

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is to defend the Emotive Theory of Ethics, and, in particular, the versions of that theory proposed by A. J. Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) and by C. L. Stevenson in *Ethics and Language* (1944). For those readers who are familiar with the *conventional* history of Twentieth Century moral philosophy and the infamous place which the Emotive Theory occupies in that history, the question which may well spring to mind at this point is ‘Why bother?’ In order to answer this question, however, I will need to provide a rough sketch of the very *unconventional* history of Twentieth Century moral philosophy which inspired me to ‘resurrect’ a theory which most modern moral philosophers have long assumed to be safely dead and buried.

From the very outset, the Emotive Theory (ET) was a misunderstood, misrepresented and unjustly ridiculed theory, but, contrary to what one might expect, it has, with the passing of time, become an even more misunderstood, misrepresented and unjustly ridiculed theory. This has been due to the facts (i) that most of its original critics were too outraged by it to bother with an objective appraisal of its claims (or, in some cases, too outraged by it to be bothered reading any further than the first few paragraphs of the texts in which it was originally espoused); and (ii) that subsequent critics have increasingly relied upon the erroneous and misleading appraisals of the theory provided by the original critics rather than any first hand acquaintance with the primary texts. The cumulative errors of interpretation to which this unscholarly process of ‘Chinese whispers’ gave rise are now so ingrained in the literature that the passing and, for the most part, dismissive references made to the ET in recent times are often based on little more than completely distorted caricatures. This, in turn, has given rise to a disturbing historical irony, for the alternative theories proposed by some of the more recent critics who have dismissed the ET on the basis of some such caricature turn out to be perfectly consistent with its actual and undistorted claims.

To take a particularly glaring example of this irony: on the basis of one such caricature (a caricature which lead him to describe the ET (or ‘emotivism’ as it is also known) as ‘the nadir of [modern] moral theorising’), Mark Johnson went on to state in his book *Moral Imagination* (1993) that ‘emotivism ignores the fact that morality is both socially-embedded and intimately bound up with the evolution and maintenance

of personal identity', when, in actual fact, this 'fact' was taken for granted by the ET at the level of its background psychology, and, indeed, had to be if the theory was to make any sense at all. However, the irony of Johnson's attack upon emotivism does not end here, for, in the process of gathering support for his summary dismissal of emotivism, he goes on to inform us that '[John] Dewey saw that our [moral choices] both express and re-form our self identity', but does so in apparent ignorance of the fact that Dewey was Charles Stevenson's principle mentor, and in apparent ignorance of the distinct possibility that Stevenson's emotivism might therefore be perfectly consistent with what Dewey 'saw'. Johnson's ignorance, in this respect, and the widespread contemporary ignorance of which it is typical, is, however, just one aspect of the historical irony to which I have alluded. The other can be brought to light by means of a short story - strange but true - which forms the centrepiece of my very *unconventional* history of Twentieth Century moral philosophy.

When R. M. Hare (who was one of the ET's most dispassionate and important critics) was in Australia in 1993, he accepted my invitation to visit the University of Newcastle, and I, in turn, accepted his invitation to join him for a one-on-one breakfast just prior to his departure on the final day of his stay. This breakfast proved to be a most memorable encounter for me, but the most memorable thing about it was something which Hare said as we were winding up our discussion and making final preparations for his departure. He had been talking about his friendship with Charles Stevenson - about sing-songs around the Stevenson's family piano, Stevenson's piano playing and Stevenson's love of music in general - but, then, as if to emphasise that this mutual rapport did not extend to their opinions about moral philosophy, Hare added that, while he himself had often been referred to as 'an emotivist', he was not and never had been an emotivist because, unlike Stevenson, he had always maintained that, despite being non-descriptive, moral judgements can be supported by reasons.

Not content to allow him the final word on this matter, and, in hindsight, displaying some of the same youthful disrespect for 'elders' which earned A. J. Ayer an *enfant terrible* reputation, I reminded Hare that Stevenson had never denied that moral judgements can be supported by reasons; that he had merely claimed that the connection between a moral judgement and the reasons which support it is a psychological rather than a logical connection. Hare reflected on this for a second or two and then, to my complete astonishment, replied 'Yes ... I recall him saying that, but I have never understood what he meant by it.'

Hare's admission that he had never understood what Stevenson meant when he claimed that moral judgements are psychologically rather than logically connected to the reasons which support them is significant enough in itself, but, when juxtaposed against Johnson's ignorance as to what Stevenson had actually claimed, it brings to light a profound historical asymmetry. For, on the one hand, we have long-standing critics of the ET, such as Hare, who recall, but have never understood, Stevenson's

claims concerning the psychological connection between moral judgements and the reasons which support them; while, on the other, we have more recent critics of the ET, such as Johnson, who understand and, indeed, agree with the claim that moral reasons are psychologically rather than logically connected to the judgements they support, but who are, at the same time, ignorant of the fact that Stevenson ever made such a claim.¹

This ignorance of what Stevenson actually claimed is not only typical of the ET's more recent critics, such as Johnson, it is also (and more paradoxically) typical of the theory's more recent apologists, such as Alan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn, who, as distant (if somewhat historically estranged) descendants of Ayer and Stevenson, are now widely regarded as having 'given [the] non-cognitivist [theories of Ayer and Stevenson, among others,] fresh and sophisticated reformulation.'² For instance, in his review of Gibbard's influential *Wise Choices Apt Feelings*, Blackburn says:

If Gibbard's picture of human choice and action is a kind of update of Hume, by Darwin, Stevenson and Hare, it is not the worse for that, and in any case it is an update in the sense that it avoids old mistakes and proposes new solutions.³

But, insofar as Gibbard's efforts to 'update' Stevenson are concerned, the 'old mistakes' he supposedly 'avoids' are not mistakes on Stevenson's part but on the part of the earlier critics from whom he (Gibbard) got 'the whisper' about Stevenson; critics and commentators who have, through their misinterpretation and misrepresentation of Stevenson, created problems where there are none; problems for which contemporary non-cognitivists, such as Gibbard and Blackburn, have subsequently proposed totally uncalled-for solutions. To take a specific example of this, Gibbard states:

Stevenson said that when a person calls something 'good', he is saying something like this: 'I like it. Do so as well.' I am now, in effect, adding Stevenson's 'Do so as well.' to my analysis. My own analysis [, however,] is unlike Stevenson's in other respects: The states of mind involved in normative judgements, I say, are not mere likings, but the acceptance of norms. In making a normative statement, I do not report my state of mind, I express it - I speak my mind. Still, my analysis includes a crucial Stevensonian element: the conversational demand [or what, in less esoteric terms, Stevenson would have called 'an attempt on the speaker's part to influence the attitudes of the people he is speaking to].⁴

¹ To heap irony upon irony, Hare himself has made the same kind of point in regard to how his own theory has suffered from the 'Chinese whispers': 'The confusions are so widespread, even among professional philosophers who should know better, and are so often taught to succeeding generations of students, that it is worth another attempt to clear them up - though the confusions are so insidious that [there is] not much hope of eradicat[ing them]. (1995, p.67)

² Couture and Nielsen, 1995, p.10.

³ 1992, p.342.

⁴ 1990, p.173.

Stevenson, however, never claimed that the states of mind involved in normative judgements are 'mere likings'. The references to 'mere likings' which Gibbard provides (and which many earlier critics seized upon in dubbing emotivism 'the boo-hooray theory of ethics') are to the 'working models' which Stevenson utilised in the very initial stages of his analysis; working models which were, as he put it himself, deliberately oversimplified (*EL* 20). As he went on to make clear:

It must be emphasised, however, that ethical reasons need not be confined to terse, isolated supporting statements - as [the] simple examples [associated with our simplified working models] may too easily suggest. An ethical judgement is often supported by a whole *body* of beliefs, in which specific (factual) conclusions are subsumed under more general ones. One need only turn, say, to a book on a particular form of government (democratic or communist, etc.) to see that an elaborate structure of economic and psychological theory, supplemented by conclusions drawn from history, sociology and many other fields, may be used as a means of strengthening or redirecting attitudes in the light of [factual] beliefs (*EL* 129).

His actual claim was that the normative states of mind involved in normative judgments are attitudes, and at no point did he ever suggest there was anything 'mere' about them. Neither did he (nor Ayer for that matter) ever claim that normative judgements *report* a state of mind; what he actually claimed is that they give *expression* to certain states of mind, namely, attitudes. Thus to claim, as Gibbard *et al* do, that Stevenson stands out among classical non-cognitivists as a non-expressivist because, in his analysis of 'It is good' as 'I like it. Do so as well', the non-cognitive element is the demand 'Do so as well'⁵, is to not only misrepresent Stevenson in the extreme but to completely miss the point of the 'analysis' alluded to. And, likewise, to claim, as Gibbard does, that 'Ayer believed moral judgements to be emotions' is to not only misrepresent Ayer in the extreme, but to miss the point of his parallel if somewhat less elaborate analysis.⁶

Stevenson was as much (if not more so) an expressivist as the other classical non-cognitivists. The fact that Gibbard can incorporate what he sees as 'a crucial Stevensonian element' in his own analysis and, at the same time, fail to recognise Stevenson as a kindred expressivist, is indicative of the extent to which the claims of both Ayer and Stevenson have been distorted by the 'Chinese whispers' process. In the light of this distortion - the light under which he has labored in his attempts to improve upon classical non-cognitivism - Gibbard's 'norm expressivism' theory, while perhaps original in some respects, amounts, in the main, to a rather long-winded restatement of what Ayer and Stevenson had stated some fifty years earlier; and to a long-winded restatement which, by virtue of its long-windedness, tends to obfuscate the central issues rather than clarify them. To take a specific example of this: in response to the charge that [earlier forms of] expressivism fail with 'embedded contexts', Gibbard concedes that:

⁵ 1992, p.149, note 76.

⁶ I note that in attributing this view to Ayer, Gibbard *et al* provide no reference.

When a person calls something 'wrong' expressivists say he is not stating a purported fact; he is expressing a special state of mind - a feeling or an attitude, say. Now at best, such an account works for simple ascriptions of rightness or wrongness. It does not extend to more elaborate uses of moral language, as in 'He did something wrong' or 'If taking bribes is wrong, then so is offering them.'⁷

Let it first be said that the fact that Gibbard even sees this as a problem - let alone a problem worth addressing - is indicative of the extent to which many modern moral philosophers have managed to completely confound themselves - along with a substantial portion of their readership no doubt. His efforts to address this supposed problem by:

[attempting] a more uniform explanation of normative terms in embedded contexts: Complex normative judgements are to be explained by their inferential ties to simple normative ascriptions and to factual judgements. A special class of simple normative ascription - judgements of what is warranted for oneself right now - has a special tie to the world: these judgements tend to motivate.⁸

have not only been undertaken in seeming ignorance of what Stevenson had claimed about complex ethical judgements and their 'inferential ties' to simpler ethical judgements and morally relevant factual beliefs, they serve to complicate what is essentially a very simple matter to an even greater extent than the critics who brought the charge regarding embedded contexts against earlier forms of expressivism. To then add, however, that 'all this [the stuff of his own response] makes for a radical modification of expressivism', as if Ayer and Stevenson had not already recognised and dealt with 'all this' fifty years earlier (and much more succinctly I might add), is to not only add insult to injury but to raise the level of confusion associated with ET from the sublime to the ridiculous.

The more succinct and 'uniform explanation of normative terms in embedded contexts' which Ayer and Stevenson had proposed fifty years earlier boils down to something like this:

Moral judgements (which are quite obviously practical in terms of both their intent and implication) give [direct] expression to the judgement maker's [derivative] moral attitudes, and [indirect] expression to (i) his [fundamental] moral attitudes and (ii) the factual beliefs which he has (in the light of his [fundamental] moral attitudes) judged relevant to the moral issue in question.

It was on the basis of this 'uniform explanation' that they claimed:

Rational argument in ethics is possible only insofar as moral disagreements are rooted in disagreements concerning either (i) the factual beliefs which both parties have (in the light of their fundamental moral attitudes) judged morally-relevant to the moral issue in question, or (ii) the logically consistent

⁷ *Op cit.*

⁸ *Ibid.*



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