

Phil 2, March 3, 2010

Ayer's expressivism

Ayer's view, as you read, is that statements of value "are simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true nor false" (103). Suppose that Ayer had said to Tyson:

"Violence is a bad thing. People ought to talk over their differences."

According to *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer would have meant something like:

"Violence: bloody hell! People talking over their differences: jolly good!"

In this case, what Ayer said would have been neither true, nor false. It would not have attempted to say anything about the world. It would have just been a kind of venting of Ayer's feelings.

Analogy: If Naomi Campbell had said, "Thank you, A. J.!" it would have been bizarre for Ayer, or anyone else, to reply: "That's true!" or "That's false!" Why? Because Campbell would have simply been expressing an emotion, namely, gratitude. And such expressions are neither true, nor false. In saying, "Thank you!" we are not attempting to describe how things are, in a way that might succeed in matching, or fail to match, reality.

Expressions v. reports

- It is important to distinguish *expressing* an emotion from *reporting that* one has that emotion.
- Ayer is not saying, "I feel negative emotions toward violence," although he is expressing those negative feelings.
- If Ayer were saying, "I feel negative emotions toward violence," then what he would be saying *could be* true or false.

Motivations for Ayer's expressivism

1. *Value statements are neither analytic, nor empirically verifiable:* As a logical positivist, Ayer believes that, in order to be meaningful, a statement must be either "analytic"—that is, true or false by definition—or empirically verifiable or falsifiable. Value statements were neither analytic, nor empirically verifiable or falsifiable.
2. *Value statements cannot be reduced to descriptive, value-free statements:* "[S]ince it is not self-contradictory to say that some pleasant things are not good, or that some bad things are desired, it cannot be the case that the sentence 'x is good' is equivalent to 'x is pleasant,' or 'x is desired'" (105).
3. *Value statements are tied to motivation:* Value judgment entails motivation. If one sincerely makes some value judgment, then one must be motivated accordingly. How does expressivism support this assumption? If one sincerely says, "X is good," then one sincerely expresses a positive emotion toward X. If one *sincerely* expresses a positive emotion toward X, then one *has* a positive emotion toward X. If one has a positive emotion toward X, then one is motivated to bring about X.

Is expressivism a skeptical position?

On the one hand:

- There are no value properties: no goodness or badness. (Just like there is no "Hello!-ness.")
- Value statements cannot be ultimately justified.

On the other hand:

- There is no reason for us to retract, or cease to make, value statements.

Is this the correct account of the meaning of value-statements?

First problem: How is disagreement possible?

Ayer: "Men ought to talk things over, rather than settle things with fists."

Tyson: "Not so: Men ought to settle things with fists, not talk things over."

Tyson seems to *contradict* Ayer. But, according to Ayer:

Ayer: "Talking things over: hip-hip-hoorah!"

Tyson: "Talking things over: #@%\$! that!"

But does Tyson then contradict Ayer?

Reply: Apparent disagreement about values is in fact disagreement about value-free facts.

A different reply: We are not expressing feelings, but issuing commands, proposals, imperatives. Ayer is saying: "Let us talk things over," and Tyson is saying: "Let us not." These proposals "disagree" not in the sense that only one can be true (since neither is capable of truth or falsity), but in the sense that only one can be adopted and pursued. (Related to Jessica's point.)

Second problem: What do value-terms mean in other contexts?

If doing a thing *is bad*, getting your little brother to do it *is bad*.

Tormenting the cat *is bad*.

Therefore, getting your little brother to torment the cat *is bad*.

According to Ayer:

If *boo* doing a thing, *boo* getting your little brother to do it!

Boo tormenting the cat!

Therefore, *boo* getting your little brother to torment the cat!

But what does it mean to say: "If boo doing a thing"?

The general lesson:

- Most words can be used in a variety of different contexts to do a variety of different things.
- Therefore, the meaning of a word is not limited to *only one of those uses*.
- However, according to Ayer, the meaning of "bad" is limited to a *speaker's expressing a negative feeling*.
- This is why Ayer cannot make sense of the phrase: "If doing a thing is bad." Someone who says this is not expressing a negative feeling toward doing a thing.
- So the meaning of "bad" cannot be limited to expressing feelings.