

THE UNIQUE STATUS OF META-ETHICAL EMOTIVISM IN STEVENSON

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The basic understanding of morality undoubtedly revolves round the situational aspects of the moral agents who form the subject of discussion. There cannot be any question about ethicality where the human agents are not involved. Now, concepts of 'good' or 'bad' are necessary to understand for the sake of answering normative queries; but, they are never appropriately comprehended from a non-subjective standpoint, as it is nothing without the subject which can be absolutely relevant in understanding the judgements passed by them. The physical world is a party to the discussion only because the moral agents sustain their existence through interacting with them, and thereby having a common interaction also with the environment of which they both form an indispensable part.

Now, the question is- why are ethical questions asked or ethical judgements passed? It is precisely to express our attitude towards something thereby contributing in affecting the thoughts of others, or else in resolving disputes /disagreements rising out of differences in belief or attitudes. This purpose is effectively served only when the situational factors are understood in relation to the subject/subjects involved – i.e. in understanding the totality of the emergence of such contexts. Hence, comes the justification of introducing meta-ethics in the form of a comprehensive understanding of ethical language along with an understanding of the psychology behind use of the language, the background behind the use of such language, and hence the social role played by use of such language. This way of exercising ethics stands in sharp contrast to the normative approach of knowing what is 'good', 'bad' on the basis of some objectively set standards. Morality is subject-oriented, and because the existential situations of humans/subjects evolve in its domain, any bit of discussion on ethics is rendered pointless when dealt with in absolute objectivity. The focus of my paper is thus to study after C.L.Stevenson the purpose of doing metaethics as a wholesome study addressing the justification and practicality of the very existence of the discipline called Ethics.

I

The meta-ethical theory of emotivism as propounded by Ayer and later on by Stevenson is typically understood as a theory of moral language according to which ethical terms are used in a tone of imperatives ('Be kind') in order to express a speaker's affective, noncognitive psychological states, such as approval or disapproval, rather than to describe some action, person, institution, etc. Stevenson's emotivism, however, was more than a theory of moral language. It was a full-blown ethical theory, grounded in moral and linguistic psychology. His intention was to clarify the nature and structure of a whole range of normative problems common to everyday life—ethical, aesthetic, economic, legal, political, etc., as well as the methods typically used to resolve them. He had always concentrated on the complexity of human experience and the power of signs and sounds to move a person emotionally and behaviourally. Accordingly, he disregards the simplistic answers to complex problems by way of postulating entities unverifiable by scientific methods (e.g., non-naturalistic moral properties).

He clearly rejects the question of exception less “first principles” of explanation and justification that can be known with certainty.

II

Charles Leslie Stevenson sets out for an intense study of ethical questions like “Is so and so good?” in his article “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms” published in the 46th volume of the journal ‘Mind’ in 1937. He says that the primary task for understanding ethical questions is to thoroughly understand the meaning of ethical terms included in it. Meaning here refers to the definition of the term which will be referring to its essence.

Stevenson observes that in this context, it is necessary to clarify what makes the essence of an ethical term. He says that whatever be it, it has to be relevant.¹ Relevance should be the mark of its essence/meaning/definition. Therefore we are here set out to find a relevant meaning of an ethical term say ‘good’.

Philosophers have attempted to give several relevant meanings for ‘good’ which may be generalised as ‘interest theories’ following Prof. R.B.Perry, a naturalist philosopher. When ‘good’ is defined as ‘desirable’, it definitely hints at some interest either of the speaker or the hearer, or when it is defined as ‘approved by all’, it shows the interest of the hearer and the speaker. Hence, the subjective versions of the naturalist theories talk of natural interests when defining the attribute ‘good’.

Some philosophers point out that the interest theories are not relevant to the vital sense of ‘good’. They argue that the vital sense of good has to be something which appeals to our common-sensical understanding of ‘good’. In whichever way I define ‘good’, some features certainly follow. Firstly, it should be always possible that I agree or disagree on commenting something as ‘good’. If two persons agree and disagree respectively about calling something ‘good’, they are supposed to oppose each other. Now, if ‘good’ is defined as ‘desirable’, and two persons agree and disagree respectively in desiring a thing, that is only a matter of their choice as per their sentiment, they do not oppose each other for that matter. Hence, there is no scope of disagreement in values when ‘good’ is defined in terms of interest. Secondly, ‘vital’ sense of ‘good’ involves an attribute of magnetism, in the sense that people should have a strong tendency or feeling of inclination or attraction attached to the thing which they consider ‘good’.² Hence, it is approved by many which for that matter also includes the speaker. The third important feature of ‘good’ is that it cannot be verified solely by the scientific

method. If I try to verify the goodness of a thing empirically, I have to verify its natural feature which defines the goodness, say its desirability or its being pleasurable or its approvability etc. This verification is empirically not possible.

All the natural interest theories fail because, a thing which is desired or approved or which gives pleasure, may not be necessarily good. Moreover, the fact that majority approves of a thing, may simply follow from the democratic set-up of the society instead of the spontaneity in the feeling. Again, G.E.Moore's objection to the naturalist theories on the basis of open-question argument is also not avoidable, as he says that however we define 'good' in terms of natural interests or inclinations, it is always open to a very valid question of whether all cases of good are accompanied by the specific interest which defines it.

III

Stevenson thus goes to analyse the nature of ethical judgements in terms of its intention in order to find a suitable meaning for ethical terms in accordance with its vital sense. He said that the traditional interest theories failed to give a proper definition of an ethical term because they considered them simply as being descriptions of existing states of interests. According to such theories, ethical terms only state facts about our interests, their emphasis being primarily on the descriptions. But this does not speak of the entirety of an ethical term complying with its relevance.³

An ethical term is used in a judgement not only to describe a fact, but also to influence the hearer. Such influence may be sought by a hidden accent of suggestion, request or even a command. For example, when I say 'You should not steal', it is an ethical judgement which clearly has an imperative force with the intention of creating influence on the hearer. It intends to create a feeling of disapproval in the hearer rather than simply express the disapproval of the speaker. In order to create this influence the agent or the speaker has to give arguments to show the consequences of such action, he has also to support his point by citing instances. These all may be considered reasons which facilitate his influencing.

Thus ethical terms facilitate the process of social influence on people from the same community. We can generally observe that people from the same community have similar moral attitudes while those from different communities differ in their moral attitudes. This is because they are subject to different social

influence. People are socially influenced when they are affected by the words of other people in the same society. Such words may be words of appraisal or condemn which may either encourage or discourage a person. In such a context ethical terms play a role in facilitating the influence. They have a suggestive tone which directs a person to act in a particular way. For instance, by the ethical judgement 'This is good' the speaker may suggest another person to approve of the particular thing. Hence, he gets influenced and in turn makes the same ethical judgement which then influences some other person and this continues. So, the influence of ethical judgements spreads among persons of the same community and develops similar attitudes in them.⁴

IV

It is at this point relevant to discuss the essence of an ethical term which leads to its social influence and also whether that essence matches with the vital sense of 'good' as previously discussed. In order to understand what constitutes the essence/meaning of an ethical term, we should first discuss what do we understand by the meaning of a term. Meaning of a term is related to its use. We use a term either for describing a matter or for expressing our feelings. Hence, a term may have either a 'descriptive' use or a 'dynamic' use. Accordingly, a term may have either a descriptive meaning or a dynamic meaning or both depending on the purpose with which it is used. For example, when the speaker says, 'Hydrogen is the lightest gas', his purpose is merely to describe a thing. But, when he says 'Shit!', his intention is not to report or describe anything, but simply to express his attitude towards a thing which leads to a corresponding action. There are, however, certain cases where words have both descriptive and dynamic uses, say, 'I want you to do this work'. Here the speaker has two purposes in his use of the words – to report what he wants, and also to ask the hearer to fulfil his want. Hence the words are here used both descriptively and dynamically.

Now that we have known that a word may have either of the two uses, we need to understand how these uses are related to the essence/meaning of a term, specifically an ethical term, as is the context here. Any meaning, as it is commonly understood, is a tendency with which the word is generally connected with. It does not generally take into account the dynamic use of a word. However as words are often used dynamically, there should be a specific type of meaning related to the dynamic use of a word. Stevenson points out that it is the emotive meaning of a term which is generally associated with the dynamic use of a term. Stevenson says that "The emotive meaning of a word is a tendency of a word,

arising through the history of its usage, to produce (result from) affective responses in people. It is the immediate aura of feeling which hovers about a word. Such tendencies to produce affective responses cling to words very tenaciously. It would be difficult, for instance, to express merriment by using the interjection 'alas'. Because of the persistence of such affective tendencies (among other reasons), it becomes feasible to classify them as 'meanings'.”⁵

How is the emotive meaning of a term related to its dynamic use? There are certain words which have a dynamic use because of their emotive meaning. In fact, the meaning is so attached to the word, that the dynamic use which follows the emotive meaning seems absolutely obvious and best suited for it. For example- if a man refers to a woman as an 'old maid', she may definitely take it as an insult of her, and it may also act as a comment which will influence the other hearers to dislike her. This is because the term 'old maid' may have a tendency to arouse a sort of contempt for a person which results from the history of its usage. This satisfies the definition of emotive meaning of a term as stated previously. On the contrary, if the same word is used in a purely descriptive way, say as an 'elderly spinster', it does not evoke any feeling or attitude in the hearer, but merely describes. Therefore, for every term with an emotive meaning, a dynamic purpose is attached. But, the dynamic purpose is not to be identified generally with the meaning of the term.⁶

Ethical terms are terms which contain emotive meanings, thus arousing a feeling or attitude in a person to act in a particular way. For example, 'This is good', includes the ethical term 'good' which may mean 'liked by all'. The meaning of an ethical term must not be taken in the descriptive sense but only in the emotive sense, as it always has a tendency of suggestion to the hearer for approval/disapproval of the thing referred. But, as the case lies, when we use an ethical term, we are more focussed in its dynamic use of influencing others, rather than concentrating on the root of such a use, i.e. its emotive meaning. Neglecting the emotive meaning of a term leads to endless confusions. So, it is essential that we highlight on the emotive meaning when defining an ethical term like 'good'. This consideration of the emotive meaning of 'good' will in turn automatically justify its dynamic usage.

V

The emotive meaning, therefore, is significant in the context of understanding the vital sense of 'good' and covers the restrictions attached therewith. Let us now clarify how the restrictions are met with the emotive meaning taken into account. The first restriction, as had been mentioned was that, there should be provision in the meaning of 'good' for both agreement and disagreement as regards the value (say, goodness) of an object/action. To explain: the meaning given for 'good' should be such that we can both agree and disagree about goodness with respect to different objects/actions. The disagreement expected can be either of belief or of interest. If there is a disagreement in belief about a thing p between two persons A and B, it must be related to a description. Now, if 'good' is defined in terms of certain interests like 'happiness', 'pleasure', 'being approved by many', 'capable of being liked', etc., these are not descriptions which one person may believe and another disbelieve with respect to a thing; and may thus end up in contradicting one another regarding the aesthetic/ethical value of the object. In that case, it is actually possible that the two persons may disagree in their interests towards the object, though not disagreeing in belief about the thing. Hence, an ethical term, say 'good' cannot be disagreed about a thing if it is taken in the descriptive sense of the term. But, if the emotive meaning of 'good' is considered, which hints at the interest created by an object in a person, it is possible that two persons may agree or disagree in their interest towards the object. Hence, disagreement in interest is possible with respect to ethical terms, though not disagreement in belief. It may, however, be disagreement in belief about interests which is to be distinguished from disagreement in interest. Disagreement in belief about interests is something difficult to conceive, what therefore exists is actually disagreement in interest.⁷

The second restriction about the vital sense of 'good' was that the meaning should have an element of magnetism. Thus it hints at the dynamicity of goodness influencing people to approve of the action/object evaluated. Stevenson clarifies that the traditional interest theories while defining 'good' considers only the interest of the hearer, and ignores the interest of the speaker. If the speaker's interest is not reflected in the meaning of 'good', the dynamicity of the term also is suppressed, it becomes a mere description. Whereas, if we consider that 'good' has an emotive meaning, it definitely expresses the interest of the speaker which in turn influences the hearers.

Stevenson then discusses the third restriction about the vital sense of 'good', which says that goodness is not solely verifiable by scientific method. The justification for this may be given with the help of a moral disagreement. If two persons morally disagree on some issue, and they both try to justify their point with empirical proof, employing the method to its fullest scope, there is no certainty that the disagreement gets resolved. It may be solved, or it may not be. Even if the disagreement gets resolved, the way the ethical judgement is related to the empirical proof is quite unconventional. What each person does is that, they give reasons in favour of their view and try utmost to convince the opposing party in that. These reasons are from the empirical sources which they strongly believe. Therefore the disagreement in their interests is basically due to the disagreement in their beliefs and by giving sufficient empirical reasons which support his belief, a person may succeed in convincing his opponent and thus resolving the disagreement in their interests. Stevenson comments significantly that, "Thus the empirical method is relevant to ethics simply because our knowledge of the world is a determining factor to our interests."⁸

It is however to be kept in mind that the empirical facts which rationalise a particular interest are not to be considered as the ground or foundation for such interest.. It only plays a role to resolve disagreements in interest if those arise from disagreements in belief. But all disagreements in interest are not due to differences in belief, they may be due to differences in mentality or attitude of persons or even due to the social circumstances. The empirical facts are therefore not totally sufficient to resolve an ethical disagreement. In cases where disagreements arise out of attitude-differences or differences in backgrounds, they cannot be resolved by empirical methods, but by a different way, i.e by way of persuasion which is beyond any experience or reason. This persuasive method actually happens to be the most effective method for resolving moral disputes. Stevenson says, ".....it is only by such means that our personalities are able to grow, through our contact with others."⁹ Hence, what we want to emphasise here is that empirical method is only partly responsible for resolving ethical disagreements, it is therefore not sufficient for an ethical understanding.

What we have reached till now is the realisation that the traditional interest theories failed to consider the emotive meaning of ethical terms responsible for their dynamic uses, and therefore failed to connect the disagreements following from such uses. Stevenson's account of the emotive theory of 'good' in terms of interest, distinctly different from the traditional ones, talks of the influence factor,

the role of persuasion along with reason, thereby asserting a vital role of ethical statements as social instruments. He describes ethics as a cooperative enterprise in which we adjust ourselves with the interest of others. This peculiar way of doing philosophy connects and establishes the study as a pragmatic and relevant enterprise.

VI

Stevenson published two more articles in 'Mind' exhibiting the emotive theory of morals as distinct from the traditional views. In the article 'Ethical Judgements and Avoidability', he wanted to highlight the fact that it is only for avoidable actions that the ethical judgements are passed.¹⁰ This is because ethical judgements are passed mainly to influence an action. Hence, if the actions on which such judgements are passed are not avoidable, there does not remain a free chance of getting influenced either positively or negatively. Apart from this, ethical judgements may also form impressions in the minds of hearers irrespective of their opinion about the agent.

Mary Warnock in her book 'Ethics since 1900' pointed out that Stevenson failed to convincingly present the central idea that, it is because of the specific role played by the ethical terms that they cannot be used in any instance whatsoever, except in cases where we refer to avoidable actions. He made it clear that it is only part of the meaning of ethical terms that they are emotive, that they have a role to influence the hearer and where necessary to avoid such action. The other role however, lies in their being descriptions of or expressions of emotions. But he has not shown the reason why ethical terms, even being partially descriptive, are not applicable to non-avoidable actions. We can notice very well that though Stevenson had discussed on the two aspects of the meaning of an ethical term - the descriptive and the emotive, he emphasised particularly on the emotive meaning and had a tendency to ignore the descriptive part. This, however, is very natural of an ethical term, because if they are emotive, they are primarily productive (of actions), rather than being merely expressive of emotions.

VII

Stevenson wrote a third article named 'Persuasive Definitions' which was published in the journal 'Mind' in 1938. He started the article with the definition of persuasive definition. He says that it is a new conceptual meaning to a familiar word, without substantially changing its emotive meaning. Persuasive definition is used with the conscious or unconscious purpose of changing the direction of

people's interests.¹¹ Generally words which have a relatively vague conceptual meaning and a very strong emotive meaning have a scope for persuasive definition. This is because when the concept is not clear, people may interpret it according to their choices. As Mary Warnock remarked of a persuasive definition that "They steal, as it were, the good will(or bad will) which belongs to the word, and use it for their own ends."¹² For example- Aristotle's use of the Greek word for happiness, which somehow or other is associated with pleasure, though the conceptual meaning is quite vague. All these contexts of persuasive definition arose in Stevenson's article because, persuasive definition is one of the ways in which people may be influenced and their interests may be changed. Such definitions are used mainly in philosophical contexts. Now, for ethical contexts specifically, Stevenson said that the ethical disputes are of nature which easily connect to the nature of a persuasive definition for matters of resolve. Therefore, in order to understand the circumstances leading to ethical disputes or the means which may be employed to solve them, it is relevant to understand persuasive definition. Stevenson cites the example of an ethical dispute to illustrate this point. He says that two persons may disagree on the meaning of 'just', one saying that an action is just if consequences A and B follow from it, and the other saying that it is just if consequences B and C follow from it. They may agree in accepting a law as just when at least B follows from it, but still there remains the disagreement between them as regards their interest, because one person has interest in a specific law as being just while the other person has interest in a different law as being just. Hence this disagreement rests on the subjective interests of the parties involved and is not empirically verifiable. It is just a disagreement in their preferences and conceptually speaking they have no point of disagreement at all. The meaning of words involved in such disagreement are therefore sought with the help of persuasive definition only.

VIII

The main intention of Stevenson's moral philosophy becomes clear in the distinction he draws between those ethical terms which he thought had practically no factual or conceptual content, and those which he thought had at least some. He also stressed more on the emotive function of an ethical term rather than its expressive function. Moreover, Stevenson brings in the concept of persuasive definition to reject the naturalistic definition of ethical terms. Stevenson, like Moore and Ayer, was against ethical naturalism, but his argument differed from them. He said that ethical terms cannot be defined in factual or naturalistic terms

because, they have both descriptive and emotive contents. Therefore, while criticising naturalism, when Moore pointed towards naturalistic fallacy, Stevenson pointed to the case of 'persuasive definition'. As Mary Warnock pointed out in her book 'Ethics since 1900' a keyword to the emotive theory, "This insistence that ethics cannot be translated into non-ethical language, that every attempt to do so is a cheat, is the most fundamental principle of the emotive theory."¹³

Stevenson published the book 'Ethics and Language' in 1945 which mostly incorporated the ideas expressed in his previously published articles, just making them more interesting.

IX

Stevenson was greatly influenced by Wittgenstein, the logical positivists, and also few American philosophers like James Dewey and Ralph Barton Perry. Dewey was an pragmatist American philosopher whose major contribution to the field of moral philosophy is the manner of distinction he made between ethical and non-ethical terms. In the book named 'The Quest for Certainty', published in 1929, he presented the distinction as statements which serve to give mere reports, and statements which serve to make judgements concerning the importance of bringing a fact into existence; or if it is already there, of sustaining its existence. The basic implication of his utterance was that there is a prediction involved in both types of statements, but the difference lies in the object of prediction. The two types of statements concentrate upon two different aspects of the future in their predictions. While scientific or non-ethical statements give the prediction that a thing will continue to behave in a particular way and we shall reach the truth about the object if we describe it in a particular way, ethical statements predict that the thing in question will become an end, and will therefore direct human activity in the future. Good ethical statements, therefore, are made for actions which have useful consequences and are therefore appraised. In 'The Quest for Certainty', Dewey says that, "Men like some of the consequences and dislike others. Henceforth....attaining or averting similar consequences are aims or ends. These consequences constitute the meaning and value of an activity as it comes under deliberation."¹⁴ Therefore, it is not that ethical statements have a sort of prediction only, they also include an assessment. This highlights the emotive as well as the descriptive meaning of an ethical term which Dewey pointed out. Stevenson, however, criticises Dewey by saying that he is more concerned with descriptions and analysis of situations which one might choose. On the contrary, Stevenson prefers to be primarily concerned with solving ethical disagreements

between two people and in analysing how each of them will judge a particular situation. Hence, they are different in their approaches of doing moral philosophy.

Another American philosopher who had an influence on Stevenson was Ralph Bertrand Perry. In his book 'General Theory of Value' Perry says that a thing is good if majority of people have a favourable attitude/interest towards it.¹⁵ He defines 'good' as 'approved of by everyone' and therefore his theory is a version of naturalism in ethics. Stevenson criticises Perry for his attempt to give a naturalistic definition of 'good'. He says that such definitions are bound to be persuasive ones, hence, not based on solid evidences; rather, on respective interests and interpretations. Perry presents his theory such that if 'good' is defined as 'approved of by everyone', then 'better' should be defined by 'approved of by more people'. Likewise, if 'bad' is defined as 'disliked by everyone', 'worse' should be defined as 'disliked by more people'. So, Perry apprehends a complicated hedonistic calculus which is never easy to grasp. He talks of degrees of intensity in likings and dislikings for judging between different things. It is noteworthy at this juncture that, Perry's theory is distinct from a utilitarian theory in the sense that he is more concerned with the type of interest (liking or disliking) associated with a thing or an action rather than the consequences (pleasure or pain) which follow or result from it. This is exactly where Perry's theory has an influence on the emotivists like Stevenson, though his presentation of 'interests' to describe morality is significantly different from that of the emotivists, the former being a cognitivist theory while the latter a form of non-cognitivism.

The emotivists like Stevenson were greatly influenced by later Wittgenstein, and much of the development of such a version of morality was due to this influence. The revolutionary thought which was the hallmark of the later Wittgensteinian philosophy was that, it is not enough to understand a concept without knowing about its actual and possible occurrences/uses either in thought or in language. This idea is relevant in the context that every philosophical problem is centred round a concept, and hence the possibility of successfully solving the problem depends largely on knowing about the actual or possible usages of the concept. Such considerations reveal the misconceptions giving rise to the problems addressed at. Having been influenced by such an idea, the emotivists attempted to analyse the cases of ethical disputes with reference to the contexts/situations in which the ethical terms were used. The purpose of use of such terms clarified the

ethical disagreements/disputes. This shows the prominent reflection of the later Wittgensteinian theory in the emotivist theory.

X

Stevenson clearly had a hint in his articles that ethical terms like ‘good’ refers to basically a complex concept , and it is hence necessary to observe the use of such words in order to understand it. For Stevenson, the pursuit of studying ethics is justified only in the study of the context and purpose of its use. This is his peculiar style of doing meta-ethics, i.e. in doing ethics on a meta level where he clarifies the irrelevance of connecting ethical questions/statements with universal standards, and focusses primarily to effectively practise ethics in a social set-up, thus making it a meaningful discourse for matters of existence. His way of treating ethics on a meta level is unique as he never confines or identifies meta-ethics exclusively with either understanding of ethical terms, or with exclusive analysis of the psychology behind passing ethical judgements, or with only a consideration of the ontic status of value terms complying with its existence. Rather, he confirms that if the practice of ethics is to be justified through the study of meta-ethics, the approach to do meta-ethics should be through cross-connecting and inter-connecting the use of ethical language with its subject-oriented meaning, and the society-oriented execution or implementation of the ethical judgements. Hence, meta-ethics, inspite of being an analytic exercise stands concrete in its significance to the reality.

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² Field G.C., *Moral Theory*, Methuen and Co., London, 1921 p.52,56,57

³ C.L.Stevenson, The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms,*Mind*, Vol. 46, No. 181 , [Oxford University Press](#) ,1937,p.18

⁴ *Ibid*,p.20

⁵ C.L.Stevenson,*Ethics and Language*, New Haven and London,1944,p.59,33

⁶ Warnock, M., *Ethics Since 1900*, Oxford University Press, London, 1966 p.96

⁷ *Ibid*, p.97

⁸ C.L.Stevenson, The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms,*Mind*, Vol. 46, No. 181 , [Oxford University Press](#) ,1937,p.28

⁹ *Ibid*,p.29

¹⁰ Warnock, M., *Ethics Since 1900*, Oxford University Press, London, 1966, p.98

¹¹ *Ibid*,p.101

¹² *Ibid*,p.101

¹³ *Ibid*,p.106

¹⁴ *Ibid*,p.110, quoted from “The Quest for Certainty”, John Dewey, Gifford Lectures, 1929,London.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.114

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