

what is emotivism?

Emotivism is a meta-ethical theory which differentiates it from normative ethics. Where normative ethics takes actual ethical decisions as its subject matter, meta-ethics considers ethics as a whole. In doing so meta-ethics considers what we are actually 'doing' when we make ethical statements or invoke words like 'right' and 'wrong'.

AJ Ayer was an emotivist who set out his ideas in a book called *Language, Truth & Logic*. His central claim was that statements were only meaningful or valuable if they contained factual content. He thought it was possible to differentiate between meaningless and meaningful statements as the latter are either true by definition or, in principle, falsifiable (they could be shown to be true or false). All other statements are disregarded as having no value.

Ayer thought this showed that much of Western philosophy was shown to be wrong-footed. Clearly this includes the majority metaphysics and, Ayer thought, moral philosophy. According to Ayer, there are four sorts of moral statements:

- definitions of ethical terms
- descriptions of moral phenomena
- exhortations to moral virtue
- actual ethical judgements

Only definitions and descriptions are of value for Ayer. Judgments and exhortations are disregarded as merely expressions of emotion,

C L Stevenson published an essay called *The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms*. He expounded emotivism with a slightly different underlying theory of language. Stevenson understood language to work (or be *used*) in two ways. The '*descriptive*' use of language is what one is doing when one seeks to communicate facts or share information while all other uses were designated as *dynamic*. For Stevenson, moral statements fell in the latter category and so had no factual content. Their content was thought to be purely emotive. What Stevenson adds is the insight that when language is used dynamically it is often in order to influence others. To say 'murder is wrong', then, may be more than simply saying 'I don't like killing'. For this writer it may also be an attempt to manipulate others into behaving in a way that I like also.

does it work?

At first emotivism seems extremely plausible. We have all encountered moral, religious or political debate where it is clear from the outset that neither party will change their position. Emotivism allows us to account for this. What it does not account for, however, is the other sort of moral debate, where a yet unknown way forward is genuinely sought. Were emotivism true, any sort of moral debate would be impossible. As indeed would any notion of moral progress.

Though many of us are now skeptical of notions of moral absolutes, there do still seem to be awful acts, such as recent genocide or even the case of *Baby P* that we want to denounce with more vehemence than 'I don't like that'. This 'intuition' has led many to conclude that at our most honest morality is more than pure opinion. Were this to be the case any notions of justice and punishment would be ridiculous.

Somewhat ironically, Ayer's verification principle struggles to meet its own harsh criteria for meaningfulness. Of course Ayer holds it to be true by definition, but this is a move we would probably only allow were we to agree with him in the first place. This is not the only problem with this principle either.

Ayer maintains that meaningful statements are those that are either true by definition, or are (in theory) capable of being shown to be false. On reflecting for a minute we might consider how only using these two sorts of statements might inhibit our communication. In fact we might go as far as to say it would be irrecognisably altered. This hints at the fact that emotivism is not only logically inconsistent, but that it is based on a faulty and outdated theory of language. Wittgenstein later understood words as functioning in 'webs of meaning' rather than simply reporting facts about reality. If this is correct it is hard to see how emotivism can be.