

CHAPTER 2

CRITICISM OF THE ORIGINAL EMOTIVE THEORY

Having now synthesised an integrated summary account of the ET, distinguished its semantic from its justificatory theses, and subsumed its semantic thesis under its justificatory thesis, I now turn to the criticism which has been directed at the theory. Before doing so, however, it will be necessary to distinguish between the analytic and pragmatic forms of this criticism.

1. DISTINGUISHING THE ANALYTIC FROM THE PRAGMATIC FORMS OF CRITICISM

In addition to what I have termed 'analytic criticism', the ET has been subject to what I have termed 'pragmatic criticism'. By 'analytic criticism' I mean criticism concerning the truth value of the ET's claims: its internal consistency, empirical adequacy and explanatory power. By 'pragmatic criticism' I mean criticism concerning the *wisdom* of its public disclosure; claims which focus on the anticipated or actual moral, political and social consequences of *acknowledging* it to be true.¹ Criticism of this pragmatic kind cannot, however, be viewed in strict isolation from criticism of the analytic kind, for much of the analytic criticism which has been directed at the ET has been driven by concerns - either stated or unstated - of a pragmatic nature. This intermingling of the analytic and pragmatic is nowhere more apparent than in the following comment made by Fons Elders in the postscript to his interview with Ayer: the distinction between values and facts is not only vague, but sterile and dangerous.²

¹ It has been suggested that the distinction I have just drawn between analytic and pragmatic forms of criticism could be better drawn in terms of 'philosophical' and 'pragmatic' criticisms. This, however, would suggest that philosophy should confine itself to the analysis of ideas and theories in terms of their truth value, internal consistency, empirical adequacy and explanatory power, and refrain from speculative musings about the good or ideal form of life and from the analysis of ideas and theories in terms of their anticipated or actual social impacts. Although I happen to conceive of philosophy in much the same analytical sense as the people who have made this suggestion, to substitute 'philosophical' for 'analytic' would be to imply that the way in which I (and others like me) happen to conceive of philosophy is the only way in which it can be conceived of.

² Elders, 1974, p.281.

Clearly, it is not the analytical vagueness or failure to precisely draw the distinction between values and facts that Elders is calling into question; indeed, he leaves us to assume that if it were not vague, but clear and precise, the distinction would be even more sterile and dangerous than it is when vaguely drawn. The real concern here is Elder's pragmatic concern that the distinction between values and facts, whether precisely drawn or not, is sterile and dangerous, but, clearly, a distinction's being sterile and dangerous has no bearing on the analytical issue of whether it can be drawn or not.³

1.1. *Responses to Early Forms of Pragmatic Criticism*

As one critic wrote with emotivism clearly in mind:

If we accept in bitter earnest the theory that all differences of opinion about what is morally good and morally evil are merely differences of personal taste, we shall find ourselves driven to the unhappy conclusion that it is impossible to justify on rational grounds the conviction that any particular form of conduct is really better than any other, however barbarous that other may be. In short, we seem to be driven to accept the motto of all dictators, "Might is right."⁴

In his 1949 essay 'The Analysis of Moral Judgements' (*AMJ*) Ayer replied to the barrage of pragmatic criticism which had been directed at his version of the ET by emphasising that he was not dismissing morals as trivial or unimportant, or suggesting that there is no good and evil, for this itself, he claimed, 'would be a statement of value which I have not made and which I do not wish to make, and, even if I did, it would have no connection with my theory' (*AMJ* 245-7).⁵ In response to the related criticisms that his theory endorsed moral relativism and encouraged moral laxity, he countered, in respect of the former, that there is no necessary connection - logical or otherwise - between his theory and moral relativism (noting, by way of example, that he himself

³ As J.J.C. Smart put it: Non-cognitivism may indeed strike us as regrettable, [but] 'Wouldn't it be horrible if this is true?' is no argument [against it] (Smart, 1994, p.11).

⁴ R. Corkey, 1961, pp.22-23. After Hudson (*MMP* 132)

⁵ Wittgenstein had also been concerned to assure his critics that he intended no disrespect for ethics in his philosophical views. For having said that 'what [ethics] says does not add to our knowledge in any sense, [and that] insofar as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, [ethics] can be no science', he then went on to add 'But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.' (After Rush Rhees, 1965, pp.3-12).

did not adhere to every moral attitude that he came across⁶); but conceded, in respect of the latter, that, while there is no logical connection between his theory and moral laxity, there may be a psychological one.⁷ He added, however, that, in the absence of any hard psychological data, he was apt to suspect that, in terms of their actual moral conduct, positivists were very much like anti-positivists.

In *Ethics and Language*, Stevenson provided a pointed example of the pragmatic criticism which had already been directed at Ayer's version of the ET. He cites Martin D'Arcy who had stated in his review of *Language, Truth and Logic*:

Under the pretence of ultimate wisdom it guillotines religion, ethics and aesthetics, self, persons, free will, responsibility and everything worthwhile. I thank Mr Ayer for showing us how modern philosophers can fiddle and play tricks while the world burns' (EL 265).

In defence of Ayer, Stevenson himself then went on to say:

The criticisms which have been levelled against [the emotive view] have shown more impatience than understanding. They have usually assumed that an emotive analysis represents an effort to 'discredit ethics', and indeed that very phrase was used even by so astute a critic as W.D. Ross. But it is one thing to attack certain writers on ethics, and another to discredit ethics [itself]. To compare ethical judgements to imperatives is not to deny that imperatives have an important use, [and] to say that ethical judgements are neither true nor false is not to maintain that they are to be made capriciously, in ignorance of one's self, or the nature and consequences of the object judged (EL 266).

Stevenson had what I consider to be the final word on this form of criticism when he stated in respect of *Ethics and Language* that 'my book hopes to make clear that [the term] "emotive" need not itself have a derogatory emotive meaning' (EL 265).

1.2. Response to More Recent Forms of Non-Technical Criticism

A more recent example of the pragmatic criticism which has been directed at the ET was MacIntyre's claim that emotivism is in part responsible for the undermining of western society's traditional moral values.

In *After Virtue (AV)*, MacIntyre provides an historical account of the social and intellectual developments which have given rise to what he sees as the 'grave disorder' of modern moral discourse - an account in which the ET plays a central role. The distinguishing feature of modern moral discourse, according to MacIntyre, is

⁶ It should simply be noted at this point, that this response to the charge of relativism misses the point, for a person can quite consistently disapprove of certain behaviours at the substantive ethical level while subscribing to relativism at the meta-ethical level.

⁷ And, as he went on to say, if a connection of this sort could be empirically demonstrated, then, no doubt, some ill-liberal people might want to keep logical positivism a secret (AMJ 248-9). Comments such as this lend support to the suspicions of later critics who claimed that emotivism was infected by a liberal bias (cf. Chapter 7).



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