Phil 104, Wednesday, December 1, 2010
Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms"

The aim:
To substitute for "Is X good?" a question:

- free from ambiguity and confusion,
- presumably *somewhat* different: "we must not demand that the substitution strike us, on immediate introspection, as making no change in meaning"
- but *not entirely* different, e.g., "Is X pink with yellow trimmings?"
- that is, still *relevant*: "Those who have understood the definition must be able to say all that they then want to say by using the term in the defined way. They must never have occasion to use the term in the old, unclear sense."

Interest theories:
Define "good" in terms of approval or other psychological attitudes.
"X is good" = "I like X" or "My community likes X" (includes the speaker)
= "Most people like X." (does not include the speaker)

Problems:

1. Speaker-including versions don't allow for **sensible disagreement**:
   "This is good." "That isn't so; it's not good."
   Becomes: "I like this." "That isn't so; *I* don't like it."
2. Non-speaker-including versions don't account for the **"magnetism"** of 'good.'
   - "A person who recognizes X to be good must *ipso facto* acquire a stronger tendency to act in its favour then he otherwise would have had."
   - But I might recognize that most people like ketchup without liking ketchup myself.
3. "[T]he "goodness" of anything **must not be verifiable** solely by use of the scientific method." A problem for both speaker-including and non-speaker-including versions.
   - Why? In part, because of Moore's open-question argument.
   - We can scientifically verify whether most people like (e.g.) pleasure by taking a poll. So, if "Pleasure is good" meant "Pleasure is liked by most people," then it would be scientifically verifiable.

Where do interest theories go wrong?
They "hold that ethical statements are *descriptive* of the existing state of interests—that they simply *give information* about interests."

What ethical judgments do is instead "not to indicate facts, but to *create an influence.* Instead of merely describing people's interests, they *change* or *intensify* them. They recommend an interest in an object, rather than state that the interest already exists." They have a "quasi-imperative force."

In other words, interest theories neglect the **emotive meaning** of ethical terms which make them especially well suited for certain **dynamic uses**.

Dynamic use of language:
Two *purposes* with which we use language:

1. Descriptive: "to record, clarify, and communicate *beliefs*."
2. Dynamic: "to give vent to our feelings… or to incite people to actions or attitudes"

The purpose with which words are used is not evident from their dictionary meanings. (E.g., "I am loaded down with work" to a visitor is both descriptive and dynamic.)

Emotive meaning:
"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."

- Try to "express merriment by using the interjection 'alas.'" Or pleasure using "ouch."
- "Old maid" and "elderly spinster" differ only in emotive meaning; otherwise they just mean "single, childless woman above the age of 55 or so." Miss Jones will be upset by "old maid" but not by "elderly spinster," because "old maid" has tendency to produce contempt.
- Compare racial, ethnic, homophobic slurs.

Emotive meaning of a word makes it especially suited to certain dynamic uses. "The more pronounced a word's emotive meaning is, the less likely people are to use it purely descriptively."

We can't give a helpful, accurate definition of "good," but we can say clarifying things about its meaning.

- "This is good" has something like the meaning of "I *do* like this; do so as well."
- But not exactly. "For the imperative makes an appeal to the conscious efforts of the hearer."
- "[A]n ethical sentence differs from an imperative in that it enables one to make changes in a much more subtle, less fully conscious way. Note that the ethical sentence centres the hearer's attention; not on his interests, but on the object of interest, and thereby facilitates suggestion. Because of its subtlety, moreover, an ethical sentence readily permits counter-suggestion, and leads to the give and take situation which is so characteristic of arguments about values."

How ethical disagreement is possible
Disagreement in belief: "A believes p and B disbelieves it."

Disagreement in interest: "A has a favourable interest in X, when B has an unfavourable one in it, and when neither is content to let the other's interest remain unchanged."

> Example with *imperatives*:
> A: "Let's go to a cinema tonight."
> B: "I don't want to do that. Let's go to the symphony."
> [A continues to insist on the cinema, B on the symphony.]
>
> Example with *ethical terms*:
> C: "This is good."

D: "No, it's bad."
"[A] case of suggestion and counter-suggestion. Each man is trying to redirect the other's interest." This is possible because "good" and "bad" have emotive meanings that lend them to the dynamic uses of suggestion and counter-suggestion.

Thus, the argument that (speaker-including) interest theories (like "X is good" = "I like X") cannot make sense of disagreement assumes either that (i) ethical terms are used only descriptively, or that (ii) the only kind of disagreement is disagreement in *belief*. But both assumptions are wrong.

Why ethical judgments are not scientifically verifiable

Some ethical disagreements can be settled empirically, because the disagreement in interest stems from disagreement in belief.

> "[D]isagreement in interest may be rooted in disagreement in belief. That is to say, people who disagree in interest would often cease to do so if they knew the precise nature and consequences of the object of their interest. To this extent disagreement in interest may be resolved by securing agreement in belief, which in turn may be secured empirically."

But some ethical disagreements *can't* be settled empirically, because the disagreement in interest may not stem from disagreement in belief.

- *Example*: "A is of a sympathetic nature, and B isn't. They are arguing about whether a public dole would be good. Suppose that they discovered all the consequences of the dole. Isn't it possible, even so, that A will say that it's good, and B that it's bad? The disagreement in interest may arise not from limited factual knowledge, but simply from A's sympathy and B's coldness."
- No rational resolution possible, although A can try to bring about a change in B's interests.

Lesson: No special role for ("first-order," substantive) moral philosophy!

> "I may add that if 'X is good' is essentially a vehicle for suggestion, it is scarcely a statement which philosophers, any more than many other men, are called upon to make. To the extent that ethics predicates the ethical terms of anything, rather than explains their meaning, it ceases to be a reflective study. Ethical statements are social instruments. They are used in a cooperative enterprise in which we are mutually adjusting ourselves to the interests of others. Philosophers have a part in this, as do all men, but not the major part."

Review Questions:

1. How, according to Stevenson, does his account explain the "magnetism" of ethical terms?
2. How, according to Stevenson, does his account explain Moore's point that the question "But is X good?" always has an "open" feel?