

# A Defense of Emotivism and its Utility in Normative Discourse

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Metaethical theories can be divided into two overarching categories: cognitivist and non-cognitivist theories. Cognitivism is the belief that our moral statements contain truth value, meaning they can be true or false. On the contrary, non-cognitivism argues that these statements contain no truth-value, and thus the statement “X is good” cannot be true or false. Emotivism, a non-cognitivist moral theory, is the belief that our moral judgments are not statements regarding what exists in the world, but expressions of our own feelings and emotions. Given an emotivist perspective, the judgment “X is good” would amount to “Hooray X,” or “Yay X,” which is an expression that cannot be true or false. Emotivism rose to popularity in the mid-20th century, with contributions from philosophers such as A. J. Ayer and C. L. Stevenson. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on C. L. Stevenson’s iteration of emotivism in his 1937 publication “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms” and his book *Ethics and Language* that was later published in 1944. However, emotivism comes under criticism from objectivist critics, who, unlike non-cognitivists, believe that moral judgments do contain truth value and additionally describe some universal property of an object. Objectivists such as Brand Blanshard take issue with emotivism due to its seeming inability to account for objective moral properties that objects of moral judgments might hold.

In this paper, I will defend emotivism by responding to two objections: first, that emotivism does not adequately account for objective moral properties, and second, that when emotivism is adopted, it would lead to chaos in moral discourse. First, I will provide an account of C. L. Stevenson’s formulation of emotivism, including the dual nature of moral judgments and the emotive nature of the term “good”. Using this perspective on moral

judgments, I will respond to Blanshard's objection by showing that emotivism does not encounter any problems by ignoring the objective moral properties an object may or may not have. I will prove this by applying emotivism to Blanshard's rabbit scenario in two cases: first, that objective moral properties do not exist (to account for an emotivist perspective), and secondly that they do (objectivism). This will provide a general defense of emotivism when applied to situational dilemmas. Next, I will respond to Blanshard's second objection that emotivism would lead to chaos if adopted by referencing the influential nature of moral judgments. I will detail how, through an analogy that closely mirrors Blanshard's objection, emotivism can not only assist in solving normative problems, but also provide more utility than an objectivist perspective on morality by accounting for the conflicting attitudes of moral agents. Finally, I will go on to prove that emotivism is more effective than objectivism in solving problems in moral discourse and overcomes many traditional roadblocks that we encounter when applying objectivist ethical theories to normative scenarios.

In Stevenson's publication "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms," he focuses on redefining our moral judgments as expressions of our interests instead of conjuring a universal formula for "goodness" (Stevenson 1937, 16-17). He does this by differentiating the descriptive meanings of our judgments, which account for our empirical observations about what exists, with their dynamic meanings, which are more suited to describe our emotions and feelings. He goes on to state that words also have emotive meanings, which are tendencies to "produce *affective* responses in people. It is the immediate aura of feeling which hovers about a word" (Stevenson 1937, 23). Emotive meanings are useful in helping us convey the dynamic meanings of our moral judgments, like our attitudes, instead of solely a descriptive meaning. Thus, the statement "X is good" does not solely serve the purpose of defining the speaker's own interest (descriptively), but carries the purpose of influencing others or making an ethical suggestion (dynamically). It is important to note that Stevenson himself believes the term "good" to be indefinable, as no other word can provide an adequate substitute for its emotive meaning. While there are other

words that seem to convey a similar meaning, such as “desirable,” “beneficial,” and “pleasurable,” Stevenson argues that words like these merely redirect one’s attitudes regarding what is “good” and “distort its emotive meaning” – therefore, not only can we not define good, but we cannot replace it with another word (Stevenson 1944, 82). Therefore, by accepting this view of moral judgments, we are rejecting the idea that moral facts can be known entirely empirically and thus embracing non-cognitivism, since, by Stevenson’s definition, “X is good” cannot be true or false. While our moral judgments can be made empirically based on our observations (or beliefs), they do not have any impact on whether or not the entity in question is actually morally good. While a main tenet of emotivism is that moral judgments are not truth-apt, later I will defend this view of moral judgments from both a non-cognitivist and an objectivist perspective to show how an emotivist perspective would not affect any potential objective moral properties.

Stevenson also makes several noteworthy statements regarding the nature of ethical disagreements later on in his book *Ethics and Language*. He makes a distinction between two kinds of disagreements: those rooted in belief and those rooted in attitude. He defines disagreements in belief as debates over “how things are to be described or explained,” and disagreements in attitude as conflicting states of approval with an emphasis on a reciprocal desire to influence the other (Stevenson 1944, 3-4). Stevenson points out that traditional objectivist theories limit moral disagreements to scientific or empirical disagreements, or disagreements in belief, which “will lead to only a half-picture, at best, of the situations in which the ethical terms are actually used” by ignoring the influential attitudes behind our moral judgments (Stevenson 1944, 20). Not only are both of these kinds of disagreements vital when considering ethical judgments, they can also reciprocally influence each other. The attitudes we are predisposed to can affect what information we actively seek, limiting our beliefs, which, in turn, influences our attitudes regarding the things we observe. For example, someone who believes that euthanasia is morally wrong in all cases will tend to seek out information that supports their negative perception of euthanasia, reinforcing their pre-existing

attitude.

Many philosophers, such as Brand Blanshard, have criticized emotivism for its non-cognitive nature. In Blanshard's publication "The New Subjectivism in Ethics," he poses many objections, however, for the sake of this paper we will focus on two. Firstly, he argues through an analogy of a rabbit caught in a trap that the ethical judgments created as a result of emotivism do not accurately account for moral properties of an entity. However, this is not the only objection Blanshard raises. He also finds difficulty with the application of emotivism to political debate, arguing that "its [emotivism] general acceptance would, so far as one can see, be an international disaster," as it would allegedly make it impossible to reach a consensus between right and wrong in situations such as international courts (Blanshard 1949, 510-511).

In order to make his first argument that emotivism is not equipped to describe an object's moral characteristics, Blanshard introduces the rabbit analogy. In this scenario, a rabbit has been caught in a trap and "struggled for days to escape and that in a frenzy of hunger, pain, and fear, it has all but eaten off its own leg" (Blanshard 1949, 505), ultimately dying. When stumbled upon by a bystander, the bystander immediately expresses that the death of the rabbit is morally bad. Blanshard asserts that, for an emotivist, "nothing good or bad happened in the case until I came on the scene" (Blanshard 1949, 506), and that the pain of the rabbit had no moral significance until observed by someone. Blanshard further argues that, if the rabbit actually did not fall into the trap and he merely believed it did, upon receiving news that the rabbit did not in fact die, there would be no reason for the speaker to feel any sense of relief, since "in that suffering itself there was nothing bad at all, and hence in its non-occurrence there would be nothing to be relieved about" (Blanshard 1949, 506), and everything that was bad in the first case is still present here. It is important to note that Blanshard's argument comes from a strictly objectivist viewpoint; the judgment "X is good" is asserting a character of the subject X, as he states (Blanshard 1949, 505). However, I intend to defend emotivism regardless of whether or not these objective

moral properties do exist in order to show that, under any condition, an emotivist approach to this scenario is viable.

First, we shall approach the rabbit scenario from an emotivist perspective. In Stevenson's case, he asserts that the definition of something's "goodness" must not be entirely verifiable through the scientific method (Stevenson 1937, 16). Therefore, for the emotivist, there are no moral characteristics that entities hold that constitute goodness or badness that we can physically observe. Thus, in the case that events do not have objective moral properties, the observation of the dead rabbit in the trap would not change the intrinsic fact that the event occurred, which is separate from any assignment of moral weight. And, in the case that the event did not occur, the mistaken expression of one's feelings related to the death of the rabbit would not have any effect on whether or not the death did occur. Furthermore, any feelings of relief felt by the bystander are not derived from any intrinsic moral goodness or badness assigned to the death of the rabbit, but rather their own attitudes toward the event, therefore, one's relief is not entirely derived from the moral properties of the event (regardless of whether they exist) in this scenario. This is a result of the simple differentiation between our judgments regarding the moral nature of an event and whether it actually occurred. For the emotivist, regardless of whether the rabbit was observed in the trap, its death still occurred, and any ethical judgments of the "badness" of the death would be made as an expression of the speaker's interests about the moral nature of the event. Thus, since there are no objective moral properties for the agent's statement to conflict with, the rabbit scenario does not pose a problem for the emotivist.

For the objectivist, this case becomes slightly complicated, as there are multiple ways to view objective moral truth: attitude-independence and standpoint-invariance, as defined by philosopher Jeroen Hopster. He defines attitude-independent moral objectivity as the stance that there are objective facts about what is right or wrong, regardless of an agent's attitude toward them (Hopster 2017, 764). On the other hand, standpoint-invariance moral objectivity states that a moral judgment X does

have an objective moral value, but rather one that will still follow from a variety of standpoints. Hopster states that “however these standpoints may differ, the truth of X will still follow from it” (Hopster 2017, 773), or that, regardless of an agent’s moral judgment regarding some X, the moral properties of X will always follow, even if the agent is incorrect about the nature of X, as we will see. In addition, standpoint invariance yields the idea that our moral statements are persuasive in nature, similar to what we find in Stevenson’s emotivism (Hopster 2017). Hopster does this by differentiating moral judgments, which convey an “incentive to influence people’s attitudes” and judgments of “taste, convention, or aesthetics” (Hopster 2017, 773), which he calls evaluative judgments. For this reason, an agent’s moral judgment can be incorrect on the basis that there is an error in their evaluation, or evaluative judgment, regarding a particular entity X, and can be influenced by another agent’s moral judgment in order to clarify this evaluative error. Furthermore, although the agent’s moral standpoint regarding X is incorrect in this situation, given new information we would assume that the true moral value of X would follow from their standpoint. This differs from attitude-independent objectivism in several ways, but most notably by straying away from the conception that moral values are entirely independent of ethical judgments and by emphasizing their influential nature.

For a realist (attitude-independent) objectivist, the line of reasoning should follow similarly as a non-cognitivist. While objectivists would argue that the struggle of the rabbit would be intrinsically bad, the attitudes that any witnesses conveyed through a moral judgment would not alter this status. Therefore, even though the rabbit’s death carries objective moral properties in this case, an expression of a moral judgment from a bystander would not alter or diminish these properties. Furthermore, this position also supports the previous claim that the expression of negative emotion from any bystander would not change the intrinsic fact that the event of the rabbit’s death did occur, and thus, from an objectivist’s perspective, would not change the event’s moral value. In the case that the rabbit was not trapped, and the bystander is mistaken, not only would they feel relief from their own

internal preferences for the rabbit to avoid harm, but they would also feel relief as the “badness” of the event was avoided, by Blanshard’s own argument, therefore, for the realist objectivist, this case does not create a conflict with the objective badness of the rabbit’s death.

For the standpoint-invariant moral objectivist, the goodness or badness of the rabbit’s harm would hold regardless of the witness’s evaluative standpoint of the event, and therefore the expression of the agent upon finding the rabbit would not change the event’s intrinsic moral value. For the scenario in which the agent simply believed that the rabbit was trapped when in reality it was not, this constitutes an error in their evaluative standpoint resulting from a lack of information. As Hopster states, the moral objectivity of an entity can follow from one’s evaluative standpoint without resulting from what one *thinks* follows from their evaluative standpoint (Hopster 2017, 772). Therefore, the badness that they perceive would not follow from their standpoint were they given the information that the rabbit was not in fact dead. However, as argued previously, the feeling of regret from the agent is not necessarily rooted in the moral value of the rabbit’s death, but rather their own feelings toward it, therefore, it would still be possible for a standpoint objectivist to feel regret in this case. Thus, regardless of if the critic adopts a non-cognitivist, realist objectivist, or anti-realist objectivist standpoint, Blanshard’s objection that the lack of perception of an event would diminish its moral “badness” (if the speaker wishes to adopt that it exists) given an emotivist perspective on moral judgments is false. From this, we obtain a general defense of emotivism as an ethical theory when applied situationally, indicating that it does not create any conflicts with moral properties of objects.

As mentioned previously, critics such as Blanshard may continue to argue that emotivism is not an acceptable ethical theory as it is not equipped to deal with moral disagreements on a wider scale, such as international relations. Blanshard states that the adoption of emotivism around the world would lead to an “international disaster” and the inability to clearly define right and wrong explicitly as a means of regulating conduct between

countries (Blanshard 1949, 510). Blanshard references the German invasion of Poland as an example, citing how it was widely supported by German civilians at the time yet was an implicitly wrong action. This serves to critique the expressive and seemingly unsatisfying nature of emotivism when viewed at a surface level as well as its description of the non-cognitive nature of morality. I will defend emotivism against this objection, providing an explanation for how emotivism can be used to solve normative problems we may face in modern moral discourse.

In order to account for this, Stevenson himself specifically references the ability of emotivism to be used to solve moral disagreements. He describes ethical judgments as “social instruments... used in a cooperative enterprise in which we are mutually adjusting ourselves to the influence of others” (Stevenson 1937, 29), and while these may lead to the formation of individual ethical communities (as Blanshard expresses), Stevenson maintains the idea that ethical judgments can only be expressed through means of persuasion. As Stevenson asserts, we are all consistently making impressions on others through our exchange of moral judgments. These interactions, although small, ultimately help to spread a variety of perspectives and attitudes that are important for working toward a solution when encountering moral disagreements. We exist, especially modernly, in a highly communicative society that is constantly exchanging ideas and beliefs. Blanshard’s worldview indicates a belief that an ethical expression of attitude would have no influence on those with opposing standpoints and that disagreements cannot be made without reference to an (arguably unknowable) universal moral truth. Instead, using his example, to call the German invasion of Poland morally wrong would not be “meaningless” under Stevenson’s emotivism, but rather promote discussion and the exchange of ideas, as exists in any ethical debate, political or non-political, and ultimately assist in leading to a resolution. I will show that viewing moral discourse from this angle offers far more assistance when attempting to solve real-world ethical disagreements than a cognitivist, objectivist approach would.

Given the dual nature of moral judgments that Stevenson



gives with his formulation of emotivism, this non-cognitivist account for morality is more useful when dealing with ethical disagreements than objectivist views. In order to reach this conclusion, first, one must consider that an emotivist approach to normative ethical dilemmas allows for a far wider range of insights and opinions. When engaging in disagreements, the realist objectivist has no motivation to change their perspective or listen to any possible counter argument since their views *will* withstand scrutiny from a large set of perspectives and (presumably) align with what they believe to be an objective and undeniable moral truth. Although antirealist objectivists attempt to address this problem, by assuming that every agent would come to the correct conclusion regarding the moral qualities of an entity, we run into a similar self-validated objective perspective, creating a similar problem. For example, from a standpoint-invariance objectivist's viewpoint, if they are confident that the moral truth of some object X follows from their evaluative standpoint, and they receive no new information to update this standpoint, Therefore, objectivist theories are not receptive to disagreements in attitude and do not acknowledge the effect that they have on moral interchanges as they believe ethical judgments to be simply evaluative and they are confident that their beliefs align with certain objective moral properties. However, when approaching them from an emotivist standpoint, moral progress becomes far more plausible because the emotivist's dual-natured moral judgments do not conform to objective moral qualities, promoting change and reform from moral discourse.

Given the foundation we have laid regarding the benefits of emotivism, I will now show how emotivism can be applied in a concrete normative setting in order to solve moral problems where objectivism fails. Let us suppose that Country X firmly believes that an action done by Country Y (for example, harvesting resources on land that is not theirs) is morally wrong. On the contrary, Country Y is strict in their judgment that their action was morally justified, creating a moral disagreement between the two parties. By making this ethical judgment, for the objectivist, Country X is making a statement that correlates to some moral

property of Country Y's action. Assuming that Country X and Country Y both have concurrent beliefs regarding the nature of Country Y's action, with no regard to possible disagreements in attitude, neither country has any motivation to compromise or even entertain a possible counterargument. Instead, since it follows from each countries' own perspective that there is a logical correlation with an objective moral truth, each conflicting claim is substantiated, creating an unsolvable issue. While a compromise is possible, from this point, there is no way that each party can resolve their disagreements about the moral qualities of Country Y's action. This analogy is used to represent an ethical disagreement between two countries (as to respond to Blanshard's objection) as well as an example of a normative dilemma in order to illustrate the benefits of emotivism when dealing with modern moral discourse.

It is obvious from this example that, in the case of an ethical debate through the lens of realist objectivism, there are very few (if any) available resources to remediate the conflict. However, if we attempt to see the same scenario through the lens of non-cognitivism, we see that neither party feels the need to substantiate their argument with reference to an unknowable objective moral truth but can rather use their collective interest in influencing one another to reach a resolution. While Blanshard disagrees, arguing that the lack of objectively known moral values can give each country the ability to do what they want without repercussion, it is supported by this scenario that emotivism provides far more opportunities to reach an agreed-upon solution between both parties. When focus is placed on remediation and the mutual influence of each party's ethical judgments are acknowledged, far more can be done to solve the debate than simple self-reinforcing judgments. As we have shown, this emphasis on remediation and the exchange of attitudes is extremely vital to modern moral discourse, and yet it is only present when moral judgments are viewed as having a disagreement in attitude. Thus, emotivism is not only useful in reaching a functional conclusion in moral discourse, but also overcomes roadblocks to moral progress that are present when we view moral judgments through an objectivist lens.

Throughout this paper, I have clarified the false belief by objectivist philosophers such as Blanshard that emotivism is responsible for validating what most would consider to be clearly morally wrong actions (such as the German invasion of Poland), and that the perception or judgment of an event under a non-cognitive theory such as emotivism does not add or subtract moral value from an event, but rather serves as a formulation of the speaker's beliefs and attitudes toward the event. Not only was this accomplished, but a defense of the use of emotivism in terms of modern ethical debate was proposed, contrary to objections that it would allow agents to disregard the opinions of other parties. With the intention of improving society as a whole, when applied on a normative level, emotivism would provide a number of benefits by not only allowing for a mutual influence of ethical judgments from opposing viewpoints of a debate, but also acknowledging the roles our attitudes play in moral disagreements. In the scope of moral discourse, this leads to many debates that simply result in the amplification of one's own voice due to the knowledge (or, rather, the belief) that they are correct and their views align with an objective, knowable aspect of morality. While objective moral truths may or may not exist, regardless of their status, emotivism aims to deconstruct the empirical method of moral debate and assists in creating tangible social progress in a way that objective ethics cannot.

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