Epistemic Significance of Emotivism

TOLUWALASE AJAYI
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Abstract. This paper examines the epistemic significance of emotivism, emotivism is an important breakthrough in the exposition of ethics and its subject matter. Emotivism embraces a number of different views. The best known expression of the theory could be found in the writings of the American philosopher C.L.Stevenson, and it is with his version of emotivism and his ideas on the nature of moral judgements that we shall base our argument. The paper deploys the critical tool of academic philosophy to the epistemic significance of emotivism. While acknowledging the fact that emotivism has paved a new way for looking at ethical issues, the paper defends the thesis that by emphasizing the roles of reasons, Stevenson offers an account which, despite making attitudes the primary element of ethical language, it is compatible with the existence of ethical reasoning. Our moral opinions and the evidence we have for them, are analogous to the opinions and evidence we have concerning non moral matters, it is possible to know or be justified in believing moral propositions in the very same sense as factual propositions, and we have good reason to believe that some of our moral opinions are true.

Keywords: C.L. Stevenson**,** Emotivism, Ethics, Moral judgment, Moral knowledge.

1. Introduction

Emotivism can be defined as an "ethical theory which holds that moral judgements are simply expressions of one's emotions, one's feelings or one's attitude towards an action" (Omoregbe, 1993:261). The emotivists do not see moral statements as factual statements that convey any information about actions, but rather they see it as an attitude which the person who makes the statement has adopted towards the action in question. The attitude or feelings or emotions may be favourable or unfavourable, negative or positive, and that is what he expresses when he makes a moral judgement about the action. The "first to propose the theory were I.A.Richards and C.K.Ogden (1873) in their *The Meaning of Meaning*" (Tsinorema, 1988:613).The consensus of the emotivist is that moral judgements and ethical concepts such as good, right, bad, and other moral values have emotive meanings. Moral judgements about whether something is good or bad in its right are contained wholly in the field of ethics. One of the leading exponents of this theory is C.L.Stevenson. Stevenson's book tilted, *Ethics and Language* presents a detailed analysis of ethical statements. The task of this paper is to discuss the epistemic significance of those central or fundamental parts of Stevenson's emotive theory and his ideas on the nature of moral judgements. We show how defensible or indefensible, coherent or incoherent, meaningful or meaningless, the emotive theories are. In other words, we provide the grounds for objection, inconsistencies and limitations to and within the claims of C.L.Stevenson's ethical theory.

2. The Emotive Theory of C.L.Stevenson

Charles Leslie Stevenson was born in "Cincinnati, Ohio. He studied at Yale University as an undergraduate, later at Cambridge, England, and took Ph.D. at Havard in 1935" (Kurtz, 1966:434). Stevenson is the author of essays in ethics, aesthetics, and linguistic philosophy. His best known publication is his book *Ethics and Language* published in 1944. Stevenson worked out in great detail an emotive theory similar to that espoused by Ayer, Carnap, and other logical positivist. To him the task of ethics is that of metaethics i.e. the analysis of ethical terms. And the way we resolve ethical terms are used to fulfill two functions (1) To express ones feelings about something and (2) To evoke similar feelings in others.

Stevenson claims that for us to know the meaning of a piece of language we have to know what particular use is made of it in discourse. Following the decline of the verifications theory, it became obvious that a sentence could be meaningful without being analytic or empirically verifiable. In his causal or psychological theory of meaning, Stevenson maintains that "the meaning of a linguistic sign is a dispositional property of the sign to cause or be caused by certain psychological process in the hearers and speakers respectively. Its meaning is constituted by the dispositional as been caused by and would not have developed without, an absolute process of conditioning which has attended the signs use in communication" (Ross, 1930:54). While distinguishing between descriptive and emotive meaning, he maintains that the descriptive meaning is the disposition of a sign to affect cognition, mental activities such as thinking, supposing. Stevenson defines emotive meaning as ''the power that the word acquires, on account of its history in emotional situations, to evoke or directly express attitudes, as distinct from describing them'' (1944:33). He takes moral language to have primarily emotive meaning; hence moral judgements for example express the attitudes of the speaker and may also be intended to evoke similar attitudes in the hearer.

If a person says 'A is good', he is using this ethical statement to express his positive feelings about 'A' and at the same time he is also trying, by means of this statement to evoke similar positive feelings about 'A'. In other words, what the person who says 'A' is good is actually saying is that: 'I approve of 'A': Do as well, Stevenson also use the term 'magnetism' to express moral judgements by saying that: A person who recognizes B to be good must *ipso facto* acquire a stronger tendency to act in its favour than he otherwise would have had. Ethical judgements evoke the sentiments of the person expressing them.

In his psychological method, Stevenson claims that "ethical statements are both emotive and descriptive: This is good has the meaning of this has a quality or relations x, y, z……. 'Except that 'good' has as well a laudatory emotive meaning which permits it to express the speaker's approval of the hearer" (1944:34). He further differentiates two kinds of agreement or disagreement in morals, one in belief, and the other in attitude. Disagreement in attitude rests on disagreement in belief, hence, setting matters of facts and securing agreement in belief may lead to agreement in attitude. But it is possible for two people to agree on the relevant facts but still disagree in their attitude towards them.

Stevenson argues that no factual or logical considerations can compel us to adopt certain attitudes rather than others. No factual statement is logically more relevant to a moral evaluation than any other factual statement. There is need for evaluation in our choice of factual statements to adopt as reason for value judgements. Though, Stevenson does not deny that moral judgements can have descriptive meaning but rather he says there is always an emotive element in their meaning which differentiates them from mere statements of fact and gives them their distinctive function in language.

When a moral judgement is delivered, a distinction is drawn between a factual state of affairs in the judgement and the positive or negative evaluation which is passed on that state of affairs. "The former is factual belief and it constitutes the descriptive meaning while the latter is an expression of attitude towards what is said to be the case and constitutes the emotive meaning of the judgement" (Tsinorema, 1988:616). He went further to say that belief and attitude, though distinct they are causally related and interwoven in that believe can influence attitude and cause them to change.

3. The Weaknesses of Emotivism

When we argue, we seem to be doing more than just expressing feelings. Moral views are to be consistent and coherent, but this would not be expected if they were mere feelings which are beyond the reach of reason. Emotivism seems to reduce ethical debate to emotional manipulation. We do not necessarily become emotional when discussing moral issues; we can recognize the immorality of certain actions without being moved emotionally. If ethical statements were contingent on emotions, they would change as emotions change. They cannot be universal because emotions vary between individuals, even when moral statements are carried by weight of public emotions, it does not make them right, nor should they be adopted. There have been, as a matter of fact a great many different moral standards both in the past and at present day. But it is difficult for us to say that one is better than the other.

When we look at Ayer's and Stevenson's form of emotivism we discovered that they are based on two different theories of meaning. Ayer's form of emotivism is different from the subjective theory of ethics. While the subjectivist maintains that ethical statements are expressions and excitants of feeling which do not necessarily involve any assertions. A.J.Ayer is of the opinion that since moral judgements does not assert anything, it is impossible

to argue about genuine questions of moral value, because if nothing is asserted nothing can be denied. From this analysis we can say that Ayer puts moral values beyond reason and view morality as fundamentally non rational. Ayer disagree with the intuitionist belief in the existence of mysterious 'non natural properties', he argues that moral judgement should not be viewed as mysterious as the intuitionist make us belief.

In his analysis of the methodology of moral argument Stevenson distinguishes between logical and psychological. The logical way of solving disagreement has to do with the consistency of the reasons, i.e. factual beliefs, that is given in moral judgements. Stevenson claims that this meant only for the exception not the rule. He went further and distinguished between the rational and non rational methods. The 'rational' methods test the truth and comprehensiveness of the supporting beliefs, and by changing people's beliefs they effect a change in their attitudes. "Both the rational and non rational methods aim at creating an influence". (Tsinomera, 1988:618). The consequence of this is that if I say 'B is good' according to Stevenson, I am only expressing my own feelings about B and at the same time evoke similar feelings in others. Emotivism presents moral discourse as a standard setting and not a standard using. But how reasonable is this theory of emotivism? Omoregbe writes:

Emotivism is untenable. Moral standards could not be so easily explained as expression of inner feelings; that make no assertions about actions. Nor is Stevenson's explanation as to why there are moral disagreements satisfactory. When a person says that murder is bad, he makes an assertion concerning the nature (the moral nature) of the action of murder. And if another person comes along and says that murder is good, he too has made an assertion concerning the nature (the moral nature) of the action of murder (1991:135).

Both Ayer and Stevenson argued that moral judgements is mainly expressive. We have moral judgements that emanates from objective moral principles. The good reason for anything we do should not be seen in the light of the agent but rather, it should conform to the objective meaning of goodness based on rationality. If for example we set out to create an influence by delivering moral judgement, we must bear in mind that the hearers do not already have the attitude which the judgement wish to produce. We must equally assume that our uttering the judgement will produce the adoption of a relevant attitude. But the truth of the matter is that moral judgements are often delivered without any of the aforementioned conditions. In most cases when we utter moral judgement, it may be that our hearers already share the same attitude with us.

On the other hand, we may not really want our hearer to share the same attitudes with us; as a result we do not bother whether the judgement will change our hearer's opinion. In question of factual belief emotivist accept distinction between good and bad evidence, but when it comes to moral attitudes they do not think that there could be a distinction. Emotivist argues that moral arguments are judged only by their capacity to produce the desired effect but not in terms of good or bad reasons. If the main function of a moral judgement is to produce a psychological effect, it may achieve the desired result with being understood or being intelligible. "Emotively effective may not necessarily be intelligible, we can achieve an influence effectively through non rational means e.g. bribery or threats" (Tsinorema, 1988:619), even though we disapprove both methods morally no matter how they give us desired result. To Stevenson it is not necessary to have reasons in morals; he argues that reasons support moral judgements psychologically and not morally. He conceives the reasons character of moral language in causal terms and argued that the rules of moral discourse can only be effective or ineffective. From this analysis Stevenson presents "morality to us not as a form of rational communication but as a form of manipulation and propaganda" (Tsinorema, 1988: 619).

Stevenson mistakenly takes disagreement in moral attitude and disagreement about the method of moral argument to be the same. Questions pertaining to morals and rational discourse can only be solved by the logical structure of the discourse and not by the attitude. Ozumba declares that

It does not make sense to perceive morality as involving only evocation and persuasion. Emotivism accepts the fact that agreements and disagreement are genuine occurrences in ethical disagreements. For instance when one says 'K' is good' he is expressing the view that 'K' is good', is it because the agent like 'K' or is it because 'K' POSSESSES certain qualities. Which make it good? In what sense are we using the word good here? Is it as something we have interest in or something that should be desirable? But should the meaning of good be found in interest and desirability? And not in right and universability? (2001:110).

If we follow the emotivist patterns of argument it means that everyone will be on the lookout for his own selfish motive, this can culminate into conflict.

Emotions should not be the basis of our judgements, emotions are bound to change, and the validity should be based not on emotions but on objective ground.

4. Epistemic Significance: In Defense of Moral Judgements

What does it mean to say that someone knows, or fail to know something? How much do we or can we know? How can we use our reason, our senses, the testimony of others, or others and other sources to acquire knowledge? Are there limits to what we can know? Are some things unknowable? Is it possible that we do not know nearly as much as we think we do? On the other hand, why do people argue, disagree and even quarrel over the rightness or wrongness of certain actions? Why do we have moral disputes and disagreements? What causes moral disputes? When men make moral judgements, what exactly are they doing? When our conscience tells us that an action is good or right, what is implied in the statement that we make? Or better still when the ordinary man makes such judgements, what is it that he intends to say, rightly or wrongly, from the moral point of view when we use the terms 'right' and 'wrong ' we have one implication or the other in mind, for example, when we talk about 'right' we are referring to moral fittingness.

Epistemology is considered one of the major branches of philosophy, it is the philosophical analysis of the nature of knowledge and the conditions required for a belief to constitute knowledge, such as truth and justification. One possesses moral knowledge when one's moral opinions are true and held justifiably. "Justification is a matter of how one's beliefs fit together. A person belief stands as justified and in light of the relations it bears to the person's other beliefs. If this is right, then defending the possibility of our moral beliefs being justified requires showing that they might actually stand in the relations that are required either to each other or to our other beliefs" (White, 2019:12). Different theories of justification, and different models of knowledge, go with different accounts of what counts as evidence for, or justification of, our moral views and with different accounts of when and how we might acquire moral knowledge. Since moral epistemology is the study of what would be involved in knowing, or in having justified in, moral propositions, Kailton argues that "it is possible to hold that what we know when we have moral knowledge is some empirically accessible fact". (2020:15). Cognitivism implies that moral propositions can be known, in the same very sense as ordinary factual propositions. When we view the nature of moral judgements from the perspective of value, a person who, for example says 'The action of good' is giving us information about the worth of the action, or telling us that the action has some value. The same thing applies when we say alms giving is good, or that a character is good. Here, the ethical meaning of good agrees with the other meaning of good that we studied in Axiology. In this aspect of value, we usually use the term 'good' and 'bad' and not 'right' and 'wrong'.

"The structure of justification requires an unshakeable foundation. Epistemic foundationalists hold that we cannot be justified in believing anything unless at least some of our beliefs are certain, indubitable, or infallible and self evident". (Huemer, 2018: 10). Defending the possibility of our moral beliefs being justified requires showing either that some such beliefs enjoy the required privileged status or that they are properly related to beliefs that do. It is important to say that it is not in all cases that the term 'right' means something that produces good results. "While the teleological school of thought maintains that we cannot pass any moral judgement on an action without taking into consideration the intention, the deontological school claims otherwise, to them certain actions are intrinsically wrong irrespective of the intention, circumstances and the consequences of the actions" (Omoregbe,1993:73). Examples of this type of actions include adultery, abortion, and masturbation.

The deontological school view moral judgement from the *a priori,* and the teleological school from the *a posteriori* . We must say that the advocates of deontologism are wrong, there is no way we can view an action ontologically to consider their moral worth, good or bad. To say that an action is morally wrong without taking into consideration the intention, the circumstances, and the expected results is untenable. It is only when we can provide an answer to the intended and anticipated results that we can tell whether it is good or bad. Very often moral judgement comes with the force of an order; Kant sees moral law as an imperative. In judging a piece of conduct morally, we say that somebody ought to do certain actions. In analyzing this we use the phrases 'we ought to do' something or it is 'our duty' to do something. Morality to Omoregbe is highly subjective; to "when we make a moral judgement about any action what we are doing is just expressing our personal attitudes or feelings" (1993:75). According to Stevenson, for example if I say 'This action is good' what I am saying is that I like this action do so as well. On the other hand if I say 'An

action is wrong' and someone else says 'it is right' each of us is only making an assertion about his own feelings or if I say 'I like chocolate' and a friend of mine answered 'I don't like chocolate' there is no disagreement over the morality of our actions. As a matter of fact we disagree with the emotive theory, because we all know that moral judgement is a factual statement which makes an assertion that could be true or false.

Many people claim that rightness of an action like speaking the truth consists not merely in its producing good results; they believe that it is still right if it produced bad results. Its rightness, they believe that it is still right if it produced bad results. Its rightness depends on its being morally fitting thing to do in most circumstances, although not in all. In the words of Lillie:

An action's rightness depends on its moral, or its moral suitability, and the mental attitude of the agent is the dominating factor in determining its suitability, the spirit in which help is giving is more important for the rightness of the action than the nature of the help. It is certainly the case that mental conditions must be taken into account, but there is also an objective moral fittingness. There is moral fittingness in a man attempting to save a drowning child, even although his inability to swim makes his action useless. (2018:84).

When the ordinary man says an action is good or right, it means that he is saying something which is true, it is of course possible that he is mistaken in this. We judge a 'will', a 'motive', an 'intention', a 'purpose', and even a 'character', to be good in so far as each of these may be normally expected to produce a good action. In speaking of good action, we must be careful not to limit the term 'action' to the simple bodily movement of the agent, the motive, intention, purpose, hence speaking the truth in malice is not really the same action as speaking the truth in love. Human behaviour appears as the proper object of all those personal and moral reactions, judgments and attitudes to which, as social beings, we are naturally prone; or, to put the same point differently, human actions and human agents appear to be the bearers of objective moral properties.

The non-cognitive argues that there is no such thing as moral knowledge that there are no place within evaluative discourse for terms such as fact, truth, reality and such like, is commonly referred to as moral cognitive. Most of the non-cognitivist interpret moral disagreement in terms of disagreement in attitudes towards non-moral facts and refuse to concede the possibility of a moral reality that can be

described. The truth of the matter is that moral knowledge cannot be reduced to something merely propositional. The quest for knowledge in the moral realm is more than an enquiry into what to believe, it is equally concerned with what is require. Mackie denies that there is any such thing as moral reality he argues "that the argument from relativity has as its premise the well known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community. Such variation is in itself merely a truth of descriptive morality, a fact of anthropology, all of which makes it difficult to treat moral judgments as apprehension of objective truths" (1977:36). Even though moral disagreement may well suggest a prima facie reason to be skeptical about the possibility of moral realism and the existence of objective moral judgements, but before jumping into such a conclusion, it is worth remembering that commitment to moral realism whilst is not the possibility that all moral disputes should be resolvable, it certainly allows for such a possibility, the mere existence of disagreement does nothing to invalidate moral realism. Most of such disputes are resolvable in principle. This is because a great deal of moral disagreement relates to the fact of matter in disputes, that is to say non-moral facts. It follows that we should not conclude that disagreement over factual matters is never subject to resolution and with it a corresponding agreement over the moral disputes like the nature and relevant of personal responsibility. On the other hand, moral disagreement is also as a result of insufficient attention to the facts, such as ignorant, insensitivity or lack of imagination and when these are overcome, there is at least a measure of hope that the disputing parties stand a greater chance of reaching some kind of agreement is never resolvable because people's opposing commitments to what is seen as having ultimate significance. This lack of disagreement is an inevitable consequences of moral pluralism, but this need not force us into becoming moral skeptics, as will more readily be appreciated after the case for objective moral judgements has been made.

Ethics also serves as a "moral guides or principles of behavior for deciding what is right and wrong" (Quirk, 1955:466). Frankena takes ethics to be primarily concerned with "providing the general outlines of normative theory to help us in answering problems about what is right or wrong, or ought to be done, and as being interested in meta – ethical questions mainly because it seems necessary to answer such questions before one can be entirely satisfied with one's normative theory" (1993:5).

Ethics has no universally acceptable definition; it can be and has been defined in various ways. It can be defined primarily as a part of the "quest for truth and the motive for studying; it is the desire for knowledge" (Lillie, 2018:18). The analytic schools sees the task of ethics as mainly the analysis and clarification of moral terms, such as 'good', 'bad', 'duty', but the truth of the matter is that the task of ethics is more than the analysis and clarification of moral terms. We all want to know the truth about things, and ethics aims at finding out the truth about something: hence a mere knowledge of ethical principles is not enough to keep us in the paths of virtue. Omoregbe's view in this regard is correct, when he says that:

The analysis and clarification of moral terms is a means to the end of ethics. When we study ethics, we are studying the principles of morality and the purpose of studying these principles is not just to know them but to conform our conduct to them. If the function of moral principles is to guide conduct, the purpose of studying them must be to know them in order to conform to them. (1993:9).

The two sub branches of ethics are (1) Meta ethics and (2) Normative ethics (Ozumba, 2001:6). Metaethics is concerned with the analysis of ethical terms such as 'good', 'bad', 'duty', etc. hence metaethics asks the question what do we mean when we say that an action is good or bad. Emotivism is an example of metaethical theory. Normative ethics on the other hand centres on the norms, standards or principles of human behavior. There are several terms that is usually used in judging human actions by ethical standards, for example, we say that an action is 'good' or 'bad', 'right', or 'wrong', 'moral', or 'immoral'. At times we say that we 'ought' to do an action, that we 'should' do it, we 'should not' do it, or it is our 'duty' not to do it. From the foregoing the word 'good' indicates an attitudes of mind in favour of the object or event to which the term good is applied, such that almost anything may be termed good if anyone finds himself in favour of its existence, hence there is a great deal of ambiguity.
By and large, our business in ethics is to try to reach meanings which will be generally accepted and free from ambiguity and inconsistency, but unfortunately we are not likely to attain this in ethics because ethical terms are words in common use on men's lips and are liable to constant change in meaning.

5. Conclusion

Epistemology deals with the study of knowledge, specifically with what we know and how we know it.

This has to do with justifying our knowledge; it is also associated with the notion of truth. Stevenson's theory is in our ordinary speech, we make moral judgments' on a great many different kinds of objects. We speak of a good motive, goodwill, good intentions, good character, high moral purpose, good actions. If I say 'Joke is evil', I mean that Joke has violated or upset an objective moral order and destroyed a value. This assertion can be true or false; it is not just an expression of my attitude or feelings, but an assertion that can be challenged that can be contradicted, and that can be justified. While we recognize the fact that there are subjective elements in morality e.g. intention, motive, and psychological states. It is of course necessary to say that what make up the morality of an action may be described as a product of the joint operations between the objective elements and the subjective elements.

References

Frankena, William (1993): *Ethics,* (Second Edition) New Delhi: Prentice Hall.
Huemer, John (2018): *Elements of Epistemic Knowledge,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Kailton, Sarah (2020), *The Epistemology of Controversy,* New York: Oxford University Press.
Kurtz, Paul (1966): *American Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, London: Macmillan.
Lillie, William (2018): *An Introduction to Ethics*, London: Methuen and Co.
Mackie, J.L. (1977): *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Harmondsworth: Penguin
Omoregbe, Joseph (1991): *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy, Vol.3, Contemporary Philosophy,* Lagos: Joja Publishers.
Omoregbe, Joseph (1993): *Ethics, A Systematic and Historical Study*, Lagos: Joja Publisher.
Ozumba, Godwin (2001), *A Course Text on Ethics, Lagos*: Obaron and Ogbinaka Publishers.
Quirk, L. (1955): *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English,* England: Longman Group Ltd.
Ross, W.D. (1930): *The Right and Good,* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Stevenson, C.L. (1944*): Ethics and Language*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
Tsinomera, Stavroula (1988): ''Emotivism and Prescriptivism'' in G.H.R. Parkinson (ed.). *An Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Great Britain: Routledges and Kegan Paul Ltd.
White, Morton (2019): *Moral Knowledge and Explanatory Importance,* New Haven: Yale University Press.