
Revising the history of metaethics. The case of Ayer's emotivism

*Revisando la historia de la metaética.
El caso del emotivismo de Ayer*

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is double. In the first part I argue against the traditional interpretation of Ayer's emotivism. According to this interpretation, in *Language, Truth and Logic* Ayer based emotivism on his "radical empiricist" (positivist) view. I argue that this is not so. Then, in the second part I develop a new interpretation of emotivism according to which Ayer's analysis of moral vocabulary does not depend on positivism. The purpose of the article is to contribute to the history of metaethics by presenting a correct account of Ayer's analysis.

Keywords: Ayer, emotivism, positivism, metaethics.

Resumen: Los objetivos de este trabajo son dos. En la primera parte argumento en contra de la interpretación ortodoxa acerca del análisis emotivista desarrollado por A. J. Ayer. Según esta interpretación, en *Lenguaje, Verdad y Lógica* Ayer presentó el emotivismo basándose en su "empirismo radical" (positivismo). Sostengo que esto no es así. En consecuencia, en la segunda parte desarrollo una nueva interpretación del emotivismo según la cual el análisis del vocabulario moral presentado por Ayer no depende de sus tesis positivistas. El propósito del presente texto es contribuir a la historia de la metaética al ofrecer una correcta interpretación del emotivismo de Ayer.

Palabras clave: Ayer, emotivismo, positivism, metaética.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In *Language, Truth and Logic (LTL)* A. J. Ayer, following his positivist principles, maintained that ethical statements do not have literal meaning and hence cannot be assessed in terms of truthfulness or falsehood. Nevertheless, they are not completely meaningless as metaphysical statements. They have a different sort of meaning: emotive meaning. This is the received view of Ayer's emotivism in metaethics, or as I call it, the "orthodox interpretation"¹. Despite being the most common interpretation in over 100 years of metaethical history, according to Ayer it misconstrues his analysis:

The emotive theory of values [...] has provoked a fair amount of criticism; but I find that this criticism has been directed more often *against the positivistic principles on which the theory has been assumed to depend than against the theory itself*. Now I do not deny that in putting forward this theory I was concerned with maintaining the general consistency of my position; but it is not the only ethical theory that would have satisfied this requirement, nor does it actually entail any of the non-ethical statements which form the remainder of my argument. Conse-

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1. See D. ROSS, *The Foundation of Ethics* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1939); B. BLANSHARD, *The New Subjectivism in Ethics*, "Philosophy and Phenomenological Research" 9/3 (1948) 504-511; G. KERNER, *The Revolution in Ethical Theory* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1966); G. WARNOCK, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (Macmillan, London, 1967); M. WARNOCK, *Ethics since 1900* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1968); J. URMSON, *The Emotive Theory of Ethics* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1968); W. HUDSON, *Modern Moral Philosophy* (Macmillan, London, 1970); E. RABOSI, *Emotivismo ético, positivismo lógico e irracionalismo*, "Dianoia" 17 (1971) 36-61; S. SATRIS, *The Theory of Value and the Raise of Ethical Emotivism*, "Journal of the History of Ideas" 43 (1982) 109-128; S. SATRIS, *Ethical Emotivism* (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, 1987); D. WIGGINS, *Ayer's Ethical Theory: Emotivism or Subjectivism?* in P. GRIFFITHS (ed.), *A. J. Ayer Memorial Essays* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991) 181-196; M. SMITH, *The Moral Problem* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1994); A. MILLER, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics* (Polity Press, Oxford, 2003); N. ZAVADIVKER, *Alfred Ayer y la teoría emotivista de los enunciados morales*, "Anuario Filosófico" XLI/3 (2008) 661-685; A. FISHER, *Metaethics: An Introduction* (Acumen, Durham, 2011); M. BEVIR, J. BLAKELY, *Analytic Ethics in the Central Period*, "History of European Ideas" 37/3 (2011) 249-256; M. VAN ROOJEN, *Metaethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Routledge, New York, 2015).

quently, even if it could be shown that these other statements were invalid, this would not in itself refute the emotive analysis of ethical judgments; and in fact I believe this analysis to be valid on its own account².

We face here a paradox. On the one hand we see that an array of philosophers assert that Ayer did base emotivism on his positivist principles but, on the other hand, Ayer himself asserts the contrary. This paradox, which lies at the core of the history of metaethics, has so far not been tackled.

I take it to be the conjunction of the three following points that make the paradox arise: (1) chapter VI of *LT* is not clear; we cannot exactly comprehend how Ayer is arguing for emotivism. Despite this, as the quotation shows (2) Ayer was aware that emotivism was independent of positivism but nevertheless (3) he did not justify how this might be so. Points (1) and (3) joined together with the generalized attitude of regarding any article, text or book authored by a logical positivist to be a text which is predominantly epistemological are the sources from which the orthodox interpretation originates. What to do then with point (2)? How to make sense of Ayer's quotation? He surely must have had reasons for stating that his emotivist analysis is independent of the positivist principles. But then again, where are those reasons stated? They are nowhere to be found. Thus, a natural and quick reaction is to resort to the orthodox interpretation's pattern of explanation.

I do not think that the orthodox interpretation is correct, and this is why in this paper I will put forward three arguments for supporting the contrary position: emotivism does not rest upon positivism. These three arguments are stated in section 5, but before presenting them I will briefly present the fundamental theses of positivism and the central postulates of emotivism in sections 2 and 3 respectively; in section 4 I will succinctly expound the main lines of thought of the "orthodox interpretation". In section 6 I will develop an alternative interpretation of emotivism, one which does

2. A. J. AYER, *Language, Truth and Logic* (Dover, New York, 1952) 20.

not fall back on the positivist principles. Finally, in section 7 I will conclude this paper with some comments about the consequences of this work.

2. THE POSITIVIST PRINCIPLES

Ayer, following Hume, divided all propositions in two categories: the *a priori* propositions of logic and mathematics which are analytic, and propositions about empirical matters of fact which are synthetic. Regarding the latter, Ayer adopted the verification principle in order to verify whether an empirical proposition is meaningful or not. These are then the two fundamental positivist principles: (A) the analytic-synthetic distinction and (B) the verificationist theory of literal meaning. Let me explain this a little more in detail.

(A) The analytic-synthetic distinction can be easily understood if we consider the following statements:

1. A bachelor is an unmarried man.
2. Some bachelors are tall.

According to Ayer the difference between (1) and (2) can be spelled out as follows: sentence (1) is analytic because it is impossible for a bachelor to be a married man; denying it would be a contradiction. This proposition only records the way in which the word 'bachelor' is used in English. It does not make any claim about the world. Consequently, it (α) cannot be confuted by any experience and therefore (β) it is always true simply in virtue of its meaning. Differently, a synthetic statement like (2) is one that does describe the world in a certain fashion. Hence, it can be (γ) confuted by experience and (δ) cannot be regarded as certain or necessary.

(B) The principle of verification was the criterion of literal or cognitive significance used by the members of *Der Wiener Kreis* in order to determine whether a putative synthetic statement is meaningful or not. Ayer's version of the principle goes as follows: in order to establish whether a synthetic statement is meaningful or not, one should be able to indicate a possible sense-experience which

would serve to determine the truth or falsehood of the statement. If one can indicate a possible sense-experience, then the statement is meaningful, regardless of the truth or falsehood of it. Conversely, if we cannot, the statement should be regarded as a pseudo-proposition: a meaningless proposition.

3. THE EMOTIVIST ANALYSIS

Ayer's emotivism consists of three tenets. The first one is about the status of ethical statements: they are unverifiable. The reason he put forward for this assertion was a particular use of the open question argument (OQA) presented by Moore in *Principia Ethica*³. The OQA was the main argument used by Moore to dispose of ethical naturalism⁴. Said differently, the OQA justifies the idea that ethical statements cannot be reduced to natural statements, and so the presence of an ethical word in a statement adds nothing to its empirical content. A sentence such as "it is good to save a drowning child" cannot be identified with "it is pleasurable to save a drowning child" since the word 'pleasure' is not equivalent neither in intension nor extension to 'good'. By resorting to the OQA Ayer claimed that "[since ethical concepts] are irreducible to empirical concepts [...] we are therefore justified in saying that [...] ethical statements are held to be unverifiable [...] The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content"⁵.

The second tenet is about the function of ethical words. They are employed to manifest the speaker's feelings. Thus, if I say to my friend "you acted bad in not saving that drowning child" I am not saying anything more than if I had just said "you did not save that drowning child." The moral word 'bad' does not state any factual event. It only serves to put into words my moral feelings about the

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3. G. E. MOORE, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993).
 4. Ethical naturalism is the thesis that ethical properties are reducible to observable, empirical or natural properties. Or, alternatively, ethical naturalism maintains that ethical sentences are about matters of fact. See N. STURGEON, *Moore on Ethical Naturalism*, "Ethics" 113/3 (2003) 528.
 5. A. AYER, *LTL* cit., 106-107.

situation. Or, as Ayer puts it “the function of the relevant ethical word is purely “emotive.” It is used to express feeling about certain objects, but not to make any assertion about them”⁶.

The third and final tenet is about a further function of moral language. According to Ayer, ethical statements are also used to provoke feelings in other speakers so as to stimulate them to perform (or not) actions. For example, the sentence “‘it is your duty to tell the truth’ may be regarded both as the expression of a certain sort of ethical feeling about truthfulness and as the expression of the command ‘Tell the truth’”⁷.

4. THE ORTHODOX INTERPRETATION

The orthodox interpretation maintains that Ayer’s emotivism is derived from and supported by the positivist principles. This way of presenting emotivism started with one of the first reactions against it, namely with D. W. Ross’ book *The Right and the Good*. There he wrote:

[The] denial that when we use such terms as ‘right’ or ‘good’ we mean (as opposed to expressing) anything at all is not, I think, the product of disinterested reflection on such judgments. It is the product of a preconceived theory about judgments in general, viz. of the theory that judgments which are both synthetic and a priori, i.e. are neither tautologous nor empirical, are impossible⁸.

From then on, the critics mainly followed this path: emotivism depends on positivism, therefore if positivism is false, so is emotivism (!)⁹. This manner of dismissing emotivism with one stroke of the pen still goes on exactly like this in the contemporary

6. *Ibidem*.

7. *Ibidem*.

8. W. D. ROSS, *op. cit.*, 35.

9. If positivism is true, then emotivism is true. Positivism is not true. Therefore neither is emotivism. Here we have a clear fallacy of the inverse.

metaethical narrative. By way of illustration, see what van Roojen asserts:

Ayer concluded that moral claims do not meet the two-pronged test for meaningful language. They are neither tautologies nor empirically verifiable. Yet it sure looks like ethical claims are meaningful. So Ayer postulated an alternative expressive role for moral language to explain away the impression of meaning¹⁰.

After reading these passages and bearing in mind Ayer's quotation at the beginning of section 1 it should be plain that there is something odd here: Ayer asserts P (emotivism does not rest upon positivism) and the orthodox interpreters maintain \neg P (emotivism does indeed rest upon positivism). Who is right? In the next section I shall argue that Ayer is, but before I want to remark that the orthodox authors are attributing to Ayer the following argument:

- (1) A statement has cognitive or literal meaning if and only if the statement is analytic or synthetic.
- (2) Ethical statements are not analytic: given any ethical statement such as "P is Q" in which 'Q' is an ethical word, it would never be the case that the denial of the statement's identity would be contradictory.
- (3) Ethical statements are not synthetic: given any ethical statement such as "P is Q" in which 'Q' is an ethical word, it would never be the case that a person could indicate a possible sense-experience which would verify the statement.
- (4) Therefore, from (1) to (3) it follows that ethical statements do not have cognitive or literal meaning.

This argument, which I call the "positivist-ethical argument," only amounts to justify the claim that ethical statements lack cognitive or literal meaning. Therefore, the argument only attributes to Ayer the non-cognitivist thesis: ethical statements cannot be true or false.

10. M. VAN ROJEN, *op. cit.*, 49-50. Emphasis added.

5. ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE ORTHODOX INTERPRETATION

a) *First argument*

At the beginning of the sixth chapter of *LTL* entitled “Critique of Ethics and Theology” Ayer stated:

There is still one objection to be met before we can claim to have justified our view that all synthetic propositions are empirical hypotheses. This objection is based on the common supposition that our speculative knowledge is of two distinct kinds; that which relates to questions of empirical fact, and that which relates to questions of value. It will be said that “*statements of value*” are *genuine synthetic propositions*, but that they cannot with any show of justice be represented as hypotheses, which are used to predict the course of our sensations; and, accordingly, that *the existence of ethics* and aesthetics as branches of speculative knowledge *presents an insuperable objection to our radical empiricist thesis*¹¹.

And some pages later:

Considering the use which we have made of the principle that a synthetic proposition is significant only if it is empirically verifiable, it is clear that the acceptance of an “absolutist” theory of ethics *would undermine the whole of our main argument*¹².

In these quotes Ayer is stating why he directs his attention to ethics. There is a particular conception of ethical knowledge derived from Moore’s *Principia* which maintains that all ethical sentences are “ethical” since all of them refer to the ‘good’ and “*propositions about the good are all of them synthetic and never analytic*”¹³. In addition to this, Moore defends the idea that ethical statements are

11. A. AYER, *LTL* cit., 102. Emphasis added.

12. *Ibidem*, 106. Emphasis added.

13. G. E. MOORE, *op. cit.*, 58. Emphasis added.

synthetic but not verifiable in sense experience, but in the realm of intuition. Ayer, knowing¹⁴ then the possibility of the following counter-argument:

- 1) If the verification principle is true, then all synthetic propositions can be verified by sense-experience.
- 2) Ethical statements are synthetic propositions which cannot be verified by sense-experience.
- 3) Therefore, by (1) and (2) it follows that the verification principle is not true.

directed his attention to ethics to precisely counter this argument. It is not then a sheer impulse towards metaethics that impels Ayer to analyse moral parlance but rather an objection that he must face so as to defend his positivist principles. In other words, Ayer turned to metaethics in order to face a possible objection that would have challenged his very positivist principles. According to the orthodox interpreters, being that emotivism is based upon positivism, Ayer's argument against Intuitionism is the following:

- (1) If a sentence is synthetic, then it should be possible to indicate a certain sense-experience that would verify it.
- (2) It is not possible to indicate a sense-experience to verify ethical sentences.

14. Indeed, Ayer was well aware of Moore's characterization of ethical sentences: "TH: To go back to before *Language, Truth and Logic*, do you remember a first encounter with philosophy, a first encounter with a philosophical argument or problem? AA: Yes indeed. I was a classical scholar at Eton and read Plato (...) But I think even before that, I discovered philosophy on my own. The first book I ever read was Bertrand Russell's *Sceptical essays* (...) I also at that time was interested in aesthetics—an interest I've not kept up— and I read Clive Bell's little book on art. He defends the view that beauty, like good, is an unanalysable non-natural quality. He says that for the arguments in favour of this view, he recommends Moore's *Principia Ethica*. I dutifully went out and bought it, and for several years, I believed Moore. Only in my second year at Oxford did I realize that this view was untrue". T. HONDERICH, *An Interview with A. J. Ayer*; in P. GRIFFITHS (ed.), *A. J. Ayer Memorial Essays* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991) 211-212.

- (3) Therefore, by (1) and (2) it follows that ethical sentences are not synthetic.
- (4) If Moore's characterization of ethical sentences is true, then ethical sentences are synthetic.
- (5) By (3) it follows that ethical sentences are not synthetic.
- (6) Therefore, by (4) and (5) it follows that Moore's characterization of ethical sentences is not true.

Ayer clearly did not present this argument. Firstly, he never wrote that he disposes of "absolutism" (intuitionism), as he calls it, using the positivist principles; this argument is nowhere to be found in *Language, Truth and Logic*. Secondly, because if he had presented this argument, he would not have answered the intuitionist's objection, being that the "reply" to them would have consisted in *assuming* the positivist principles in order to justify the same principles. This evidently would not have been a good argument to put forward against intuitionism. My first argument against the Orthodox Interpretation is, therefore, that it fails to explain Ayer's purpose in putting forward his emotivist analysis.

b) Second argument

As I wrote in section 3, Ayer established that one fundamental feature of ethical statements is that they are unverifiable. Authors of the orthodox interpretation such as A. Fisher explain this feature as follows:

What happens when we apply the verification principle to ethics? Ayer claims that "sentences which simply express moral judgments ... are unverifiable". Thus, given that Ayer does not think statements about ethics are analytic, we would expect him to claim that they are meaningless and that they are in the same category as statements made by the theologian or the metaphysician. Surprisingly he does not say this, since he believes moral claims are meaningful¹⁵.

15. A. FISHER, *op. cit.*, 27.

Did Ayer really consider moral sentences as unverifiable because of the verification principle? Before answering this question, I will firstly establish what Ayer meant by 'unverifiable' in the ethical context. Basically, he maintained that ethical statements are unverifiable because they are irreducible to empirical concepts. The challenge in asserting this is that:

we seem to be leaving the way clear for the "absolutist" view of ethics, that is, the view that statements of value are not controlled by observation, as ordinary empirical propositions are, but only by a mysterious "intellectual intuition" (...) with regard to ethical statements, there is, on the "absolutist" or "intuitionist" theory, no relevant empirical test. We are therefore justified in saying that on this theory ethical statements are held to be unverifiable (...) We begin by admitting that the fundamental ethical concepts are unanalysable, inasmuch as there is no criterion by which one can test the validity of the judgments in which they occur. *So far we are in agreement with the absolutists*¹⁶.

Ayer is here explicitly stating that both his characterization of ethical sentences and that of the intuitionist as unverifiable are the same, and this is because they both accept the consequences of the OQA. Now, despite the fact that there are difficulties regarding how to correctly interpret and formulate the OQA¹⁷, I think that for the purposes of this text a generalized version of the OQA can be presented as follows:

- (1) If 'good' has the same meaning as a 'pleasant' (or any other natural predicate) then the question whether pleasant things are good should be closed.
- (2) It is an open question whether pleasant things are good.

16. A. J. AYER, *LTJ* cit., 106-107. Emphasis added.

17. For this problem see F. FELDMAN, *The Open Question Argument: What It Isn't; and What It Is*, "Philosophical Issues" 5/1 (2005) 22-43 and F. FELDMAN, *The Naturalistic Fallacy: What It Is, and What It Isn't*, in N. SINCLAIR (ed.), *The Naturalistic Fallacy* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019) 30-54.

(3) Therefore, ‘good’ has not the same meaning as ‘pleasant’.

The conclusion that Moore draws from this argument is that “there is a simple, indefinable, *unanalysable* (sic) object of thought [good] by reference to which it [ethics] must be defined”¹⁸. From this it follows that ethical statements cannot be identified with natural statements; they are *sui generis*. Therefore, with regard to ethical statements, there is, on Moore’s analysis, no relevant empirical test to “verify” the validity of ethical statements. They are empirically unanalysable. Ayer, as expressed in the citation above, follows Moore in this. He thus did not consider moral sentences as unverifiable because of the verification principle. Therefore, based on this I can now present my second argument: the orthodox interpreters maintain that Ayer considered ethical sentences as unverifiable because of the verification principle, but I have just shown that this is not true. Ayer held ethical sentences to be thus because of the Open Question Argument. This is the second interpretative failure of the orthodox interpretation.

c) *Third argument*

For this third and final argument I want to draw attention to one of the tenets of emotivism that the orthodox interpreters cannot explain nor make sense of. How do they explain Ayer’s characterization of moral sentences as having emotive significance? Resorting to the verificationist criterion. A. Miller, for instance, says:

The criterion of literal significance (...) appears to entail that [ethical] sentences are not literally significant (...) But what then is its semantic function? According to Ayer’s emotivist theory the function of ethical statements is to express feelings or emotions (...) He sometimes describes this conclusion as the claim that “ethical concepts are mere pseudo-concepts” (...) Why doesn’t Ayer simply conclude from the fact that moral

18. G. E. MOORE, *op. cit.*, 72.

judgments are neither analytic nor empirically verifiable that they are verbiage? (...) The idea seems to be this. Although moral judgments are not literally significant, they are not non-sensical, because they possess some other sort of significance: emotive significance¹⁹.

Following the orthodox perspective, Miller attributes to Ayer the positivist-ethical argument (section 4). He believes that Ayer arrived at the conception of emotive meaning using the positivist principles. This seems very puzzling to Miller since both ethical and metaphysical statements are neither analytic nor synthetic. From his perspective it follows that the question “why didn’t Ayer say that ethics, like metaphysics, should be eliminated as well?” is entirely meaningful. But it is only so under the precondition of accepting that Ayer formulated emotivism using the positivist principles. Thus, Miller’s puzzlement is only possible within the framework of the orthodox interpretation. Nevertheless, the question is wrong altogether. It is evident that Ayer never wrote that ethics should be eliminated. Why? Simply because he never argued for emotivism using the positivist principles.

It is important to emphasize that Miller, like many others²⁰, in attributing Ayer the positivist-ethical argument, cannot make sense of one of the fundamental tenets of emotivism: emotive meaning, since the positivist-ethical argument only amounts to justify the claim that ethical statements cannot be assessed in terms of truthfulness and falsehood. Taking this into consideration, I can then construct the following argument:

19. A. MILLER, *Philosophy of Language* (Routledge, London, 2018) 142-143. Emphasis added. For more examples, see A. MILLER, *Emotivism and the Verification Principle*, “Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society” 98 (1998) 103-124.

20. See note 1. See also E. CAMP, *Metaethical Expressivism*, in T. MCPHERSON, D. PLUNKETT (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics* (Routledge, New York, 2018) 90; H. J. GENSLER, *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction*. (Routledge, New York, 2011) 46-47; S. DARWALL, *Philosophical Ethics* (Westview Press, Oxford, 1998) 74. Cf. M. SCHROEDER, *Noncognitivism in Ethics* (Routledge, London, 2010) 20-35.

- 1) If the orthodox interpretation provides a sound exposition of emotivism, then it must establish that ethical statements have emotive significance.
- 2) The orthodox interpretation cannot establish that ethical statements have emotive significance.
 - 2a) Since the positivist-ethical argument cannot establish that ethical sentences have emotive meaning.
- 3) Therefore, from (1) and (2) it follows that the orthodox interpretation does not provide a sound exposition of emotivism.

d) Conclusion of this section

The orthodox interpretation cannot explain the purpose that Ayer had in mind when he wrote chapter VI of *LTL*. Next, it is unable to accord or agree with the text: Ayer clearly stated that he considered ethical sentences as unverifiable because he thought the OQA was a sound argument, not because of the positivist principles. Finally, the orthodox interpretation cannot provide a good explanation of emotivism, since it cannot explicate how it is that ethical statements have emotive significance. I think that these are solid reasons to soundly affirm that it is time to abandon the orthodox interpretation. Here concludes then the first part of this work. Now it is time to provide a new interpretation of emotivism. That is what I will proceed to do in the next section.

6. EMOTIVISM, INTUITIONISM AND OCKHAM'S RAZOR

Before beginning to present a new interpretation of emotivism, I think that it will be worthwhile to restate Ayer's objective for including an analysis of ethical concepts in his work: to present an ethical analysis sound in itself and also to avoid possible objections to his radical empiricism. With that said, I will proceed now to present a new interpretation of emotivism.

Ayer starts off chapter sixth considering two moral theories, utilitarianism and subjectivism, which offer the possibility of

reducing ethical sentences to observational sentences. Because of this feature, these analyses are called “naturalistic”²¹. The utilitarian holds that moral properties such as goodness or righteousness can be analysed in terms of pleasure, whereas the subjectivist maintains that the properties are to be analysed in terms of feelings of approval. Her analysis would render the sentence “P is good” as “I approve of P.” Despite their divergence in their manner of carrying out their analyses, both theories reduce ethical sentences to a subcategory of psychological or sociological sentences. This is then why they are *prima facie* tempting for Ayer. In effect, if either the utilitarian or subjectivist are right, then moral sentences are susceptible of being empirically verified. Nonetheless, Ayer thinks that both theories are incorrect, since it is not contradictory to deny the identification proposed for the analyses, and, were they correct, then it would indeed be contradictory to deny the identification of *analysans* and *analysandum*. In argumentative terms:

1. If the utilitarian analysis is true, then it is incorrect to deny that “what is good is pleasurable.”
2. Nonetheless, it is not incorrect to deny that “what is good is not pleasurable”.
3. Therefore, the utilitarian analysis is not true.

This is Ayer’s variation of Moore’s open question argument. Using it again, Ayer claims that the same argument applies to the subjectivist analysis, which produces the same result: it is not incorrect to negate the identity proposed by the analysis. Hence, Ayer denies that both utilitarianism and subjectivism are correct analyses of ethical concepts. Furthermore, since the argument can virtually be applied to *any* analysis with the same result, Ayer contents that “sentences which contain normative ethical symbols are not equivalent to sentences which express psychological propositions, or indeed empirical propositions of any kind”²². In stating this, Ayer accepts

21. See note 4.

22. A. J. AYER, *LTL* cit., 105.

one of the central conclusions of the OQA, namely, that ethical properties are absolute, *sui generis*, and cannot be analysed in non-moral terms. Thus, ‘good’ is “unlike anything else in the natural world”²³. The fact that Ayer himself uses the OQA²⁴ to justify the idea that ethical sentences are unverifiable marks a major difference with the orthodox interpretation. Let us remember that the philosophers who adhere to such interpretation claim that Ayer regards ethical sentences as unverifiable because of his positivism.

So, being that ethical sentences cannot be analysed in non-ethical sentences, then it follows that

(T) The truth value of ethical sentences cannot be verified or proved by any empirical method

for, in order to do so, we would need to translate it into an observational sentence. For example, if we wanted to verify the truth value of a sentence such as “it is good to stop climate change” a plausible method would consist in translating ‘good’ for an observational property ‘X’ and then proceeding to see whether it is the case or not that X. Nonetheless, the OQA cancels any attempt to resort to this procedure, since it will show that ‘good’ and whatever property might ‘X’ be will virtually never correspond in meaning. In this way, moral properties then cannot be analysed in different terms. But then how do we actually apprehend moral properties altogether? The intuitionist *à la* Moore answers by claiming that we actually apprehend a moral property such as ‘good’ by means of intellectual intuition²⁵. An answer like this is not poor in metaphysical

23. S. NUCCETELLI, *Should Analytical Descriptivists Worry about the Naturalistic Fallacy?*, in N. SINCLAIR (ed.), *The Naturalistic Fallacy* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019) 164.

24. A. J. AYER, *LTJ* cit., 104-106. He uses the argument once again in *On the Analysis of Moral Judgments* in A. J. AYER (ed.), *Philosophical Essays* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1954) 231-249.

25. See S. SVAVARSDÓTTIR, *Evaluations of Rationality*, in T. HORGAN, M. TIMMONS (eds.), *Metaethics after Moore* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006) 61; P. BLOOMFIELD, *Opening Questions, Following Rules*, in T. HORGAN, M. TIMMONS (eds.), *op. cit.*, 177.

consequences, for from here it follows that moral words refer to supernatural entities. Ayer himself was deeply troubled with this consequence. It is understandable then why some historians of metaethics mark the second stage in the development of the subject with the reactions against the appeal to a metaphysical intuitive faculty²⁶.

Ayer, contrary to the intuitionist, explains that we do not actually apprehend ethical properties, but rather we are “built” somehow naturally with them, due to the fact that ethical symbols serve as the expression of the speaker’s emotions²⁷. As the expression of feelings, ethical sentences cannot be true or false. This fact explains why the presence of an ethical symbol in a sentence does not add anything to the empirical content of it. For instance, if I say “you did wrong by not saving that drowning child” the presence of the term ‘wrong’ does not add anything to the factual content that the sentence already conveys: that the child was drowning. What I really do by uttering the word ‘wrong’ is to express my emotions regarding the fact that the child was drowning. If I now generalise the sentence and utter “not saving children is bad!” I pronounce a sentence that has no factual meaning, does not designate any particular fact.

So far then, Ayer has established that:

- (1) Ethical sentences possess emotive meaning. That is,
 - (2) Ethical sentences express the emotion(s) of the speaker.
- And since they do so,
- (3) Ethical sentences can neither be true nor false.

It is (1) the fundamental idea that allows Ayer to reject the dubious consequences of the intuitionist analysis. Indeed, contrary to the Intuitionist who from (T) deduces:

- I. The faculty of intuition is in charge of apprehending ethical properties. Since they are so apprehended, and not in

26. N. SINCLAIR, *The Naturalistic Fallacy and the History of Metaethics*, in N. SINCLAIR (ed.), *The Naturalistic Fallacy* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019) 24.

27. A. J. AYER, *LTL* cit., 106-108.

experience, this proves the existence of a realm of non-natural properties.

- II. Ethical sentences express synthetic propositions. They can be true or false. But
- III. Different people may have different ethical intuitions; to what one seems true, to another it may appear false.

Ayer, rather contends that:

- I. Intuition does not apprehend ethical properties, since these, when they appear in a sentence, express the speaker's feelings. Therefore, there is not a realm of unnatural properties. Then,
- II. Ethical sentences are not synthetic propositions. They can be neither true nor false. Then,
- III. Different people may have different ethical feelings, and when they express them they are not contradicting each other.

What has Ayer done then? He, by explaining that ethical sentences convey the speaker's feelings or sentiments, has applied Ockham's razor. He has provided an explanation of (T) without postulating supranatural entities as the intuitionist does. Differently, he (1) accepts the unanalysable characteristic of ethical concepts as a result of the open question argument, and (2) observes the fact that there is a constant relationship between ethics and emotions. From the conjunction of these two points he develops his analysis of ethical sentences. Thus, Ayer's emotivism possesses a virtue that intuitionism does not: all other things being equal, his theory offers a simpler account of our moral vocabulary.

7. CONSEQUENCES

In this paper I have carried out three main points. First, I have put forward three arguments for abandoning the erroneous interpretation that is repeatedly found in the history of metaethics according

to which Ayer's emotivism is based upon his positivism. Secondly, I have shown that, once abandoned this orthodox account, the new interpretation must be independent of the veracity of the positivist principles. Finally, I have presented such an interpretation: Ayer did not present his analysis of moral parlance resorting to positivism. Rather, taking into consideration both the consequences of the open question argument and the relationship found between ethics and emotions, he presented his emotivism as a simpler theory that does not postulate a supranatural world. As a consequence of these points, I think that it is safe to assert that it is time to rewrite the history of metaethics, specifically the chapter that corresponds to Ayer's emotivism.

Lastly, an important conclusion to be drawn is that if we want to prove Ayer wrong, we cannot just affirm that since positivism is dead, so too is emotivism. Differently, we will need to take a step back and argue against the central argument that Ayer uses in presenting his analysis: the open question argument. This task, however, will not be simple²⁸.

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28. Indeed, the contemporary debate about the status of the open question argument is far from settled. See O. Harman, *Is the Naturalistic Fallacy Dead (and If So, Ought It Be)?*, "Journal of the History of Biology" 45/3 (2012) 557-572; W. FITZPATRICK, *Open Question Arguments and the Irreducibility of Ethical Normativity*, in N. SINCLAIR (ed.), *The Naturalistic Fallacy* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019) 138-161.

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