Emotivism as an ethical theory

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Emotivism is a moral theory based on people's emotive responses to other people, events or principles. Emotive response simply means what a person is feeling towards something. It can be said emotivism deals principally, if not exclusively, with human feelings. If, for example, I was to say euthanasia is wrong, then according to emotivism, all I am doing is announcing how I feel about euthanasia. Emotivism also argues that even if I can give reasons as to why I believe euthanasia is wrong, all I would be doing is finding reasons which appeal to my emotions in order to support my position.

Followers of emotivism argue that if we strip away all the 'rational reasons' for doing A rather than B, at root, all we are left with is a personal preference based on feelings of approval or disapproval and so the theory is often referred to as the 'Boo-Hurrah' theory. E. g. This may seem to many, to be a rather crude and unthinking moral theory and one may ask if it constitutes a moral theory at all. Many people question what emotivism suggests. That is, if all conduct is simply about how we feel, can anything be right or wrong? Can we not prove, in some rational manner, that the truth is preferable to the lie?

Loyalty better than deceit? Many people argue that surely we can appeal to something more substantial than just my feelings of approval or disapproval? One particular view of philosophy argues that such questions cannot be answered by philosophy. This is called Logical Positivism. The Vienna Circle among whom R. Carnap, M. Schlick and O. Neurath, were the most famous founding members, first conceived this idea.

The Vienna Circle outlined the task for philosophy, " To move forward by establishing the criteria for talking meaningfully about the world. Logical Positivism argues that philosophy is entirely about establishing the means by which the truth or falsehood of certain propositions can be demonstrated. If a statement cannot be shown to be either true or false then it is a meaningless statement. For logical positivists, there are three types of statement: Analytic, Synthetic or Meaningless. Analytic statements are statements that can be established to be either true or false by analysing their constituent parts. Take for example the statements '2+2= 4 and all bachelors are unmarried men'.

Both of the statements are true because they contain within themselves the means for verifying the truth. Wittgenstein called them tautologies as 2+2 means the same as 4 and an unmarried man means the same as a bachelor. Basically, the subject of the statement is contained within the predicate. In the statement 'all unmarried men are bachelors', 'unmarried men' is the subject and 'bachelors' is the predicate. In this statement, the predicate and subject both mean the same thing so it would be foolish to say that the statement is false. Synthetic statements are the opposite of analytic statements.

They are synthetic in the sense that the truth or falsehood of the statement can only be established by reference to further information. They have to be confirmed through some kind of experience. For example, to determine whether 'Tuesday was a wet day' I would have had to experience the fact myself or have known someone else who experienced the weather on Tuesday or searched through some empirical evidence, namely the

meteorological records for that Tuesday. There is nothing in the statements that leads us to automatically believe that Tuesday was a wet day.

The subject is not contained within the predicate. All synthetic statements have to be tested against experience. If a statement is neither analytic nor synthetic, then it is a meaningless statement. Examples of meaningless statements are 'stealing is wrong' or 'God exists'. Meaningless in this context only means that there is no way the statement can be proved true or false. The statements really mean 'I disapprove of stealing therefore I think it is wrong' or 'I happen to have a belief in the existence of something that I wish to call God'.

Neither one of these two statements is logically or empirically testable. For the strict positivist, philosophy is essentially about epistemology (theories of knowledge). Positivists believe that the realms of ethics, aesthetics and theology are outside the ambit of philosophy because they do not constitute proper knowledge. Instead, the three realms are emotive. They deal with issues rooted in feelings of approval or disapproval, like or dislike. They cannot be proved or disapproved.

Two names most commonly associated with the theory of emotivism are A. J. Ayer (1910-1988) and C. Stevenson (1908-1979). Ayer made a huge impact on British philosophy with his book 'Language, Truth and Logic' (1934). He agreed with logical positivists in that he thought that ethical statements were meaningless and remained outside the legitimate arena of investigation 'we can see why it is impossible to find a criterion for determining the validity of ethical judgements... because they have no

objective validity whatsoever... they are pure expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood' (Language, Truth and Logic, Gollancz, 1970, p. 08) Ayer uses the example of stealing to explain his ideas. On a common-sense level, most people would think it is wrong to steal.

Ayer however would not. Ayer argues that there is simply no way to verify that stealing is actually wrong. '... it is as if I had written ''stealing money! '' where the size and thickness of the exclamation mark shows... that a special sort of moral disapproval is the feeling which is being expressed'. However, Ayer was not centrally concerned with morality or ethical theory.

It is not until we get to the work of Charles Stevenson that we find a fully articulated version of the emotivist theory. Stevenson was interested in the way people use moral terms in everyday language. What could be said about conversation? It is possible to see three features emerging from Stevenson's analysis. The fact that genuine moral agreements and disagreements occur within (them); The fact that moral terms have, a 'magnetism'; The fact that the scientific, or empirical method of verification is not sufficient for ethics. The first of these features is apparent in everyday life.

Disagreements in ethics are often genuine and not superficial. If A says that euthanasia is unacceptable and B argues the opposite they are disagreeing on a number of fundamental issues. The issue of euthanasia becomes a vehicle for such disagreements. For example, euthanasia for A might well entail belief in a particular set of doctrines about human nature, natural law, objective knowledge of right and wrong, social organisation, medical

responsibility and political legislation. A's attitude towards euthanasia is going to be affected by his attitudes towards these associated doctrines.

Each of these may conflict to some degree with another set of doctrines or theories held by B. Therefore, B's attitude towards euthanasia will be different to A's. Also, because of the connections with other sets of beliefs, A and B are likely to act in different ways. A might stand outside hospitals with a placard protesting against the legalisation of euthanasia, while B may campaign on behalf of the practice by lobbying support from politicians. The disagreements therefore cannot be dismissed by the superficial 'Boo-Hurrah' theory as it entails acting as well as believing.

The second feature points out that moral terms have a persuasive force to them. People choose to use particular words in order to substantiate our belief and to persuade others of the correctness of our belief. This view is linked to the last feature, the fact that the logical positivist's methods of verification are inadequate when it comes to talking about moral beliefs. All moral statements contain words or phrases that have a cognitive meaning as well as an emotive meaning. The phrases 'the technically illegal transfer of funds' and 'fraud' both have the same cognitive meaning but fraud also has an emotive meaning.

The word has a number of unpleasant connotations, which the phrase does not. When debating moral issues, we tend to use words with a particular emotive meaning, to persuade others to our way of thinking. Stevenson refers to this as the use of 'persuasive definitions'. R. M. Hare added to the work of Stevenson by putting forward his own thoughts and ideas. In his

book 'The language of Morals' (1952) Hare argues that there are two types of statements: descriptive and evaluative, the latter being more important.

Adding on to Stevenson's persuasive definitions, evaluative meanings are used to 'prescribe' behaviour. If for example A, decides to argue persuasively that 'euthanasia is wrong' then A is also trying to prescribe both the attitude and behaviour B should adopt. Hare then goes further by advocating that on questions regarding moral behaviour, one must move beyond their individual viewpoint and preference and try to 'universalise' that viewpoint in the belief that the viewpoint is not only good for us, but good for everyone else also.

Hare called this 'Universalisability' and it can be seen to have a great deal in common with the Kantian doctrine of moral imperatives. The principal difficulty with emotivism is that if we accept it as the most justifiable analysis of moral discourse, then all moral debate becomes so much hot air. If we accept emotivism, them when we talk about moral issues (although we may be persuading others to believe what we believe or it might be helping release our feeling) ultimately we would be talking about things that have no significant meaning.

This is plainly improbable. We not only feel that the murder of thousands of Jews in the Second World War was wrong, we also believe that we are justified in saying that we know it was wrong. Morality cannot be reduced simply to how we feel about something. It involves the use of reason and the recognition that some human qualities and experiences can be demonstrated to be more objectively positive than other qualities and experiences.

For example, it is an empirical fact that caring for children is better than neglecting them. Therefore, the rational moral response is to care for children and not to neglect them. At root, emotivism seems too reductive. It cannot be accepted that a crime as terrible as (for example) genocide can be reduced to two simple sets of competing attitudes. Human nature, given its richness and complexity, arguably needs a moral account that can cope with such depth and diversity.