stevenson denies that you can define them using other words (he is sceptical that you can define anything in terms of

anything else). In particular, the claim that moral sentences should be understood as imperatives, often attributed to Stevenson, is one he explicitly denies:

“This is good” has something like the meaning of “I do like this; do so as well”. But this is certainly not accurate. For the imperative makes an appeal to the conscious efforts of the hearer. Of course he can’t like something just by trying. He must be led to like it through suggestion. Hence an ethical sentence differs from an imperative in that it enables one to make changes in a much more subtle, less fully conscious way. Note that the ethical sentence centres the hearer’s attention not on his interests, but on the object of interest, and thereby facilitates suggestion. Because of its subtlety, moreover, an ethical sentence readily permits counter-suggestion, and leads to the give and take situation which is so characteristic of arguments about values.

It is easy to see how Stevenson accommodates the magnetism of ethical terms, since we express attitudes that themselves move us. How does he explain disagreement? The central thought is that this is disagreement in interest:

It is disagreement in interest which takes places in ethics. When C says “This is good”, and D says “No, it’s bad”, we have a case of suggestion and counter-suggestion. Each man is trying to redirect the other’s interest. There obviously need be no domineering, since each may be willing to give ear to the other’s influence; but each is trying to move the other none the less. It is in this sense that they disagree. (p. 27)

Such disagreement doesn’t need to end in deadlock:

When ethical disagreement is not rooted in disagreement in belief, is there any method by which it may be settled? If one means by “method” a rational method, then there is no method. But in any case there is a “way”. Let’s consider the above example, again, where disagreement was due to A’s sympathy and B’s coldness. Must they end by saying, “Well, it’s just a matter of our having different temperaments”? Not necessarily. A, for instance, may try to change the temperament of his opponent. He may pour out his enthusiasms in such a moving way—present the sufferings of the poor with such appeal—that he will lead his opponent to see life through different eyes. He may build up, by the contagion of his feelings, an influence which will modify B’s temperament, and create in him a sympathy for the poor which didn’t previously exist. This is often the only way to obtain ethical agreement, if there is any way at all. It is persuasive, not empirical or rational; but that is no reason for neglecting it. There is no reason to scorn it, either, for it is only by such means that our personalities are able to grow, through our contact with others. (p.29)

[Apologies for the lengthy quotations from Stevenson in this handout; as you might infer, I think he writes rather well.]