

## VIII Problems for Expressivism

### Can we really give up on realism?

A fundamental philosophical question for expressivism is whether it really gives us a plausible account of what we ordinarily take ethics to be, or whether what it gives us is something that falls short. To try to get a grip on this, take an issue that you really morally care about: whether it be issues of racism, or sexism, our treatment of animals or the environment, the status of the unborn child, our responsibilities to the rest of the world; everyone has something that they are deeply morally committed to. And then think whether there is really nothing more to the

There are at least two issues here. One is disagreement. Suppose you are arguing with someone who disagrees with you on one of these issues. Stevenson points out that you might be disagreeing on straightforward issues of non-moral fact: what the consequences of a certain policy might be, what others think, how they will be affected, and so on. But suppose you have come to agreement on all of that. What is left? Stevenson says that there is just 'disagreement in interest'. You have different attitudes, and that is the end of it. There is no mistake that the other person is making.

A second issue concerns moral reasoning. Suppose you are worrying about some moral issue: deciding what is the right thing to do. Again, assume that you know all the relevant non-moral facts; but you are still unsure about what you should do. What can the expressivist say that you are deliberating about? They might say that you are deliberating about how to feel. Does that capture the idea? Of course you want to feel the right way. But you might think that you should feel a certain way towards an action because it is right. Whereas the expressivist will have to say that you judge an action is right because you feel a certain way.

Stevenson's response to these worries is to deny that they really have any substance:

And now, have I really pointed out the "vital" sense of "good"?

I suppose that many will still say "No", claiming ... that my analysis, like all others given in terms of interest, is a way of begging the issue. They will say: "When we ask 'Is X good?' we don't want mere influence, mere advice. We decidedly don't want to be influenced through persuasion, nor are we fully content when the influence is supported by a wide scientific knowledge of X. The answer to our question will, of course, modify our interests. But this is only because a unique sort of *truth* will be revealed to us—a truth which must be apprehended *a priori*. We want our interests to be guided by this truth, and by nothing else. To substitute for such a truth mere emotive meaning and suggestion is to conceal from us the very object of our search."

I can only answer that I do not understand. What is this truth to be *about*? For I recollect no Platonic Idea, nor do I know what to *try* to recollect. I find no indefinable property, nor do I know what to look for. And the "self-evident" deliverances of reason, which so many philosophers have claimed, seem, on examination, to be deliverances of their respective reasons only (if of anyone's) and not of mine.

It's somewhat contentious to say that the truth must be apprehended *a priori*; moral realists might deny that. But still, Stevenson effectively challenges the realist to substantiate their claim that there must be something more. It is not easy to break the deadlock here. Instead we'll focus on internal problems for expressivism.

## 2. Can the expressivist say that moral sentences are neither true nor false?

The issue here is not a problem for expressivism per se; but rather an issue about the compatibility of expressivism with another popular view. In *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer held that a sentence like *Stealing money is wrong* 'expresses no proposition which can be either true or false'. But earlier in the same book he had embraced a disquotational or minimalist or redundancy view of truth, according to which, to assert that a sentence is true is equivalent to simply asserting that sentence itself (see pp. 107 and 87ff. respectively). But it is not obvious that those two doctrines can be held together.

Let's first say a little more about the disquotational view of truth. According to this view, first clearly stated by Ramsey, the truth predicate basically serves to take the quotation marks off (to 'disquote'): I can say '*Snow is white*' is true; or, equivalently I can just say *Snow is white*. (Note that I'm also using italics as a device of quotation here, so that we don't get swamped with quotation marks!) Likewise the falsity predicate is used in place of the negation of the sentence. If that is all there is to the truth predicate you might wonder why we have it; the disquotationalist's answer is that it is used in cases where we are in no position to assert the sentence on its own. For instance, I might say, *Whatever she told him is true*, even though I don't know what she said. On a standard disquotationalist understanding, that enables us to say something that would otherwise require an infinite disjunction: Either she said that p, and p; or she said that q, and q ... and so on for all the things she might possibly have said.

This is a nice simple account of truth. It doesn't require worrying about what many of the issues that other accounts have had; but it doesn't seem to be compatible with expressivism as Ayer defended it. For if the expressivist wants to say that the sentence *Eating meat is wrong* has a perfectly legitimate use, albeit an expressive one, then the sentence '*Eating meat is wrong*' is true will also have a perfectly legitimate use, namely exactly the same one. But then how can we insist that *Eating meat is wrong* is neither true nor false?

Ayer seems not to have noticed this problem. Stevenson, in his 1944 book saw it very clearly. His solution was to link expressivism inescapably to noncognitivism. The reason that we don't want to say that moral sentences express propositions isn't that they are neither true nor false; it is that they do not express beliefs. So although expressivism is still a thesis about the status of sentences in a public language, the distinctive claim about them derives from the psychological states that they express.

## 3. Indirect uses and the Frege-Geach problem

Recall that Stevenson focussed on the use of ethical sentences to recommend; Ayer focussed on their use to express an attitude. But very soon critics started to point out that ethical sentences can be used in many other ways. So Ross, in his 1935/6 Gifford lectures, published in 1939, observed that they can be used in a wide range of cases, for instance in conditionals:

There is no doubt that such words as 'you ought to do so-and-so' may be used as one's means of so inducing a person to behave a certain way. But if we are to do justice to the meaning of 'right' or 'ought', we must take account also of such modes of speech as 'he ought to do so-and-so', 'you ought to have done so-and-so', 'if this and that were the case, you ought to have done so-and-so', 'if this and that were the case, you ought to do so-and-so', 'I ought to do so-and-so.' Where the judgement of obligation has referenced either a third person, not the person addressed, or to the past, or to an unfulfilled past condition, or to a future treated as merely possible, or to the speaker himself, there is no plausibility in describing the judgement as

command. But it is easy to see that ‘ought’ means the same in all these cases, and that if in some of them it does not express a command, it does not do so in any.  
Ross, *Foundations of Ethics*, pp. 33–4

The problem arises even for negation. If *Eating meat is wrong* expresses my disapproval of eating meat, what does *Eating meat is not wrong* express? Presumably not my approval of eating meat — I could think it wasn’t wrong without thinking it was good. Nor does it express my failure to either approve of eating meat or to disapprove of it, for it is quite compatible with *Eating meat is right*.

One approach the expressivist might take is to claim that moral terms in asserted contexts mean something different to what they mean in the scope of negations, conditionals etc. Ross simply denies this, but he doesn’t give an argument for it. But Peter Geach, developing what he called ‘the Frege point’ — that words mean the same whether they are asserted or not — did. Geach asks us to consider the following:

If doing a thing is bad, getting your little brother to do it is bad.

Tormenting the cat is bad.

Ergo, getting your little brother to torment the cat is bad.

Peter Geach ‘Assertion’ 1965 p. 463

That certainly looks like a *valid* argument, whether or not you believe the premises. But if it is valid the term ‘bad’ had better mean the same in each occurrence. This objection to expressivism has become known as the Frege-Geach problem