

C. L. Stevenson's Emotivism

- I. An adequate analysis of the good will have to meet three requirements:
 - (1) We must be able to disagree about whether something is good.
Presumably, Stevenson would appeal to moral phenomenology to back up this claim. Also, unlike Ayer, Stevenson seems to take Moore's argument against ethical subjectivism to be decisive (that is, he thinks that we should reject subjectivism since it cannot account for moral disagreement).
 - (2) "Goodness" must possess a "magnetism," a tendency to act in its favor.
Presumably, Stevenson would again appeal to moral phenomenology to back up this claim.
 - (3) The good must not be empirically knowable, i.e., scientifically knowable. Stevenson believes that Moore's open question argument proves that "good" cannot be defined in terms of anything scientifically knowable. Stevenson is pretty much taking this point for granted given that Moore's open question argument was, at the time, thought to be a decisive refutation of ethical naturalism.
- II. How naturalistic theories (or, as Stevenson refers to them, traditional interest theories) fail to meet these requirements:
 - A. Hobbes's theory (subjectivism) fails (1).
 - B. Hume's theory (inter-subjectivism) fails (2).
 - C. (3) rules out all naturalistic theories without exception.
- III. The two different purposes that lead us to use language:
 - A. Descriptive: to record, clarify, or communicate beliefs.
 - B. Dynamic: to express our feelings, create moods, or incite others to act or feel a certain way.
- IV. Two Kinds of Meaning:
 - A. Propositional Meaning
 - B. Emotive Meaning: it is the tendency of a word, arising through the history of its usage, to produce affective responses in people.

This tendency must hold for all who speak the language; it must be persistent, and it must be realizable more or less independently of the determinate circumstances attending the word's utterance.

Thus, the meaning of a word does not vary with dynamic usage. The emotive meaning accompanies a word much more persistently than any dynamic purpose that the word is typically used for.

Compare: “There was an odor coming from his house” with “There was an aroma coming from his house.

[Background: A man tells her hostess that he thoroughly enjoyed himself at her party when in fact he was quite bored.]

Compare: “You lied to her” with “You told her a falsehood with the intent of making her believe it was true.”

V. The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms:

“For instance, ‘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 cannot like something 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.” (p. 485)

VI. Emotivism and the Three Criteria Above:

(1) Disagreement in interest vs. disagreement in belief

- Disagreement in belief is where A believes p and B does not.
- Disagreement in interest is where A has a favorable interest in X and B does not.

Sometimes disagreement in interest is rooted in disagreement in belief, but not always. Sometimes two people can agree on all the empirical facts and still disagree in interest. But, unlike Ayer, Stevenson doesn't believe that attempts at persuasion have to end when there is disagreement that cannot be resolved by empirical methods. The person can still attempt to sway the other person; that is, she can attempt to get her to take a different interest by means of the emotive meaning of ethical terms.

Potential Problem: Does anything capable of swaying someone to take a new or different interest count as a reason?

- (2) The restriction requiring magnetism rules out only those theories that do not include the interest of the speaker in defining the “good.” Emotivism does, hence it meets this requirement.

- (3) The empirical method is not sufficient for resolving ethical disagreement, because not all disagreement in interest is rooted in disagreement in belief.