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A Summary of Section I of “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”

In section I of “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms,”² Charles Leslie
Stevenson has three main objectives: (1) to indicate the overall goal of his paper, (2) to
10 introduce the criteria by which he thinks it is reasonable to judge theories trying to
achieve that goal, and (3) to discredit the theories of his subjectivist predecessors by
showing how they fail to achieve that goal. In this paper, I aim to explain how Stevenson
attempts to achieve these three objectives.

Stevenson begins to indicate the overall goal of his paper by saying that he is
15 concerned with the meaning of ethical questions, such as ‘Is so and so good?’ (p. 14). He
regards such questions as hard to understand, in the way that the question ‘Is there a
needle in that haystack?’ would be hard to understand if we did not know what a needle
is (p. 14). Stevenson does not mean that questions using ethical terms such as ‘good’ are
entirely unknown to us, as if they contained words we have never heard before; but he
20 does think that their meanings need to be made clear, and that their meanings need to be
made clear before we can intelligently attempt to answer them. “The present paper,”
Stevenson writes, “is concerned wholly with this preliminary step of making ethical
questions clear” (p. 14). Stevenson goes on to say that his strategy for making ethical

¹ My roommate, [name], proofread my paper for me.

² Charles Leslie Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms,” *Mind* vol. 46, no. 181 (January 1937), pp. 14–31.

questions clear will involve, essentially, trying to find a way of translating questions
25 using ethical terms into questions that are easier to understand (p. 14). He proceeds on the
assumption that this will involve replacing the word 'good' with some phrase that is a
definition of that word (p. 14).

Different theories may try to achieve this goal in different ways. To introduce the
criteria by which he thinks it is reasonable to judge theories trying to achieve this goal,
30 Stevenson is quick to point out that not just any proposed translation of an ethical
question can be judged to be acceptable. He observes that it would be foolish to translate
the question 'Is X good?' into the question 'Is X pink with yellow trimmings?', because
the latter question obviously has an entirely different meaning from the former one (p.
14). He goes on to say that a proposed translation of an ethical question is acceptable
35 only if anyone interested in asking the original question would regard the translation as
an adequate substitute for her original question (p. 15). That is, if she regards the
translation as failing to ask what she was asking with her original question, then there
must be something wrong with the proposed translation.

Stevenson goes on to specify three criteria that he thinks must be met by any
40 theory offering a definition of 'good' that can be used to translate ethical questions into
questions that are easier to understand. First, any proposed definition of the word 'good'
must respect the fact that when one person is saying that something is good, and a second
person is saying that that thing is not good, then the two speakers are disagreeing, or
contradicting each other (p. 16). What Stevenson means is that the two speakers are
45 saying things that cannot both be true at the same time.

Second, any proposed definition of the word ‘good’ must respect the fact that anything deemed to be good has a certain “magnetism” (p. 16). As Stevenson writes, “A person who recognizes X to be “good” must *ipso facto* acquire a stronger tendency to act in its favour than [*sic*] he otherwise would have had” (p. 16). That is, to regard something as good is *motivating* in a way that, say, regarding it as yellow is not motivating.

Third, any proposed definition of the word ‘good’ must respect the fact that ascertaining that something is good is a different sort of activity from ascertaining any sort of scientific information (p. 16). What Stevenson means is that you cannot ascertain that something is good by methods such as seeing what you desire, or taking a vote and seeing what the majority desires. These are simple scientific inquiries (matters of psychology or sociology, for example), and Stevenson maintains that ethics is a different sort of activity. Stevenson approvingly quotes the saying that “Ethics must not be psychology” (p. 16); he implies that he would endorse a wider saying, such as “Ethics must not be science.”³

The specification of these criteria enables Stevenson to pursue his third objective in this section of his paper, which is to discredit the theories of his subjectivist predecessors. To regard ‘good’ as meaning *desired by me*, Stevenson points out, fails to meet the first criterion (p. 16). The same goes, Stevenson says, for regarding ‘good’ as meaning *desired by my community* (p. 16). To regard ‘good’ as meaning *desired by most people*, Stevenson says, fails to meet the second and third criteria (p. 16). Stevenson implies that similar criticisms can be offered against any kind of theory that defines ‘good’ in terms of the desires, or interests, of the speaker or some larger group.

³ My classmate, [name], helped me to understand the part of Stevenson’s paper that I am describing here.