

CHAPTER 1

THE ORIGINAL EMOTIVE THEORY

The threefold purpose of this first chapter is (i) to synthesise an integrated summary account of the Emotive Theory from the separate versions proposed by Ayer and Stevenson; (ii) to distinguish those of its claims which contribute to its semantic thesis from those which contribute to its justificatory thesis; and (iii) to subsume its semantic thesis under its justificatory thesis.

Contrary to what has become popular practice, I have given equal emphasis to Ayer's version of the theory because it was, in many respects, the clearer and by far the more concise account. Stevenson's version, which was intended to qualify the earlier views of Ayer (and others), certainly benefitted, in some respects, from being fleshed-out to book length, but his detailed discussions of issues which ultimately prove to be peripheral to his thesis tend to obscure and detract from the more incisive claims which are central to it. In addition to including a measure of clarification and elaboration on my own part, my account of Ayer's emotivism will include the subsequent elaborations, clarifications and retractions with which he qualified his original views. These, for the most part, will be tabled in note form, since none of them serve to alter the basic thrust of his original claims. Stevenson's version of the theory will then be treated as an elaboration of Ayer's.

1. AYER'S CRITIQUE OF ETHICS

In 1936 Ayer's infamous *Language, Truth and Logic (LTL)* went to press in the first of its twelve editions. I do not intend to defend (at any length) the central thesis of that book, namely, the verificationist thesis (the thesis that a statement is positively¹ meaningful if and only if it is either logically or empirically verifiable) against the criticism which has been directed at it as an account of scientific knowledge, for I do not take Ayer's ethical theory to hinge in any necessarily dependent sense upon his verificationist thesis - understood as an account of scientific knowledge. I take his ethical theory to hinge upon his verificationist thesis only to the extent that it assumes logic and empirical verification (and combinations thereof) to be the only means of firmly establishing the truth or falsity of any claim to knowledge. I acknowledge, however, that one could be forgiven for thinking that Chapter

¹ 'Positively' here is intended to convey the sense in which positivists (logical and otherwise) have always tried to limit inquiry and belief to what can be firmly established (after Lacey, 1986)

6 of *LTL*, his 'Critique of Ethics and Theology', was only included as an ad hoc counter to what he considered to be the last significant objection to his verificationist thesis. But, as Ayer himself emphasised in the preface to the book's second edition, the ethical theory he developed in the first edition was not only designed to maintain the consistency of his general position, but to be consistent in itself (*LTL* 26-7). In accordance with this emphasis, I have analysed his ethical theory in terms of its internal consistency and in isolation from the broader problems which beset his verificationist thesis as a whole.

The 'last significant objection' to which I have just alluded was the claim that ethics, aesthetics and theology present an insurmountable stumbling block to Ayer's verificationism, and, in particular, to his claim that all genuine synthetic propositions are empirical hypotheses, because statements of value and religious belief, which are not empirical hypotheses, are nonetheless genuine synthetic propositions. The gist of Ayer's response to this, insofar as statements of value are concerned, was spelt out in the second paragraph of the Chapter:

We shall set ourselves to show that insofar as statements of value are significant, they are ordinary 'scientific' statements; and that insofar as they are not scientific, they are not in the literal sense significant, but are simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true nor false (*LTL* 136).

Having made his intentions clear, Ayer then set out to show (i) that these conclusions were not at variance with common sense; (ii) that they did not require the elimination of ethics (or aesthetics or theology) as they did the elimination of metaphysics;² and (iii) that they did not undermine the ordinary role of ethical language. Before turning to these tasks, however, there were two preliminary tasks to which he turned his attention.

1.1. *Delimiting the Subject Matter of Ethical Philosophy*

For Ayer, ethical philosophy, as it had been traditionally practiced, was far from being an homogenous whole. Not only was it apt to contain pieces of metaphysics and the analysis of non-ethical concepts, its actual ethical contents were of four very different kinds:

1. propositions expressing definitions of ethical terms.
2. propositions describing the phenomena and causes of moral experience.
3. Exhortations to moral virtue.
4. Actual ethical judgements.

² Ayer not only drew a distinction between the poet who is not concerned with the expression of true propositions but with the creation of art and the eliciting of emotional responses, and the scientist who is concerned with the expression of true propositions; he also drew a distinction between the poet who deliberately writes 'nonsense' with a view to eliciting the emotional responses he desires to elicit, and the metaphysician who writes 'nonsense' in the mistaken belief that he is giving expression to true propositions (*LTL* 59-61).

According to the 'positively' streamlined conception of the discipline which Ayer envisaged, it was only the first of these four categories that could be said to constitute the subject matter of ethical philosophy. The second he assigned to psychology and sociology; the third he would not even entertain as propositions; and the fourth he remained unsure about (though he was sure that it did not belong to ethical philosophy). On the basis of this 'streamlined' conception, he went on to claim that, while a strictly philosophical treatise on ethics should, through the analysis of ethical terms, show to what category all ethical pronouncements belong, it should make no such pronouncements itself; it should, in other words, remain normatively neutral.³

1.2. *Dispensing with some Traditional Alternatives*

Prior to setting forth his own theory concerning the category to which all ethical terms and pronouncements can be assigned, Ayer sort to dispense with what he saw as its only serious rivals, namely, [orthodox] subjectivism⁴ and utilitarianism, which he saw as the only alternatives to absolutism (or what is now more commonly referred to as intuitionism), and absolutism itself, which he took to be his own theory's most threatening rival.

In dispensing with orthodox subjectivism and utilitarianism Ayer drew upon an argument that had already been utilised by G. E. Moore in *Principia Ethica*, and by others before him⁵; an argument which consists in showing that, in respect of any purported identity, such as 'X is good', it is always perfectly reasonable to ask 'But is X really good?' This argument, which has since been dubbed the 'Open Question Argument', was designed to repudiate all claims of the form 'X is [as a matter of definition] good' (where 'X' denotes 'pleasure', 'social harmony', 'that which is generally approved of', 'evolutionary progress' or whatever natural property one cares to propose). By redeploying this argument, Ayer was simply asserting that it is not self-contradictory to say that it is sometimes wrong to perform the action which would bring about the greatest pleasure or meet with the most general

³ In hindsight, Ayer had second thoughts about this 'positively' streamlined conception of ethical philosophy. The very fact that he went on to write and publish a further six papers in the field (three between the years 1946 and 1954), and that only two of these were concerned with the analysis and definition of ethical terms, suggests, in itself, a softening of his earlier views, but this softening eventually became explicit: Looking back on [my attempt to delimit the subject matter of ethical philosophy] I find that it is not so much mistaken as unduly scholastic. The distinctions that I made were valid, but my use of them to lay fetters upon moral philosophy impoverished the subject to an unreasonable extent (*FM* 17).

⁴ I have inserted the qualifier 'orthodox' in anticipation of the distinction which Ayer himself would later draw between *orthodox* subjectivism and what he refers to as his own *radical* subjectivism.

⁵ By conjoining the forward-looking observations of Taylor (1926, p.151), which link Plato's Euthypro Argument to Cudworth, and the retrospective observations of Prior (1949) linking Moore's argument to Cudworth, the history of this argument can be traced back to antiquity.



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0916-7>

Emotion, Truth and Meaning
In Defense of Ayer and Stevenson

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2002, XX, 243 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0916-7