



Emotivismo clásico: Charles L. Stevenson

*Classical Emotivism:
Charles L. Stevenson*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to reconstruct Charles L. Stevenson's metaethical view. Since his metaethical view is a form of emotivism, I will start by explaining what the core claims of emotivism are. I will then explore and comment on the specific claims of Stevenson's proposal. Last, I will offer an overview of the objections that have traditionally been raised against emotivism.

Keywords: Charles Leslie Stevenson, Emotivism, Ethical language.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es reconstruir la postura metaética de Charles L. Stevenson. Dado que su postura metaética es una forma de emotivismo, empezaré este artículo explicando cuáles son las tesis básicas del emotivismo. Tras ello, explicaré y comentaré las tesis específicas de la propuesta de Stevenson. Finalmente, acabaré este artículo ofreciendo una panorámica de aquellas objeciones que tradicionalmente han sido formuladas contra el emotivismo.

Palabras clave: Charles Leslie Stevenson, Emotivismo, Lenguaje ético.

1. Introduction

C.L. Stevenson's metaethical view is a form of emotivism, which is why, before exploring the peculiarities of Stevenson's proposal, it is worth taking some time to explain what the core claims of emotivism are.

Emotivism states that moral judgments do not concern matters of facts, insofar as they do not describe or represent the world in any way, but are simply *emotional responses* to it – which is why defenders of emotivism usually claim that moral judgments cannot be true or false. Thus, for example, if I judge that you acted (morally) wrong in stealing a book from the library, I am only considering the empirical proposition that you stole that book from the library and at the same time expressing an attitude of disapproval towards it. And if I judge that stealing books from libraries is (morally) wrong, I am not thinking about any proposition at all, but I am merely displaying a certain attitude toward the action of stealing books from libraries. Similarly, according to emotivism, moral language has no factual meaning at all, since it only serves to *express* non-cognitive states such as attitudes or feelings and, therefore, its statements cannot be analysed in terms of truth and falsehood. Thus, according to emotivism, when I say 'Telling lies is (morally) wrong', I am not asserting any proposition, I am only *expressing* my feeling or attitude of disapproval towards the action of telling lies. These ideas are well summarized by Ayer in his *Language, Truth and Logic*:

The presence of an ethical symbol adds nothing to its factual content. Thus if I say to someone, 'You acted wrongly in stealing that money', I am not stating more than if I had simply said, 'You stole that money'. In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, 'You stole that money', in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker.¹

The exception to this is Stevenson, who in his *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis* (1963)² argues that ethical judgments are truth-apt. His motivation for

¹ Ayer, A. J. 1936. "Critique of Ethics and Theology". In Ayer, A. J. 1946/1971. *Language, Truth and Logic*. 2nd Edition. Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, p. 142.

² Stevenson, C. L. 1963. *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

this is to preserve our normal habits of speech, which presuppose that ethical judgments have truth-values.³ In brief, Stevenson's claim is that when one says that an ethical judgment is true, what he is really doing is *reaffirming* that ethical judgment. His example is as follows:

When Mr. A says "Jones ought not to have done it", and Mr. B replies, "that is true", what is the force of B's reply? Rather obviously he too has said, in abbreviated form, the equivalent of "Jones ought not to have done it". His "that is true" permits him as it were to repeat A's remark, thus expressing an attitude (apart from hypocrisy) that is in agreement with A's.⁴

Stevenson argues that this sense of truth as reaffirming what others have said is not an unusual sense of truth, insofar as it is also typical for factual contexts.⁵ However, the important point here is that even if Stevenson's considerations are correct and ethical judgments are truth-apt in this sense of truth, it does not make ethical judgments truth-apt in the ordinary (and interesting) sense of truth.

The claim that moral language only expresses attitudes seems to imply that there is no contradiction involved in moral disagreement.⁶ That is, if I say 'Telling lies is (morally) wrong' and you say, 'Telling lies is *not* (morally) wrong', we are not contradicting each other in any way; we are only *expressing* our different personal preferences. So, if the emotivist wishes to deny that we have moral disputes, he needs to explain why it looks like we do; since we are clearly trying to *argue for something*, not just expressing our personal preferences.

According to emotivism, ethical language not only aims to express the feelings or attitudes of the speaker, but also to exert an influence on the hearer.⁷ Thus, if I say to you, 'Stealing books from libraries is (morally) wrong', I am not only aiming to express my attitude of disapproval towards the action of stealing books, but I am also trying to get you to adopt that same attitude.

It is important to distinguish emotivism from the position that has often been called subjectivism.⁸ The latter claims that the meaning of sentences such as 'X is

³ Ibid., p. 215.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 217-218.

⁵ Ibid., p. 219.

⁶ Ayer, A. J. "Critique of Ethics and Theology", op. cit., p. 142.

⁷ Ayer, A. J. "Critique of Ethics and Theology", op. cit., p. 143; Stevenson, C. L. 1937. "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms". *Mind* 46 (181), pp.18-19; Stevenson, C. L. 1944. *Ethics and Language*. New Haven: Yale University Press (thirteen printing: October 1969), pp. 40-41; Stevenson, C. L. *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis*, op. cit., p. 209.

⁸ In order to differentiate his own view from subjectivism, Stevenson distinguishes between 'disagreement in attitudes' and 'disagreement in belief about attitudes' (Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., pp. 10-11): according to subjectivism, all ethical disagreement is rooted in a 'disagreement in belief about attitudes', whereas for Stevenson's emotivism, as we will see in what follows, (almost) all ethical disagreement is rooted in a

(morally) good' is equal to 'I approve of X'. Thus, subjectivism declares that ethical statements refer to factual propositions (*i.e.*, psychological propositions) and that therefore they can be true or false and, for the same reason, they can be contradicted. So, according to subjectivism, when I say, 'X is (morally) good', I am claiming that I have an attitude of disapproval towards X, which can be true or false in the sense of whether I really do have this attitude of disapproval or not. And the statement can be contradicted if you reply that I do not really have this attitude. Again, this point is well summarized by Ayer:

For the orthodox subjectivist does not deny, as we do, that the sentences of a moralizer express genuine propositions. All he denies is that they express propositions of a unique non-empirical character. His own view is that they express propositions about the speaker's feelings. If this were so, ethical judgments clearly would be capable of being true or false. They would be true if the speaker had the relevant feelings, and false if he had not. And this is a matter which is, in principle, empirically verifiable. Furthermore they could be significantly contradicted. For if I speak 'Tolerance is a virtue', and someone answers, 'You don't approve of it', he would, on the ordinary subjectivist theory, be contradicting me. On our theory, he would not be contradicting me, because, in saying that tolerance was a virtue, I should not be making any statement about my own feelings or about anything else. I should simply be evincing my feelings, which is not at all the same thing as saying that I have them.⁹

Historically, the acceptance of emotivism was favoured by the acceptance of logical positivists' so-called 'verifiability principle'. The verifiability principle is an empiricist criterion of meaning which says that only those statements that are verifiable by (*i.e.*, logically deducible from) observational statements are cognitively meaningful. Statements that do not satisfy the verifiability principle were taken to be cognitively meaningless, statements that failed to describe any state of affairs.

It goes far beyond the scope of this paper to examine in detail how logical positivists analysed ethical language. There are, though, two important points to bear in mind. First, the success of the verifiability principle does not automatically imply the success of emotivism since, even in accepting the verifiability principle, logical positivists could still treat ethical statements as cognitively meaningful inasmuch as they were able to argue for some sort of naturalistic account of moral properties, *i.e.* their reduction to the observational.¹⁰ Second, the success of emotivism is not

'disagreement in attitude' (see: Stevenson, C. L. 1961. "Relativism and Nonrelativism in the Theory of Value". In Stevenson, C. L. *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis*, op. cit.). Ayer's distinction between 'ethical symbols' and 'normative symbols' (Ayer, A. J. "Critique of Ethics and Theology", op. cit., p. 140) seems to serve to the same purpose.

⁹ Ayer, A. J. "Critique of Ethics and Theology", op. cit., p. 144.

¹⁰ Those logical positivists that argued for a naturalistic account of moral properties embraced what Neurath called "felicology" (Neurath, Otto. 1931/32. "Sociology and Physicalism". In Ayer, A. J., ed. 1959. *Logical Positiv-*

linked to the success of the verifiability principle. We can, for example, defend an emotivistic account of ethical language on other grounds, without accepting the verifiability principle.¹¹

2. Stevenson's emotivism

Stevenson's primary aim is to give an account of moral disagreement that is plenty compatible with emotivism,¹² whereby he is offering something that was lacking in the work of previous emotivists such as Ayer's "Critique of Ethics and Theology" (1936).¹³ Stevenson's main claim is his distinction between emotive meaning and descriptive meaning, which was first stated in his "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms" (1937). This distinction allows him to distinguish between *disagreement in attitude* and *disagreement in belief*, which in turn allows him to give an account of moral disagreement that is compatible with the basic claims of emotivism.

According to Stevenson, the meaning of a sign is a dispositional property of that sign; more concretely, the meaning is "[...] the dispositional properties that relate a sign to the psychological reactions of those who interpret or use it".¹⁴ Under this dispositional theory of meaning, and probably having the belief-attitude dictum in mind, Stevenson posits his distinction between emotive and descriptive meaning. Descriptive meaning is the sign's disposition to cause some "*cognitive mental processes*",¹⁵ such as believing or thinking; while, on the other hand, emotive meaning

ism. New York: The Free Press, pp. 305-307); that is, the view according to which ethics is to be reduced to "[...] questions of fact; why people hold the principles that they do, what is that they desire, and how their desires can be fulfilled" (Ayer, A. J. "Editor's Introduction", In Ayer, A. J., ed. 1959. *Logical Positivism*. New York: The Free Press, pp. 21-22; see, also, Blumberg, Albert E.; Feigl, Herbert. 1931. "Logical Positivism: A New Movement in European Philosophy". *The Journal of Philosophy* 28 (11), p. 293; Schlick, Moritz. 1939. "What is the Aim of Ethics?". In Ayer, A. J., ed., *Logical Positivism*, op. cit., pp. 247-263). Thus, for example, an ethical claim such as 'It is morally right to take care of your children' might be reduced to the empirical fact that in taking care of their children, people are usually fulfilling some of their desires and increasing their own happiness. Among those who accepted the verifiability principle, but refused this sort of naturalistic account of moral properties is Ayer, who argued against felicific conceptions of ethics like this by claiming that it does not seem self-contradictory to say that X causes the greatest happiness (or the greatest balance of pleasure over pain), but that X is not right. (Ayer, A. J. 1946/1971. *Language, Truth and Logic*. 2nd Edition. Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, p.107).

¹¹ Stevenson himself was not concerned with the verifiability principle. In fact, he took it as an example of persuasive definition (Stevenson, C. L. 1938. "Persuasive Definitions". *Mind* 47 (187), pp. 339-341).

¹² Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., p. 1.

¹³ In the preface to the second edition of *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer himself recognizes that his emotivist theory "[...] needs to be supported by a more detailed analysis of specimen ethical judgments than I make any attempt to give" (Ayer, A. J. *Language, Truth and Logic*, op. cit., p. 27). Moreover, he recognizes that "[...] this deficiency has been made good by C. L. Stevenson [...]" (Idem.).

¹⁴ Stevenson, C. L. 1948. "Meaning: Descriptive and Emotive". In Stevenson, C. L. 1963. *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis*, op. cit., p. 163; see also: Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., p. 54.

¹⁵ Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., p. 62 (emphasis of the author).

“[...] is a meaning in which the response (from the hearer’s point of view) or the stimulus (from the speaker’s point of view) is a range of emotions”.¹⁶ According to Stevenson, the distinction between these two kinds of meaning allows us to explain why claims such as ‘Stealing books from libraries is (morally) wrong, but I do approve of it’ are somehow paradoxical:

[...] “he is good in all respects, but in no respect whatsoever do I approve of him”. If this does what it tends to do, it will first express the speaker’s *attitude* and then go on to express a belief (about the attitude) to the effect that he does not have the attitude.¹⁷

Emotive and descriptive meaning, says Stevenson, are not mutually exclusive.¹⁸ This allows him to conclude that ethical terms have emotive and descriptive meaning, both being “[...] distinguishable *aspects* of a total situation, not ‘parts’ of it that can be studied in isolation”.¹⁹

But the importance of this distinction has to do with the topic of moral disagreement. The acceptance of these two different kinds of meaning makes possible the existence of two different kinds of moral disagreement: disagreement in attitudes and disagreement in beliefs. Disagreement in belief, says Stevenson, “involves an opposition of beliefs, both of which cannot be true”, while disagreement in attitude “involves an opposition of attitudes, both of which cannot be satisfied”.²⁰ The first has to do with how the world is, whereas the latter is about how the world must be valued.²¹ The disagreement that goes on in Ethics is primarily a disagreement in attitude,²² but given that attitudes and beliefs can influence each other,²³ there are occasions where the disagreement in attitude is rooted in some disagreement in belief.²⁴ At any rate, disagreement in attitude, says Stevenson, predominates in any moral dispute given that first, we only discuss those beliefs that are likely to alter the attitudes that are relevant to the ethical disagreement and second, disagreement in attitude determines when the moral dispute comes to an end; because if we manage to agree about all the factual matters but we still have different attitudes, then there would remain an ethical issue

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 59; see also: Stevenson, C. L. “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁷ Stevenson, C. L. *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis*, p. 207.

¹⁸ Stevenson, C. L. “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”, op. cit., p. 21.

¹⁹ Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., p. 76.

²⁰ Stevenson, C. L. “The Nature of Ethical Disagreement”. In Stevenson, C. L. *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis*, op. cit., p. 2; see also: Stevenson, C. L. “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”, op. cit., p. 27.

²¹ Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., p. 4.

²² Stevenson, C. L. “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”, op. cit., p. 27.

²³ Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., p. 5. According to Stevenson, it is an “indubitable fact” that beliefs alter attitudes (Ibid., p. 115).

²⁴ Stevenson, C. L. “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”, op. cit., p. 28. For example, cases where one has not yet realized that his interests will lead him to factual consequences that will collapse with other of his interests.

to be resolved, whereas if we come to a point where we have the same attitudes, then the conflict ceases even if we do not manage to agree on a any factual issue.²⁵

It is important to recognize what kind of disagreement is going on in any moral dispute if we want to put an end to it.²⁶ If we are engaged in a moral dispute and we disagree on a belief, then we need to give our opponent “reasons for believing”, whereas if the dispute is all about disagreement in attitude, we must give our opponent “reasons for approving”.²⁷

Moral disagreement can be resolved by appealing to factual reasons only in cases where the relevant disagreement in attitude is rooted in a disagreement in belief.²⁸ Stevenson distinguishes different ways in which this can be done.²⁹ Thus, for example, we can resolve an ethical disagreement by appealing to the factual reasons that are psychologically related to an ethical judgment, such as the motives that lead to making that judgment or the origin of the attitude;³⁰ or by showing that there is some logical inconsistency in our opponent’s position;³¹ or by appealing to the consequences of that which is judged³² - that is, by showing that an action F is (morally) good or bad by proving that F has some factual consequences G, towards which we and our opponent have the same moral attitude.

At any rate, the important point here is that by emphasising the role of reasons, Stevenson is able to offer an account which, despite making attitudes the primary element of ethical language, is compatible with the existence of ethical reasoning.³³ In Stevenson’s words: “[h]owever much they [our ethical judgments] may be guided by a full use of our intelligence, they do not spring from the intellect alone”.³⁴

However, there are some occasions when the disagreement in attitude involved in a moral disagreement is not rooted in any disagreement in belief; cases where, for example, the disagreement is rooted “in the scarcity of what people want” or “in temperamental differences”.³⁵ One of the examples offered by Stevenson is the following:

²⁵ Ibid., p. 14; Stevenson, C. L. “The Nature of Ethical Disagreement”, op. cit., p. 6.

²⁶ Stevenson, C. L. “Persuasive Definitions”, op. cit., p. 344.

²⁷ Stevenson, C. L. “Relativism and Nonrelativism in the Theory of Value”, op. cit., p. 82; Stevenson, C. L. *Facts and Values*, op. cit., p. 208.

²⁸ Stevenson, C. L. “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”, op. cit., p. 29; Stevenson, C. L. “Persuasive Definitions”, op. cit., p. 347; Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., p. 237; Stevenson, C. L. “The Nature of Ethical Disagreement”, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

²⁹ Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., especially chapter III.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 121.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 115-116.

³² Ibid., p. 119; Stevenson, C. L. “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”, op. cit., p. 28.

³³ Stevenson, C. L. 1950. “The Emotive Conception of Ethics and its Cognitive Implications”. In Stevenson, C. L. 1963. *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis*, op. cit., p. 63 and 67.

³⁴ Stevenson, C. L. *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis*, op. cit., p. 232.

³⁵ Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., p. 138.

John's mother is concerned about the dangers of playing football, and doesn't want him to play. John, even though he agrees (in belief) about the dangers, wants to play anyhow.³⁶

If ethical disagreement is not rooted in any disagreement in belief, it cannot be resolved by appealing to factual reasons. Thus, in these cases there is no 'reasoned' way to resolve ethical disagreement.³⁷ This does not mean, however, that the ethical disagreements that are not rooted in any disagreement in belief can never be resolved. If we need to resolve an ethical disagreement of this kind,³⁸ there are still non-rational ways to do so. Stevenson focuses on persuasion, but there are other ways such as "material rewards and punishments", "the various forms of public demonstration"³⁹ or the use of persuasive definitions.⁴⁰ Stevenson's example of the use of persuasion in a moral dispute is as follows:

They [A and B] are arguing about whether a public dole would be good. Suppose that they discovered all the consequences of the dole. [...] [S]uppose [...] that A was poor and unemployed, and that B was rich. Here again the disagreement might not be due to different factual knowledge. It would be due to the different social positions of the men, together with their predominant self-interest. [...] 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 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.⁴¹

Stevenson adds that while these are non-rational ways to resolve an ethical disagreement, this does not make us automatically condemn them.⁴² Persuasion is, says Stevenson, "sometimes good and sometimes bad, depending upon the circumstances".⁴³

³⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 138.

³⁸ As Stevenson repeatedly emphasizes, solving an ethical disagreement is not something that is necessary: people can neither agree nor disagree. This happens in cases where those who disagree (either with regards to their beliefs or with regards to their attitudes) do not have a sufficient motive for making their beliefs or attitudes alike (Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., pp. 4-5 and p. 111; Stevenson, *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis*, op. cit., pp. 195-197).

³⁹ Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., p. 140.

⁴⁰ See: Stevenson, C. L. "Persuasive Definitions".

⁴¹ Stevenson, C. L. "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms", op. cit., p. 29.

⁴² Stevenson, C. L. "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms", op. cit., p. 29; Stevenson, C. L. "Persuasive Definitions", op. cit., p. 339; Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, p. 163.

⁴³ Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., p. 163.

Stevenson himself recognizes that in everyday life it is difficult to find the distinction between rational and non-rational methods so clearly defined. It is difficult to find someone who, in trying to convince his opponent, follows a method that is purely persuasive or purely rational: the usual case in everyday moral disputes is that these methods appear in a mixed form.⁴⁴

As we have seen, these methods of solving ethical disagreement are focused on ‘interpersonal’ situations;⁴⁵ that is, situations where we are engaged in a dispute and we are trying to convince others or deliberate with them. But, according to Stevenson, these methods also work in ‘personal’ situations,⁴⁶ when someone is trying to clarify himself and form an ethical opinion on a matter. In these situations, one is trying to solve a “conflict in attitudes”.⁴⁷ These methods work in both personal and interpersonal situations because

Conflict and disagreement in attitude are much the same, since conflict occurs (to speak roughly but not ineptly) when an individual disagrees in attitude with himself. So the personal aspects of ethics reveal the same opposition within an individual that has previously been seen within a group.⁴⁸

It is important to remark that this does not imply that resolving a personal conflict in attitudes is somehow related to introspection or psychology: when one tries to resolve a conflict through beliefs, says Stevenson, “he is *using* beliefs (which may be about many subjects) to resolve his conflict, not developing other beliefs *about* how this happens”.⁴⁹

One important aspect of Stevenson’s emotivism is his claim that ethical judgments have a “quasi-imperative force”;⁵⁰ that is, ethical judgments do not only aim to express the feelings or attitudes of the speaker, but they also aim to evoke or create an influence on the hearer.⁵¹ Stevenson takes this imperative force to be an obvious fact about ethical language and uses it to establish an analogy between ethical judgments and imperatives.⁵² But it seems clear that not all ethical judgments have this imperative force: I can make a genuinely moral judgment without trying to convince an-

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 141-142.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 130.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 151.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 130-131; Stevenson, C. L. “The Emotive Conception of Ethics and its Cognitive Implications”, op. cit., p. 56.

⁴⁸ Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., p. 131.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 133 (emphasis of the author).

⁵⁰ Stevenson, C. L. 1938. “Ethical Judgments and Avoidability”. In Stevenson, C. L. *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis*, op. cit., p. 147.

⁵¹ Stevenson, C. L. “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”, op. cit., pp. 18-19; Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., pp. 40-41; Stevenson, C. L. *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis*, op. cit., p. 209.

⁵² See: Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., chapter II.

ybody, but simply aiming to *express* my moral attitudes. For example, I can sincerely say to you, 'Taking drugs is (morally) bad', without caring whether or not you are going to take them— that is, I can be motivated to express my judgment without having any intention of changing your attitudes. In taking this imperative force as a necessary feature of ethical language, it seems as if Stevenson is overemphasizing the importance of moral dispute and assuming that we only express our ethical judgments when we are engaged in a discussion.

It seems that we do not need to accept that the only function of ethical language is this kind of imperative force to accept the distinction between descriptive and emotive meaning. As I have just argued, the emotional force of an ethical statement can survive the fact that, in a given context, the utterer has no intention of changing other people's behaviour. So, even if rejecting Stevenson's account of the imperative force in ethical statements were compatible with his account of ethical disagreement, it would not be compatible with his ideas about the possibility of an ethical judgment about unavoidable actions.

According to Stevenson, people usually accept the unavoidability of an action "as a reason for withdrawing"⁵³ their judgment about that action. Thus, for example, if I say to you, 'You ought not to steal that book from the library', and you reply that your stealing that book was, for whatever reason, an unavoidable act (that is, that you had no choice but to steal that book), then if I accept that your action really was unavoidable, I will give up my initial judgment. Stevenson's account is then coherent with his explanation of imperative force – that is, that our aim in expressing an ethical judgment is to "control actions of the kind judged".⁵⁴ Then, given that judgments about unavoidable acts cannot be changed by the subject, Stevenson concludes that they serve no purpose.⁵⁵ And, given that we do not want to "talk aimlessly",⁵⁶ we restrict our ethical judgments to avoidable acts.

3. Classical objections to emotivism

In this final section, I will offer an overview of the main objections traditionally made against emotivism: the so-called 'Frege-Geach objection' and the denial of

⁵³ Ibid., p. 298.

⁵⁴ Stevenson, C. L. "Ethical Judgments and Avoidability", op. cit., p. 144; Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., p. 303.

⁵⁵ Stevenson, C. L. "Ethical Judgments and Avoidability", op. cit., p. 152; Stevenson, C. L. *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., pp. 302-304.

⁵⁶ Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, op. cit., p. 303.

emotivism's assumption that there is a clear-cut distinction between the evaluative and the descriptive content of ethical language. I will also explain McDowell's and Wiggins' argument, which aims to show that we do not need to defend an emotivistic account of the meaning of moral terms to claim an emotive foundation of Morality. Since the debate is currently still alive, it would be unfair on my part to try to settle the matter here, which is why my aim is not, strictly speaking, to judge the soundness of any of these objections but, rather, to explain them to illustrate that emotivism is a disputable metaethical view.

On the one hand, a classical objection which aims to show that the meaning of ethical terms cannot be identified with their emotive meaning is the so-called 'Frege-Geach objection', formulated by Peter Geach⁵⁷ and taking into account what he called the 'Frege Point', *i.e.* the claim that "[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".⁵⁸

Geach focuses on arguments with a structure similar to the following one:

- (1) Prostitution is (morally) wrong
- (2) If prostitution is (morally) wrong, then it is (morally) wrong to open a brothel
-
- (3) It is (morally) wrong to open a brothel

As we have just seen, according to Stevenson's emotivism the meaning of sentence (1) is disapproval expressed towards prostitution. But, as Geach pointed out, in (2) this expression of disapproval is clearly not part of the meaning of the statement 'Prostitution is (morally) wrong', since one can assert (2) without having any attitude of approval or disapproval towards prostitution. The only way available for the emotivist to skip this problem seems to be to claim that the meaning of 'Prostitution is (morally) wrong' is different in (1) and (2). This, however, has the odd consequence that we would not be able to consider the argument presented in (1)-(3) as valid since it would take the form "‘p’, ‘q → r’; therefore ‘r’". But it seems hard to deny, at least intuitively, that the argument is a valid one.

According to Geach, his objection shows a defective trait of the emotivistic theory of ethical language: its failure to distinguish between calling a thing 'P' and

⁵⁷ Geach, P. T. 1960. "Ascriptivism." *Philosophical Review* 69 (2), pp. 221–225; Geach, P. T. 1965. "Assertion." *Philosophical Review* 74 (4), pp. 449–465.

⁵⁸ Geach, P. T. "Assertion", *op. cit.*, p. 449.

predicating 'P' of a thing. We can predicate 'P' of a thing without calling that thing a 'P', *i.e.* without asserting that that thing is a 'P'. In Geach's words:

[...] what is regularly ignored is the distinction between calling a thing "P" and predicating "P" of a thing. A term "P" may be predicated of a thing in an if or then clause, or in a clause of a disjunctive proposition, without the thing's being thereby called "P". To say, "If the policeman's statement is true, the motorist touched 60 mph" is not to call the policeman's statement true; to say, "If gambling is bad, inviting people to gamble is bad" is not to call either gambling or invitations to gamble "bad." Now the theories of non-descriptive performances regularly take into account only the use of a term "P" to call something "P"; the corroboration theory of truth, for example, considers only the use of "true" to call a statement true, and the condemnation theory of the term "bad" considers only the way it is used to call something bad; predications of "true" and "bad" in if or then clauses, or in clauses of a disjunction, are just ignored. One could not write off such uses of the terms, as calling for a different explanation from their use to call things true or bad; for that would mean that arguments of the pattern "if x is true (if w is bad), then p; but x is true (w is bad); ergo p" contained a fallacy of equivocation, whereas they are in fact clearly valid.⁵⁹

On the other hand, most of the criticisms about emotivism have traditionally been directed against its assumption that there is a clear-cut distinction between the evaluative and the descriptive content of ethical language.

Thus, for example, Searle argued that non-evaluative statements can entail evaluative statements: from the purely descriptive statement "Jones uttered the words 'I hereby promise to pay you, Smith, five dollars'" we can infer the evaluative statement 'Jones ought to pay Smith five dollars'.⁶⁰ The problem for emotivism is that it assumes a clear-cut distinction between facts and values that makes it impossible to infer an evaluative premise unless there is an evaluative premise in the derivation.⁶¹

Philippa Foot offered another argument for the claim that there is no clear-cut distinction between the evaluative and the descriptive meaning of ethical language.⁶² Foot argued that the evaluative meaning of a moral concept cannot be described without referring to the object being evaluated. Foot's argument can be

⁵⁹ Geach, P. T. "Ascriptivism", *op. cit.*, p. 223.

⁶⁰ See: Searle, John R. 1964. "How to Derive 'Ought' From 'Is.'" *Philosophical Review* 73 (1): 43–58.

⁶¹ A similar argument to that of Searle can be found in Foot's "Moral Arguments" (Foot, Philippa. 1958. "Moral Arguments". In Foot, Philippa. 2002. *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press; p. 104), where Foot argued that from a non-evaluative premise such as 'X is a lack of offence' we can infer the evaluative premise 'X is an act of rudeness'.

⁶² Foot, Philippa. 1958-1959. "Moral Beliefs." In Foot, Philippa. 2002. *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, pp. 110-131

summarised as follows: in the same way that nobody can “[...] feel dismay about something he did not see as bad; if his thoughts about it were that it was altogether a good thing, he could not say that (oddly enough) what he felt about it was dismay”,⁶³ nobody can say, for example, that “clasping the hands three times in an hour was a good action”.⁶⁴ Thus, the range of application of value concepts is restricted by the kind of object we are referring to, which seems to show that evaluation is somehow logically connected to factual statements.

More recently, the debate over whether there is a clear-cut distinction between the evaluative and the descriptive content of ethical language has focused on the so-called ‘thick concepts’, *i.e.* concepts with both evaluative and descriptive content.⁶⁵ A classic example of a thick ethical concept is ‘courageous’: when I say that someone is courageous, I am not merely evaluating him positively but also *describing* him as a person who is not afraid of taking risks. If, as some authors have urged,⁶⁶ the evaluative and the cognitive content of thick ethical concepts cannot be disentangled, *i.e.* we cannot understand what being courageous is without referring to not being afraid of taking risks and vice versa, then the possibility of arguing for an emotivist account of ethical language is blocked.

Another way that emotivism has been argued against is by trying to undermine one of its main motivations. One of the main strengths of emotivism is that it seems to be the most straightforward way to secure our intuition that our morality depends on our attitudes or emotions, in the sense that without these we would not be moral beings. However, some authors have argued that there are alternative ways of preserving that claim: by establishing an analogy between values and colours, Wiggins and McDowell have argued that values, like colours, are anthropocentric in the sense that our perception of them depends on our idiosyncratic perceptual system, but this by itself does not imply that they only exist in the subject.⁶⁷ If correct, the argument would show that if an emotivist such as Stevenson wants to give a non-descriptive account of the meaning of ethical terms, he would need of something more than the acceptance of an emotive account for the foundations of Morality. In Wiggins’ words:

⁶³ Ibid., p. 114.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 118.

⁶⁵ For an overview of the current state of the debate on thick concepts, see the papers collected in Kirchin, Simon, ed. 2013. *Thick Concepts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶⁶ See, for example: Williams, Bernard. 1985/2006. *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*. London: Routledge, pp. 128-131 and 140-142; Putnam, Hilary. 2002. “The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy.” In *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 34-35.

⁶⁷ McDowell, J. 1985. “Values and Secondary Qualities”. In McDowell, J. 1998. *Mind, Value and Reality*. USA: Harvard University Press, p. 143; Wiggins, D. 1976. “Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life”. In Wiggins, D. 1998. *Needs, Values, Truth*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 3rd Edition, pp. 106-107.

We may see a pillar-box as red because it is red. But also pillar-boxes, printed as they are, *count* as red only because there actually exists a perceptual apparatus (*e.g.* our own) that discriminates, and learns on the direct basis of experience to group together, all and only the actually red things. Not every sentient animal that sees a red postbox sees it as red. But this in no way impugns the idea that redness is an external, monadic property of a postbox. ‘Red postbox’ is not short for ‘red to human beings postbox’. Red is not a relational property. (It is certainly not relational in the way in which ‘father of’ is relational, or ‘moves’ is relational on a Leibniz-Mach view of space). All the same, it is in one interesting sense a *relative* property. For the category of colour is an anthropocentric category. The category corresponds to an interest that can only take root in creatures with something approaching our own sensory apparatus.⁶⁸

Thus, according to these authors, values are subjective in the sense that they cannot be conceived without a subject, but not in the sense that they do not form part of the world. A crucial step in the argument is Wiggins’ claim that anthropocentricity has nothing to do with objectivity:

[...] let me point out the *prima facie* implausibility of the idea that the distinction between objectivity and non-objectivity (which appears to have to do with the existence of publicly accepted and rationally criticizable standards of argument, or of ratiocination towards truth) should coincide with the distinction between the anthropocentric and the non-anthropocentric (which concerns orientation towards human interests or a human point of view). The distinctions are not without conceptual links, but the *prima facie* appearance is that a matter that is anthropocentric may be either more objective or less objective, or (at the limit) *merely* subjective. This is how things will appear until we have an argument to prove rigorously the mutual coincidence of independently plausible accounts of the anthropocentric/non-anthropocentric distinction, the non-objective/objective distinction, and the subjective/non-subjective distinction.⁶⁹

A more detailed justification for the claim that anthropocentricity cannot be identified with objectivity can be found in Prades’ “Realismo y Quietismo”.⁷⁰ There, Prades developed an account which aims to make compatible an idiosyncratic foundation of our conceptual system with the claim that it is the world what gives our statements its truth-values. His reasoning is grounded on the distinction be-

⁶⁸ Wiggins, D. “Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life”, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-107. McDowell uses the same analogy: “[...] evaluative ‘attitudes’, or states of will, are like (say) colour experience in being unintelligible except as modifications of a sensibility like ours. The idea of value experience involves taking admiration, say, to represent its object as having a property that (although there in the object) is essentially subjective in much the same way as the property that an object is represented as having by an experience of redness -that is, understood adequately only in terms of the appropriate modification of human (or similar) sensibility” (McDowell. “Values and Secondary Qualities”, *op. cit.*, p. 143).

⁶⁹ Wiggins, D. “Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life”, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102.

⁷⁰ Prades, J. Ll. 2015. “Realismo y Quietismo”. In Prades, J. Ll., ed. 2015. *Cuestiones de Metafísica*. Madrid: Editorial Tecnos, pp. 91-125.

tween content and truth: although the content of what we say is determined by our idiosyncrasy, the truth of what we say is still determined by the world. Denying this distinction would mean us claiming that because our human nature determines our conceptual system of the world, it must also be our human nature that determines its correctness. However, this would amount to claiming that the correctness of the *content* of an utterance such as ‘The grass is green’ is not determined by the *fact* that the grass is green but by our own human nature. But, it seems evident that the *fact* that the grass is green in no way depends on us because the grass would still be green even if we were to disappear.

Wiggins and McDowell’s argument is, however, problematic. The problem does not come so much from the claim that anthropocentricity has nothing to do with objectivity, but from the analogy between values and colours upon which the argument rests. The analogy is disputable and so, it is not clear why the emotivist is committed to accepting it.⁷¹ The analogy simply assumes the falsity of emotivism, insofar as it rests on the claim that moral terms work as predicates.

4. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have commented on Stevenson’s metaethical view. I have discussed some aspects of Stevenson’s proposal which I take to be in some way problematic, such as Stevenson’s claim that a necessary feature of ethical judgments is that they have an imperative force. I have also explained some of the objections that have been traditionally held against emotivism: the so-called ‘Frege-Geach objection’ and some of the different ways it has been argued against emotivism’s assumption that there is a clear-cut distinction between the evaluative and the cognitive meaning of ethical language. Finally, I have explained McDowell’s and Wiggins’ argument, which aims to show that we can accept an emotivistic foundation of Morality without having to commit ourselves to accepting an emotivistic account of the meaning of moral terms which, as I have pointed out, rests on the disputable analogy between values and colours.

⁷¹ Hare, for example, explicitly rejects the possibility of construing any analogy between value predicates and colour predicates (Hare, R. M. 1960. “Ethics”. In Hare, R. M. 1972. *Essays on the Moral Concepts*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 41–42).

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