Chapter (IV)

Richard B. Brandt: The Emotive Theory of Ethics, The Philosophical Review, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Jul., 1950), pp. 305-318.

Should like to begin by expressing my belief that the consider able advances in ethical theory in the past twenty years have been in great part a result, directly or indirectly, of the ideas of the proponents of the emotive theory, and in particular of Mr. Stevenson whose book, Ethics and Language, on account of its ingenuity, care, and good sense, deserves the high admiration it has received.

There are differences between the theories roughly classifiable as emotive, but I shall take as a topic for comment certain n theses which are probably among those acceptable to most writers generally regarded as belonging to this group. (i) Ethical disagreements are primarily disagreements in attitude, not disagreements in belief. I shall refer to this as the "Disagreement in Attitude" thesis. (2) Consequently, ethical disagreements are not necessarily always capable of being resolved by observation of facts; rather, the procedures which are and must be used to support an ethical statement are whatever procedures will effectuate a change in a person's attitudes. (3) Ethical statements are not, at least fundamentally, assertions about ethical attitudes, but expressions of them. I shall call this the "Expression" thesis. (4) Ethical utterances often have a directive effect on the emotions and attitudes of persons to whom they are addressed. I take

this thesis not to be controversial, but I shall call it the "Emotional Influence" thesis. (5) There is another thesis, accepted by Mr. Stevenson and others, about the mechanism of this directive influence on feelings and attitudes. This I shall call the "Blind Emotive Meaning" theory or simply the "Blind Emotive" theory, and I shall discuss this immediately. I take this thesis to be logically independent of the other four.

I

Let us begin, then, with the thesis of Blind Emotive Meaning. I do not wish to assert that this theory is false; all I wish to do is to questions whether it has been established.

What precisely is the Blind Emotive theory? It is a theoretical proposition in psychology. As such, one might suppose that controlled experimental evidence would be adduced in favor of it; but, so far as I know, none ever has been. In fact, the only relevant experimental evidence with which I am acquainted bears against it. Perhaps the best way to make the nature of this psychological proposition clear is to formulate an alternative thesis, which I shall call the "Cognitive Field" theory. And let us limit our discussion to the emotive effects of communication. The Cognitive Field theory holds that whatever substantial changes occur in a person's emotions or attitudes as a result of social communication must be regarded as a function of changes in the person's cognitive field, where by "cognitive field" is meant what is perceived by a person, plus what he is believing and expecting about his world. In a situation where communication is taking place, the cognitive

field includes the meaning of what is said to a person, and, of course, his apprehension of the speaker's feelings and attitudes as revealed by what he says. Briefly, for the Cognitive Field theory, emotional and attitudinal effects arise only from perception، belief, and understanding, perhaps often involving entities only vaguely outlined or hinted at.

I understand Mr. Stevenson and others to deny this theory, not only for communication in general, but for ethical discourse in particular.

They appear to hold that the hearing of a verbal expression, independent of what it is taken to mean or any alteration the hearing of it may produce in the cognitive field, can and typically does have substantial effects on emotions and attitudes. That is why I call it the Blind Emotive theory: considerable emotive effects will take place even if the cognitive field of the person affected is not altered except for these nsory presence of the word itself. As a consequence of this view, these writers hold that an expression's power to affect emotion or attitude, and its power to affect cognitions, can vary independently; in fact, for Mr. Stevenson, the essence of what he calls Persuasive Definition is the emotive effectiveness of a term remaining fixed, while a change is brought about in the cognitive meaning.

Ought we to adopt Mr. Stevenson's view or the Cognitive Field theory? It is admitted by everyone that the hearing of some words، irrespective of the meaning, may cause slight emotional effects, so that a word may be reported as being pleasant, or

unpleasant, or ugly, or fearsome. The dispute is not about this, but about substantial effects. Now, it is obvious that at least most of the influence of discourse on feelings or attitudes derives from what is said, or from the hearer's impression of the type, intensity, and determination of the attitudes of the speaker - especially if the speaker is a person held in awe or admiration by the hearer. Must we go beyond this and hold that the word alone has power to influence attitudes substantially, over and above what power it has through its influence on the cognitive field? I have three difficulties with doing this.

First, there is no evidence which compels us to go beyond the Cognitive Field theory. The usual way of demonstrating that we must go further is to produce two words or expressions which allegedly have identical descriptive meaning but which, if used in the same circumstances, would obviously have different emotive force: for example‹liberty" and "license," "wise" and "shrewd." But do these pairs of terms really have the same meaning? If we include in the meaning of a term not merely the focal dictionary meaning but the subtler connotations which Mr. Stevenson calls "suggested" meaning, then it is clear that these terms do not have the same meaning. As far as I know‹ Mr. Stevenson has not produced a pair of terms with different emotive effects which clearly have the same meaning. And even if the cognitive meaning were the same, the hearer's cognitive field would probably be altered by his perception of the speaker's attitudes, as expressed by his use of the term. Sometimes interjections like "ouch" appear to be offered as

evidence for the theory, since it is supposed they have no cognitive meaning at all; but it is obvious, first, that this expression does affect the hearer's cognitive field by conveying to him the impression that the speaker is probably in pain and, second, that the emotive effect on the hearer is both small and diffuse.

My second difficulty is really just a puzzle. If the emotive power adheres simply to the sound or visual form of the word, it seems to follow that a word would carry the same emotive power through all of its various senses, so that, if we are emotively affected by "Be sure to do the right thing," then, given similar intonations and gestures, we should be equally stimulated by "Be sure to take the right fork." Mr. Stevenson himself agrees that in some usages of these terms the emotive effect is, as he puts it, checked, unrealized.3 I am puzzled by this. I am not clear how Mr. Stevenson will explain these variations of the emotive effects of a word, apparently correlated with the sense in which it is being used, without making the emotive effect of an expression much more dependent on the expression's effect on the cognitive field of the hearer than his theory appears to do.

My final difficulty concerns general psychological theory. It is well-known that propaganda analysts regard certain terms as emotionally charged and to be avoided in framing questions for a public opinion poll. This fact, however, is no support for the Blind Emotive theory; the crucial question is the interpretation of this fact, and whether the emotive charge is independent of the suggested meanings is a disputable - by no means a settled

- point. Mr. Stevenson has occasionally used terminology which suggests that, to his mind, his theory is in line with the psychological theory of suggestion.4 But I do not see how his theory derives any support from the theories and experiments associated with so-called "prestige suggestion"; these theories all concern the effects on a person of perceiving the fact that the ideas and attitudes of a revered person are such and such and, as far as I know, do not argue for any substantial emotive power of words alone, independent of the meaning. And in any case, recent researches and discussions largely by Gestalt psychologists have raised serious questions whether the mechanism of prestige suggestion in general exercises the blind coercion on beliefs and attitudes that has often been credited to it.

Let me make it clear that I am not questioning just Mr. Stevenson's terminology. Some writers have objected that his choice of the term emotive meaning" is unhappy. But my point, whether valid or not, is a point about substance. The Blind Emotive theory holds that some words possess a dispositional property of affecting substantially the emotions and attitudes of people, which is not dependent upon any alterations the expressions introduce into the cognitive field. Whereas I am questioning whether any such thing has been shown to be the case. Let me add a word on the logical effects of the issue. The rejection of the Blind Emotive theory does have some unfavorable consequences for Mr. Stevenson's view of "persuasive definitions" and of ethical persuasion in general. But it would not affect the Disagreement in Attitude thesis, or

the Emotional Influence thesis; nor does it affect much the Expression thesis, the view that in some sense ethical utterances are expressions of ethical attitudes.

II

The remainder of my remarks will be concerned with the Disagreement in Attitude thesis.

Critics of the emotive theory have often, I think justly, complained that proponents of the theory seldom offer any arguments for their position. Mr. Stevenson's paper appears to propose an argument; and‹ since I am disposed to agree that if his argument is correct we should probably have to look favorably upon the Disagreement in Attitude thesis, I wish in this section to comment upon that argument. What is this argument? Roughly it is that if one regards ethical problems as primarily cognitive, and if correspondingly one proposes an analysis of the meaning of ethical terms which makes explicit what the cognitive problem is, then he will be embarrassed to find that many reasons which he would in practice regard as valid ethical considerations could not by his theory be accepted as relevant. Thus, as Mr Stevenson says, "An emotive view cannot only be sensitive to the complexities of an ethical problem, but is likely to be more sensitive to them than any non-emotive view".

Let me state the issue in terms of his example. Suppose a philosopher holds that "X is wrong" means "X will decrease the power of society to win out in the struggle for survival." Mr.

Stevenson rightly points out that such a philosopher is bound to say that the only factual propositions that are ethically relevant are those that bear upon the question whether an action would decrease the power of society to survive. We must agree with him, too, in allowing that we know that many factual considerations are ethically relevant that such a philosopher could not admit to be so. And Mr. Stevenson thinks this difficulty will arise for practically every cognitive analysis. This point is an important one: in fact, I regard it as one rule for the formulation of a satisfactory analysis of ethical terms: any analysis must be so framed as to allow for the relevance of all matters of fact which it would be unconvincing to regard as ethically irrelevant. If a cognitive view is to be satisfactory, some cognitive analysis must survive this test. In adjudicating this issue, we must be clear that the issue he has raised is whether certain types of statement could be logically relevant to ethical statements, if they are taken to mean what some analysis says they mean. And I assume it is agreed that to say that a factual statement S is logically relevant to an ethical statement about an action A is the same thing as to say that, from S as a premise, something about the relative ethical satisfactoriness of A can, at least with probability‹ be inferred different from what could have been inferred from non-S as a premise. There are several different relationships between a factual and an ethical statement, all of which are forms of logical relevance‹ and which it is useful to distinguish. First, it may be that the meaning of the predicate of a factual statement is identical with the meaning of an ethical predicate. For example, if, as is supposed by some writers‹ A is right"

means "A is conducive to the survival of society," then the factual statement "A is conducive to the survival of society" will entail that "A is right" and hence that statement S will be logically relevant to an ethical statement. We might call this analytic relevance. Or, second، a statement S can be logically relevant if there is some general principle, self-evident or inductive, which connects its predicate with an ethical predicate. For example, if we could regard as true the general premise "All actions which are conducive to the survival of society are right," then, from the factual statement S that "A will be conducive to the survival of society," we could infer that A is right. And hence again the statement S would qualify as logically relevant. We might call the logical relation of S, in this case, one of synthetic relevance. In a third type of case, the relation to the ethical statement is more complicated. Here the logical relevance of S consists in the fact that from S, another factual statement S' can be inferred (at least with probability, and when taken in conjunction with other empirical premises،(and that from S' an ethical statement can be inferred in one of the ways already mentioned. For example, let S be: "This action would be a breach of promise." Then, if we have a true general premise to the effect that whatever is a breach of promise will probably not be conducive to the survival of society, we are justified in inferring from S an S' to the effect that this action will probably not be conducive to the survival of society, from which again we can infer an ethical conclusion in one of the ways suggested. In this case we might name the kind of relevance S has, secondary relevance. Other types of logical relevance could be described, but these examples will

sufficiently illustrate its meaning. On a cognitive theory of ethics, when a factual statement is said to be ethically relevant, what is meant is that it is logically relevant, in this sense. Cognitive theories also hold, with common sense, I think, that some factual statements are ethically irrelevant; and this will be the case when they are not logically relevant, in this sense.

Mr. Stevenson argues, then, that at least most important cognitive theories suffer from the defect that, on their analysis of ethical terms, many factual considerations which we in practice regard as ethically relevant will not be logically relevant. I think it is important to see that this is not true for several whole classes of cognitive theories. In particular, forms of non-naturalist analysis like Mr. Ewing's, and forms of attitudinal analysis, are not subject to the difficulty. Moreover, the difficulty may not arise on a form of utilitarian analysis. That is, it may just be the case that the only kind of consideration we seriously take into account in ethical deliberation is an action's probable effects on human happiness. If this is in fact the case - and the view surely has some plausibility -then the utilitarian analysis of ethical terms does not suffer from the disease he describes.

Let us consider the status of non-naturalist and attitudinal analyses a bit more fully. First, the non-naturalist ones. For a view like that of Ewing, any reasons which appeal to us as serious and ultimate can be held to be logically relevant. The reasons for this are that, first, the theory, by virtue of being non-naturalist, does not prescribe what is logically relevant by its definitions, and that, second, it admits an unlimited number

of general ethical statements which are true and which relate factual properties to ethical properties - statements like "Any action which is a breach of promise tends to be wrong." In fact, Ross's criticism of teleological systems of ethics is precisely the point that there are more things about an action that are ethically relevant than utilitarian's admit. Although Ross himself has listed only a half-dozen properties as ethically relevant, in principle his list is indefinitely expansible. Thus a non-naturalist view like Ewing's does not rule out, in advance, any kind of factual point as irrelevant.

About some forms of attitudinal analysis we are entitled to draw the same conclusion. This need not be argued since, in his paper, Mr. Stevenson admits the point, at least for one sample form of relativist analysis, in which the pronoun "I" appears. There are, of course, other forms of attitudinal analysis which would escape his general objection: for example, what have been called "ideal type" forms of definition, such as "If anybody were of the sort S, then he would approve of this". And this "ideal type" analysis, incidentally, would not be subject to Mr. Stevenson's objection to the relativist form, the objection that, if the analysis introduced the pronoun "I," it is not clear how two persons can disagree ethically. Actually, his special objection to the relativist form can be answered, but in any case it is an entirely different point. My conclusion is that Mr. Stevenson proves no more than that some, perhaps only a few, of the important analyses suffer from being unable to count as logically relevant, factual points we should all regard in practice as ethically relevant. And this means his argument

falls very far short indeed of showing that there is good reason for thinking a purely cognitive analysis cannot be carried through. But how exceedingly paradoxical the emotive theory itself is upon this point! For on that view, ethical disagreements are essentially attitudinal, and hence no factual sentences have any direct logical bearing upon the peculiarly ethical disagreement. On the emotive theory, a factual belief can be relevant to an ethical attitude or utterance only in the sense of being a causal ancestor of it. And causal relevance, of course, is entirely different from logical relevance. We must ask ourselves whether we can interpret ethical thinking satisfactorily if we take a view which drops the concept of logical relevance between ethical statements and factual ones, and leaves us only causal relevance. We all do want to be able to say that sometimes a person's ethical beliefs or attitudes are influenced by objectively irrelevant considerations.

But if "relevance" merely means "causal relevance," this would be impossible. On the emotive theory, if one comes to believe about an action A that some person, for him prestigeful, disapproves A, and if that belief makes him inclined to disapprove A too, he has been moved by a perfectly relevant consideration. Again, if one is moved to disapprove socialized medicine by the thought that any expression of approval would oust him from his favorite club, he has been moved, according to the emotive theory, by as ethically relevant a consideration as any other he might have thought of. Now, I do not think this describes ordinary ethical thinking; we think some persuasive beliefs are distinctly irrelevant. Is there any sense of

"relevance" definable on the emotive theory which would enable us to make the distinctions we all want to make?

III

We have been discussing Mr. Stevenson's argument to the effect that we should adopt an emotive theory because, if we view ethical problems as primarily cognitive, we shall run into certain difficulties.To my mind, Mr. Stevenson's argument does not succeed in proving that we do run into insuperable difficulties on a cognitive theory. But it nevertheless remains true that he may be right in his conclusion – his conclusion that you must adopt an emotive theory because you cannot really carry through convincingly the view that there is some definite cognitive question which ethical deliberation seeks to answer.

It seems safe to say that the most serious reason for regarding ethical disagreements as disagreements in attitude is the inability of philosophers to give a logically and epistemologically satisfactory analysis of ethical terms, that is, the failure of philosophers to exhibit what the cognitive problem in ethics is. Historically, I think, philosophers have been driven to regard ethical disagreements as disagreements in attitude, because the available analyses of ethical predicates were either logically or epistemologically unsatisfactory. In concluding my remarks I wish to comment on two things: (i(the prospects of getting a satisfactory cognitive analysis, and (2) whether, assuming a satisfactory cognitive analysis were available، there would still be good reasons for adopting the Disagreement in Attitude thesis. What would a good cognitive

analysis of ethical problems have to do? For one thing, it would have to deal with several ethical terms‹ but most importantly with certain normative senses, such as those exemplified in the sentence "It would be wrong to murder that man just because you don't like his ties." The central task of the analysis would be to determine, for these critical senses, under what conditions the speaker would think it proper to assert such a statement or what the speaker is believing (taking for granted) when he asserts the sentence - its truth conditions. If we have really got the truth conditions of an ethical sentence formulated, then several things will be true. First‹ whenever a person believes an ethical statement he will believe a corresponding statement about these truth conditions. Second, as Mr. Stevenson pointed out in his paper, if on reflection a person sees that a factual point bears either for or against an ethical conclusion, that factual point will be logically relevant to the analysis corresponding to the ethical conclusion. And third, whenever a person knows that a sentence containing a corresponding analysis is true, he will really be satisfied about the truth of the ethical sentence, will stop worrying and deliberating about it. But ethical discourse is interpersonal, and therefore a whole set of analyses for the ethical usages of normal people in general, in a given linguistic and cultural tradition, must be provided. A cognitive theory must provide a set of definitions for ethica terms such that participants in ethical disputes could truly say, "Yes‹ that is the question we really wanted to answer" - and such that‹ when that question was answered, they really would stop debating about what was right and wrong. One qualification we shall of course have to

add. For it is well known that all words are vague to some degree and that a definition usually has the effect of sharpening one's meanings. Therefore, no matter how good our definition is, it may not succeed exactly in stating what the problem was. But, if we are to be able to say that this analysis exhibits what the ethical problem is, it must be the case that it is determined, within fairly narrow limits, by the actually usage of ethical terms. Can such an analysis be given? I am inclined to think it can. In fact‹ I believe that to say, for example, "X is wrong" is roughly the same as to say, "If I had all the facts about X clearly in mind and were being ethically consistent, then I should disapprove of X." I do not wish to discuss this particular analysis, however, and mention it only as a sample, although I do wish parenthetically to remark that, on this attitudinal analysis, ethical questions would not be answerable by any easy act of introspection. It seems to be very widely believed, however, and with great assurance, that no such cognitive analysis of ethical language and problems can be given. The reasons why this conclusion is accepted are not so clear. The impossibility of such an analysis clearly does not follow from any general propositions of the theory of meaning. Mr. Ayer proceeded by considering two or three rather simple analyses and‹ concluding that they were unsatisfactory, inferred that there could be no better ones. He also seems to have assumed that, if we cannot now find a complete analysis of a term, we are justified in thinking we do not even know part of the analysis. But this is not necessarily true. It may be that we can know that in some circumstances a sentence will certainly be false, even if we do not know precisely what has to

be the case in order for it to be true. I am inclined to think that we know with assurance part of the analysis of ethical terms; and I wish to describe briefly two elements which I think we know belong to an analysis of "right" in its normative sense. What I wish to propose is that there are two truth criteria for ethical statements, two material conditions under which we reject ethical statements as incorrect. The first of them has been discussed by many philosophers. It is expressed in Kant's categorical imperative, in the views of Hume and Adam Smith that revolve about their idea of the impartial spectator, in Sidgwick's axiom of justice, and in the writings, I think, of Mr. Ayer and Mr. Stevenson. Roughly, the point is that, if a person says, "This action A is wrong, but those other actions, B, C, D, which are essentially similar to it, are not wrong," we refuse to accept his statement.

If A is to be wrong and B is to be right, there must be some difference between the natures of A and B. One way of putting it is that we demand ethical consistency. It is not easy to state just what ethical consistency is. We might put it tentatively thus: it is always mistaken for a person to say that A is wrong and B is right unless there is some property P which A has, and which B has not, such that he is willing to say, for all cases of the occurrence of P, that the presence of P makes the situation morally worse than it would otherwise be. Failure to follow this rule in one's moral utterances is not playing the game to which one commits himself in the use of moral language. Differences of opinion on matters of ethics we tolerate; but it is hard to tolerate moral inconsistency when a person is aware of it, for

such inconsistency shows he is deliberately misusing moral language for the sake of personal gain or prejudice. What anyone is definitely committing himself not to do, when he uses moral language, is to give expression to what he personally wants; there is, as Hume said, a generality about moral language.

Let us consider now the second truth criterion. Suppose a person P says, "A is wrong," and shortly after says, "A is right." We might be puzzled by this, but perhaps we should say: "P has seen a light; now we know where he stands." There is no rule in English against saying A is right if one once said it was wrong, although there is a rule which prescribes that now one must say that formerly he was mistaken, since it would not make sense to say that the same action could have been wrong at an earlier time and right at a later time. This rule, however, is not my point. What I do wish to emphasize is that, while English usage does not prohibit changing one's mind in ethics, it does prohibit uttering an ethical sentence on the basis of a momentary impulse. When we say something is wrong, we definitely give the impression of a more than temporary attitude and commitment. Let me phrase this in terms of Mr. Stevenson's first-pattern analysis, according to which "X is wrong" means "I disapprove of X." Now, does this disapproval" refer to an occurrent or a disposition? Mr. Stevenson has occasionally suggested it makes little difference which we say. But it seems that "I disapprove of X" is definitely a bad analysis if all it means is, "at the moment I feel an impulse to act unfavorably to X". The more satisfactory view is expressed in his paper,

where he says that a man engaged in ethical reflection "is making up his mind about what he really approves of.' "7 Thus part of what we are doing in ethical thinking is finding what types of action are agreeable to our relatively permanent ethical attitudes or convictions. If we use ethical language when we are not taking for granted a relatively permanent acceptance of something, we are misusing it.

If I am correct in this, then we know two truth criteria for ethical sentences in English, and hence part of the analysis of ethical terms.

Can we fill in the rest of the analysis? This is of course a question off act. The chief ground for doubt about it in my own mind is just the vague impression that ethical language is perhaps too ambiguous vague, and various, as between one person and another, to permit us to say that the cognitive problems of ethics are this and that. But, considering our tendency to underestimate the cognitive processes of other people, particularly persons not well known to us, this impression deserves empirical investigation which it has not yet received.

Now let us suppose, for the sake of the argument, that some nonemotive ethical analysis could be carried through successfully, in the sense I have described. Would it still be possible to hold that ethical disagreements are really disagreements in attitude, not cognitive ones? I believe proponents of the emotive theory would say that it would be.

In Mr. Stevenson's terminology, it would be held by them that the possibility of an analysis of this sort, for a given linguistic and cultural tradition, would merely reflect the accidental fact that all ethical disagreements in that group were "rooted in disagreements in belief".

It would be possible, they would say, that a person in this tradition change his mind and disagree in attitude with these definitions, and then our idyllic state in which the ethical problem seemed to be purely.

cognitive would no longer exist Their view on this point, however, seems to presuppose the truth of the emotive theory, of the Disagreement in Attitude thesis. What is not clear to me is what reason there could be, if an analysis could be carried through in the manner suggested, for holding that the Disagreement in Attitude thesis is correct. Some of the members of the emotive group sometimes write as if it were just obvious that, so long as our aims, purposes, and aspirations differ, we must still be disagreeing ethically, no matter how much we may be agreed in belief; but to my mind that is just the point to be proved. If, when we have got our meanings for "right" clear, we are agreed as to what is right, I do not see the ethical relevance of any attitudinal disagreements.

Mr. Stevenson has offered one argument, which appears intended to be an independent proof that ethical disagreements are disagreements in attitude. He asserts that various social groups differ more sharply on ethical matters than they do on factual ones and that this is more readily

explicable if we assume that ethical opinions involve disagreements in attitude.8 Apparently what this means is that if one works out a theory of social change he will be able to explain why different groups come by sharp ethical differences, if these are differences of attitude, but he cannot explain it so well if they are regarded as differences of belief. This is a large question, and there are serious difficulties in the argument. First, it has never been demonstrated that differences of ethical opinion are more marked than differences which are obviously differences in belief, such as opinions about theology or metaphysics; and particularly is this true if we bear in mind the fact that actions have, or are believed to have, very different effects in one culture from those they have in another. In the second place, verification of Mr. Stevenson's thesis assumes that we can make a causal analysis of ethical opinions, relating them through laws to their sources, if we assume them to be attitudes, not if we assume them to be beliefs. This assumption, however, is a very difficult one, in view of the fact that the psychological principles governing belief formation are very similar to those governing attitude formation; beliefs are very often as much subject to needs and pressures as are attitudes. I am‹ however, inclined to think that Mr. Stevenson is right in saying that this variation indicates that ethical opinions somehow involve attitudes.

Still, the facts and theories available, or likely to be available, are certainly far too crude to enhance the probability of the theory that ethical disagreements are disagreements in attitude, as distinct from the theory that they are disagreements in belief about attitudes.