



## C. L. Stevenson and the Meaning of Ethical Terms

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### Abstract

C. L. Stevenson was a non-cognitivist philosopher. He introduces Emotivism, a meta-ethical theory of moral language. He describes the distinct feature of ethical statements. According to him, moral or ethical terms have two types of meaning – Descriptive and Emotive. Descriptive meaning of a moral term may be defined but the emotive meaning of a moral term is not definable. These two types of meanings make the difference between moral and non-moral terms. Descriptive and Emotive meanings are closely related to each other. By admitting the two types of meaning Stevenson tries to define the nature of the moral disagreement. In the present article, we discuss descriptively the unique feature of C.L.Stevenson's theory of moral language. The article concludes that the theory inaugurate a new aspect to solve the problem of moral disagreement.

**Keywords:** *Meta-ethics, Non-Cognitivism, Emotive Meaning, Descriptive Meaning*

### 1. Introduction

C. L. Stevenson was a twentieth-century American moral philosopher. His major contribution to philosophy was the development of emotivism, a Meta-ethical non-cognitive theory of ethical language. The viewpoint of Meta-ethics is different from Normative Ethics and Applied Ethics – other two branches of Ethics. Normative Ethics tries to develop moral theories and Applied Ethics discuss rightness and wrongness of particular actions by applying normative ethical theories. In contrast, Meta-ethics discuss the nature of ethical terms and moral judgments. It sometimes knows as Analytic Ethics. Meta-ethical theories are of two types – cognitive and non-cognitive. According to cognitivist philosophers, moral statements express some beliefs and beliefs can be true or false. So, moral statements have the truth values. On the other hand, non-cognitivists hold that moral judgments express some desire and feelings. Desire or feelings are not truth-apt. So, moral sentences are neither true nor false, they have no truth value. Non-cognitivist moral philosophers do not admit the existence of moral facts. Emotivism or Emotive theory is a kind of non-cognitive theory. The term 'Emotivism' refers to the theory about moral judgments, sentences, words and speech acts; it is sometimes also extended to cover aesthetic and other non-moral forms of evaluation (Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2018). Emotivist philosophers claim that ethical sentences do not state any proposition; they are merely expressions of moral attitude. Moral judgments express some feeling or desire of the speaker and want to arouse similar feeling in the hearer. When a man says, 'you ought not to do this', then the speaker wants that the hearer does not perform the task.

A.J.Ayer first vividly discusses the theory. After him, C.L.Stevenson states it in a more analytic way. Ayer thinks, ethical words merely express an emotion of the speaker and want to arouse similar emotion in the hearer. Ethical utterances have no cognitive meaning and for

this reason, Ayer describes them as pseudo-concepts. But Stevenson's emotive theory is a moderate form of non-cognitivism. He admits that moral sentences have no cognitive meaning, but according to him they are not meaningless. They have a certain kind of meaning – that is emotive meaning. Emotive meaning of a word is a tendency of the word. This tendency arouses through the history of its usage. The descriptive meaning of a sign is a disposition that relates the sign to a range of “cognitive” states, including belief, supposition, presumption, etc. From a hearer or reader's point of view, cognitive states are the responses, tokens of the sign are the stimuli. From a speaker or writer's point of view, cognitive states are the stimuli; tokens of the sign are the responses. Cognitive states, like attitudes, are complex dispositions. Indeed, according to Stevenson, cognitive states and attitudes are dispositions so complex that he can give no precise account of them. He does, however, try to clarify by analogy the complexity with which cognition and attitudes are linked to action (Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2018).

## **2. Objectives of the study**

The objectives of the present study are –

- to interpret different kinds of the meaning of the ethical terms
- to describe C. L .Stevenson's view of moral language
- to examine the distinctive feature of C.L.Stevenson's view of moral language

## **3. Emotive and Descriptive meaning of ethical terms**

Generally, it is said that the meaning of a sign in its referent. ‘...the “meaning” of a sign in that which people refers when they use the sign’ (Stevenson, 1944). But according to Stevenson, some words have no referent but they do have a different kind of meaning. So he distinguishes between two types of meaning – one is Descriptive meaning and another is Emotive meaning. Stevenson believes language plays a major role in communication. It is like an instrument to communicate between two people. Similarly, moral language is also a very important instrument in moral philosophy. Ethical terms play a great role in the complicated interplay and they can readjust human interests. We can see people from different communities have different moral attitudes. According to Stevenson, words play an important role in developing moral attitudes. Ethical terms facilitated such influence (Stevenson, 1963).

The use of language has two different purposes – one is to record, clarify and communicate beliefs and another is to vent our feelings or to control mood or to incite people to actions or attitudes. He calls the first use of words ‘descriptive’ and the second ‘dynamic’ or emotive. When a person said ‘hydrogen is a lightest known gas, His thinking was like either to lead hearer to believe this fact or make them believe that speaker believes the fact. This type of use is called the descriptive use of words. But, when a person says, ‘damn, then he does not want to record, clarify or communicate any belief. Here he simply expresses his emotion. This is the dynamic use of words. Often a sentence used both descriptively and dynamically. When anyone says ‘I want you to close the door’ he wants to believe the hearer that he has this wish. But the sentence has a dynamic part. Here the speaker's purpose is to lead the hearer to satisfy his wish. The speaker used the words dynamically. According to Stevenson “the ‘descriptive’ meaning of a sign is its disposition to affect cognition.” Whereas the “emotive meaning” of a sign is its “disposition to affect feelings and attitudes” (Werkmeister, 1961).

The Emotive and Descriptive meanings of ethical terms are related in diverse ways. According to Stevenson, an ethical term may have both types of meaning. When words used descriptively we can define them, but when they are used emotively it is impossible to define them exactly. He suggests that the meaning of 'this is good' is like 'I like this. Like it as well.' The sentence plays a role of command, wherein the first part of the sentence, the tone of command is implicit and in the other part it is explicit (Warnock, 1960) When someone wants to express or to arouse feelings then the use is called emotive and when the person wants to describe something then the use is called descriptive. When words used to express or arouse feelings then the use is emotive and when they use to describe something then the use is descriptive. The two types of meaning are closely related. A term may use both descriptively and emotively on different occasions. Whether a term is being used emotively depends upon what the user intends when he utters it. If he intends either to express or to arouse feelings, then his use of the term is emotive; if he does not, then it is not (Castell, 1949).

#### **4. Stevenson's view of moral language**

Stevenson's emotive theory was distinct from Ayer's emotivism. According to Stevenson, to understand Ethics more clearly, it is important to discuss the ethical language. He did not say that ethical terms or ethical utterances are completely meaningless. According to Stevenson emotive meaning of words have a quasi-imperative force. They have the power to encourage, discourage and sometimes to quiet people. The words which are used more emotively, the less likely people are to use them pure descriptively. The emotive part of a term has not cognitively meaningful but they play an important role in communication. Dynamic use of words may express or evoke horror, amazement, sadness, sympathy, and so on. Stevenson takes the example of the term 'good'. The word has a laudatory emotive meaning. Naturalist philosophers want to define 'good' as 'desirable' or 'valuable', but Stevenson thinks it is the incomplete definition of good. The laudatory function of good distinct it from other purely descriptive terms. Emotive meaning of words can best be understood by comparing and contrasting it with the expressiveness of laugh, sighs, groans, and all similar manifestations of the emotions, whether by voice or gesture (Stevenson, 1944). Laugh, sighs, groans etc. have not any grammatical form but words have a recognized grammatical part of speech.

Emotive terms are also distinct from scientific terms. Scientific terms may be formed by commandment but in this way, one can't easily introduce an emotive term. The meanings of emotive terms are related to the historical background of its usage. Stevenson thinks emotive terms are also dependent on the habits of the speaker and the hearer. In a drama, when the actress utters the word 'alas' properly, she can arouse the sympathy of the audience. On the other hand, if she replaces the word 'alas' by the word 'hurrah', then she can't able to arouse sympathy in the audience. Thus, the emotive meaning of words has been formed throughout the course their use in emotional situations.

#### **5. Relation between Descriptive and Emotive meaning**

The emotive words have double characteristic – they can express the feelings of the speaker and at the same time they can evoke the feelings of the hearer. Most common words have both types of meaning. The emotive and descriptive meaning has a contingent relation. A term may use only descriptively or emotively, but in many cases, the two types of meaning are present at the same time. In many situations, the emotive meaning of a word is partly

dependent on its descriptive meaning. The word 'Democracy' refers to an emotive aspect to most Americans, because its descriptive meaning – 'government where rule is by popular vote', pleases them. According to Stevenson, a word's emotive meaning is not completely dependent on its descriptive meaning. It is also dependent on gestures, intonations and emotionally vigorous contexts with which the term has previously been associated. Some words like 'democracy', 'liberty', and 'magnanimity' are partly dependent on their emotive meaning, but non-metaphorical interjections will have complete independent emotive meaning. They are not dependent on descriptive meaning.

Stevenson describes emotive and descriptive meaning's distinction by contrasting them with metaphor. It is said that though a metaphorical statement has a literal meaning, it is not the complete meaning of the sentence. 'All the world's a stage' is a metaphorical statement. It has a verbal similarity to 'All the third floor is a laboratory.' The former sentence has not similar literal meaning like the later. If the former sentence is instructed to express in plain prose, then a person might say, 'real life is often like a play' or 'there is a routine in real life, each man going through a prearranged course' or 'there is a great deal of trivial make-believe in each man conduct.' This sentence's descriptive meaning isn't similar to the metaphorical sentence's literal meaning. This sentence's descriptive meanings are the suggestions given by the metaphorical sentence. According to the Stevenson metaphorical sentences has the power to create an emotive effect on the hearer. It often happens that when a word used literally, it has a less emotive effect, but when it is used metaphorically the emotive effect is greater.

Which words have both descriptive and emotive meaning, their descriptive meaning maybe define without any ambiguity and vagueness, but their emotive meaning can't be accurately defined. Stevenson takes the example of the word 'nigger'. In the dictionary, the word means 'negro'. Descriptively 'nigger' and 'negro' has the same descriptive meaning, but emotively there is a difference between them. The word 'nigger' has a sense of disgust and 'negro' doesn't have such sense. Similarly, the descriptive meaning of the word 'good' can be defined but its emotive meaning isn't defined at all. The emotive meaning of a word has a dispositional nature and its psychological effect maybe different in various circumstances. The word 'good' very often indicate agreement of disagreement in attitude, but in many instances, its emotive effect is reversed. When the word used in irony or when it is used as a satire, its emotive meaning is no more laudatory. So, Stevenson concludes that '... "good" has no precise sense; it was used vaguely' (Stevenson, 1944).

## **6. Conclusion**

Stevenson differentiates the descriptive meaning from the emotive meaning, but he admits that the two types of meaning are closely related. These two types of meaning are like the two aspects of an entire situation. Emotive and descriptive meanings are interrelated. When a term is used in a conversation, then often we can see the presence of the two types of meaning. If we aren't able to understand any kind of those meanings, then we can't understand the complete meaning of the word. Stevenson as a non-cognitivist philosopher rejects the cognitive meaning of ethical terms, but he admits that ethical terms have another kind of meaning and that is emotive meaning. His emotive theory was distinct from other non-cognitivist philosophers. By admitted the two types of meaning he succeeds to describe the nature of disagreement in ethics.

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