As we noted, the British school were all rational intuitionists who combined a realist and non-naturalist metaphysics of morals with an intuitionist moral epistemology. It was Moore's OQA that forced their realism to take a non-naturalist form.

1. If moral judgments express the appraiser's beliefs about the moral properties of people, actions, and situations, then these properties must be either natural (or metaphysical) properties or non-natural properties.
2. Moral properties are not natural (or metaphysical) properties, because moral predicates are not definable in non-moral terms. [OQA]
3. Hence, if moral judgments ascribe properties, they must be non-natural sui generis properties.

Of course, the rational intuitionists affirm the antecedent in (1) and (3) and so defend non-naturalism. But one person's conditional is another person's contrapositive. Many noncognitivists, including the emotivists, accepted the OQA and so accepted (3). But they found non-naturalism a metaphysically and/or epistemologically extravagant commitment, and so they rejected the antecedent of these conditionals.

1. If moral judgments express the appraiser's beliefs about the moral properties of people, actions, and situations, then these properties must be either natural (or metaphysical) properties or non-natural properties.
2. Moral properties are not natural (or metaphysical) properties, because moral predicates are not definable in non-moral terms. [OQA]
3. Hence, if moral judgments ascribe properties, they must be non-natural sui generis properties.
4. Non-naturalism is false.
5. Hence, moral judgments do no express the appraiser's beliefs about the moral properties of people, actions, and situations. Instead, moral judgments express noncognitive affective or conative attitudes.

So began the development of noncognitivism. Its original form was emotivism, as found in A.J. Ayer (1910-89) in Language, Truth, and Logic (1936/46) and C.L Stevenson (1908-79) in his early paper "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms" (1937), in his book Ethics and Language (1944), and in a series of essays collected in Facts and Values (1963). It would also be developed as prescriptivism by R.M. Hare (1919-2002), especially in The Language of Morals (1952) and Moral Thinking (1981), and later as expressivism by Allan Gibbard in Wise Choices, Apt Feelings (1992) and Thinking How to Live (2003) and as quasi-realism by Simon Blackburn in Ruling Passions (1998).
TWO KINDS OF EXPRESSIVISM

There is an extended sense of expressivism in which emotivism, prescriptivism, and quasi-realism are all forms of expressivism insofar as they claim that moral judgments fundamentally express noncognitive emotions, desires, commitments, or plans. But it is worth distinguishing two different kinds of expressivism, corresponding roughly to early and late expressivism.

Revisionary expressivism self-consciously rejects the realist and cognitivist assumptions of the moral philosophy of the British school. It insists that despite the indicative or assertoric syntax and semantics of moral discourse, moral judgments are really expressive, rather than assertoric. Moral judgments are expressions of feeling, and are not truth-apt. There is no such thing as moral truth or moral knowledge. The most we can hope to do is make sure that our moral feelings are well-informed as to the non-moral beliefs on which they rest.

Ayer is the clearest representative of this kind of expressivism, but there are important echoes of this brand of expressivism in Stevenson and Hare. Ayer appeals to his empiricist theory of meaning to claim that cognitively meaningful claims must be either (a) analytic or (b) synthetic and empirically verifiable. He concludes that moral claims are neither; they are synthetic but unverifiable claims and, hence, are without cognitive significance. As a result, he rejects the possibility of a moral science (as distinct from a branch of psychology) and concludes that there is no distinctive contribution to ethics that philosophy can make once it establishes the truth of emotivism. Stevenson and Hare draw related conclusions about the limits of moral philosophy. Interestingly, even less revisionary expressivists, such as Gibbard and Blackburn, retain the revisionist's idea that moral philosophy is the study of "the logic of the moral concepts" (Hare's phrase). At least, their own contributions to ethical theory talk about moral talk.¹

But when expressivism takes this highly revisionary form, it may seem suspect. For the syntax and semantic of moral discourse is assertoric. Moreover, if we treat moral assertion as disguised expressions of noncognitive attitude, we encounter problems with the meaning of moral phrases in unasserted contexts, such as the antecedents of conditionals. Further, we recognize moral truth when we assert that some moral proposition or judgment is true. We can perhaps offer expressivist reconstructions of such ascriptions of truth to moral claims by adopting a deflationary or redundancy conception of ascriptions of truth, according to which to call a moral judgment true is just to agree with it. But it seems we need truth, and not just ascriptions of truth, to explain valid inferences involving moral contents. Consider this argument.

1. If it is wrong to murder innocent children, then it is wrong to pay someone else to murder innocent children.
2. It is wrong to murder innocent children.
3. Hence, it is wrong to pay someone else to murder innocent children.

We can illustrate two concerns with this argument.

¹ It is perhaps significant that Gibbard's second book is entitled Thinking How to Live, rather than How to Live.
This first issue concerns the unasserted context in (1). The conditional judgment may express an attitude toward paying someone to murder innocent children, although this attitude would be conditional on the wrongness of murdering innocent children. It expresses no attitude toward the wrongness of murdering innocent children. This is why the moral claim in the antecedent of the conditional in (1) involves an unasserted context. But what then is its meaning? Frege believed that an adequate semantic theory should recognize the univocity of terms across asserted and unasserted contexts of utterance. Peter Geach thought that Frege’s point posed problems for noncognitivist analyses of the meaning of moral judgments. The expressivist construes moral assertion as the expression of the appraiser’s attitudes, rather than a description of the way the world is. But then it is not clear how the noncognitivist understands the meaning of moral predicates in unasserted contexts, such as the antecedents of conditional statements. And this is relevant to the validity of the argument. For the argument to be valid, the relevant moral claims must have the same meaning in asserted and unasserted contexts. It’s hard to see how this could be true if we accept the expressivist analysis of moral assertion. It’s easy to explain if moral propositions have the same indicative meaning in asserted and unasserted contexts.

The second issue is that to explain the validity of the argument we apparently need to invoke truth. The reason the argument is valid is that it is not possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. This explanation of validity is truth-theoretic. Here, it seems, we need truth and not just a deflationary semantics for ascriptions of truth.

This is a condensed summary of some standard worries about the semantic and logical resources of revisionary expressivism. The conditional/contrapositive gambit can be recycled. If expressivism leads to all these semantic and logical problems, then that might be reason to reject expressivism and accept cognitivism and realism after all. Some might want to resurrect non-naturalism. Others will think that this makes a strong case for ethical naturalism, especially since we should reject the OQA in any case, in particular, rejecting the semantic test of properties, the assumption that meaning should be transparent, or both.

But, of course, the expressivist might think that these semantic and logical problems for revisionary expressivism are not decisive. These problems motivate a different kind of expressivism. Accommodationist expressivism tries to show how there can be semantic and logical relations among our noncognitive attitudes toward moral contents, so that we can reconstruct or mimic validity, truth, and knowledge in moral matters within an expressivist framework.

Revisionary and accommodationist expressivism are poles in a spectrum. Though there are accommodationist elements in both Stevenson and Hare, I think their form of expressivism is still predominantly revisionary. Expressivism has assumed a robustly accommodationist character only in the work of Gibbard and Blackburn.

This is not the place to explore or assess the adequacy of accommodationist expressivism, which is an extremely complicated matter. But I thought it might be useful

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to situate the more revisionary form of expressivism contained in the emotivism of Ayer
and Stevenson within this larger dialectical picture.

AYER

In Language, Truth, and Logic Ayer applies his empiricist theory of meaning to moral
judgments and concludes that they lack cognitive significance, because they are neither
analytic nor empirically verifiable. They are not analytic, as shown by a variation of the
OQA (104-05). Whereas it is “self-contradictory” to deny that M-things are M, it is never
self-contradictory to deny that N-things are M. Ayer assumes that moral claims are not
empirically testable, apparently without argument.

We might dispute this. We might think that moral claims are empirically testable,
but only in conjunction with suitable auxiliary hypotheses.

1. Good people keep their promises even when this requires modest personal sacrifice.
2. Ben made a promise to Sam that can only be kept at modest personal sacrifice.
3. Ben is a good person.
4. Hence, Ben will keep his promise to Sam.

Moral claims have no observational consequences by themselves but only in conjunction
with auxiliary hypotheses, which include moral claims for which we can have independent
evidence. The situation here is no different than it is in non-moral matters. If Ben does not
keep his promise to Sam, then something will have to go -- I will need to revisit my
assumptions about the promise-keeping behavior of good people, my assumptions about
Ben’s character, or perhaps my assumptions about the sacrifice required of Ben. This is
just a familiar feature of holism about confirmation.

Moreover, some ethical naturalists have wanted to resist Harman’s suggestion that
moral claims are explanatorily impotent.4 If moral facts had explanatory value, this would
apparently also cast doubt on Ayer’s assumption that moral claims are not empirically
testable.

If moral judgments are cognitively meaningless, Ayer concludes, they must have
some other kind of meaning. They must have a purely emotive meaning, expressing the
appraiser’s emotions. As such, moral judgments would be neither true nor false (103, 107,
108). In addition to expressing the appraiser’s noncognitive feelings, Ayer claims that
moral judgments can aim and succeed at arousing similar feelings in others (108).

Ayer contrasts his emotivist metaethics, according to which moral judgments express
the appraiser’s attitudes, with a subjectivist metaethics, according to which moral
judgments report the appraiser’s attitudes. According to subjectivism, when I say

Torturing babies for fun is wrong.

I am reporting that I have a negative feeling toward the conduct in question. In effect, I am
saying

I don’t like the torturing of babies for fun.

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Or perhaps

I disapprove of torturing babies for fun.

By contrast, according to emotivism (and, more generally, expressivism), I am not reporting that I have this attitude, but rather expressing it. For example, I often do things that express my anger, such as swearing or grimacing, without reporting that I am angry, though, in normal circumstances, you might well be able to infer that I am angry from my expression of anger. On this view, I am expressing an attitude of disapproval toward the conduct in question. In effect, I am saying

Booh! (torturing babies for fun)

If we look for ordinary linguistic expressions of these attitudes, we might look to the imperatival form (103).

Don’t torture babies just for fun!

Ayer notes that the subjectivist cannot represent moral disagreement. Consider a disagreement between Axel and Bert. Suppose Axel affirms and Bert denies our moral proposition.

Torturing babies for fun is wrong.

The subjectivist believes that Axel and Bert is each reporting his attitude toward the conduct in question. Axel is saying that he disapproves, and Bert is denying that he disapproves. But there is no disagreement here. They disagree no more than if Axel said he likes sushi and Bert said he detests it. Disagreement seems to require asserting inconsistent things -- things that can’t both be true. But what Axel and Bert assert, according to the subjectivist, are not inconsistent.

Stevenson will claim that the emotivist has a better account of moral disagreement than the subjectivist. But Ayer thinks that the emotivist should agree with subjectivist that genuine moral disagreement is not possible (110-12). Ayer thinks that there can be moral disputes that reduce to disagreements about the non-moral facts on which our attitudes depend and that we can argue with others about moral matters insofar as we can provide evidence for non-moral claims on which our moral attitudes depend. Thus, we can make sense of moral reasoning within a shared scheme of attitudes as reasoning about the non-moral facts relevant to applying our shared attitudes. But it is not possible, Ayer thinks, to reason or disagree about fundamental attitudes. These are not genuine disputes.

In making these claims, Ayer ignores the realist idea that we can be mistaken not only about derivative moral commitments, as the result of mistaken non-moral assumptions with which we apply fundamental evaluative commitments, but also about fundamental evaluative commitments. He also ignores the idea that we can reason about our fundamental evaluative commitments in a dialectical fashion.
STEVENSON

Stevenson develops his conception of emotivism in his early paper “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms,” in his book *Ethics and Language*, and in a series of essay collected in *Facts and Values*. We will concentrate on general features of Stevenson’s views.

Stevenson sets out three desiderata for any conception of the meaning of moral terms and the function of moral judgments (EMET 16-17).

1. It must make sense of moral disagreement.
2. It must make sense of the “magnetic” or “dynamic” aspects of moral judgments, their relation to motivation or the will and their role in interpersonal engagement.
3. It must vindicate the autonomy of ethics in relation to the sciences.

Like Ayer, Stevenson contrasts emotivism with subjectivism or what he sometimes calls “the interest theory” (15). Subjectivism fares badly, Stevenson thinks, on all three grounds.

Emotivism, Stevenson claims, understands moral judgments primarily to be expressing, rather than reporting, the appraiser’s noncognitive emotions and desires and attempting to arouse similar attitudes in the appraiser’s audience (18-19). Notice that there are two distinguishable functions alluded to here: expressing one’s own attitudes and arousing similar attitudes in others or, as Stevenson sometimes says, influencing others. One could apparently aim for either goal without the other. Though Stevenson sometimes suggests that the interpersonal aim is primary (19), it’s not clear why either wouldn’t do. If so, we might represent the emotivist claim about the primary function of moral judgments disjunctively: to express the appraiser’s own attitudes or to influence the attitudes of others. In “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms” Stevenson suggests that subjectivism is incomplete, leaving out the primary emotive meaning of ethical terms. On one interpretation, emotivism supplements subjectivism with a distinctively emotive element. This conception of emotivism is roughly what Stevenson will later identify as the First Pattern of Analysis:

To say “X is good” is roughly synonymous with “I approve of X; do so as well” [EL 81].

So understood, emotivism is superior to simple subjectivism along all three dimensions.

Like Ayer, Stevenson recognizes that subjectivism cannot represent moral disagreement. If moral judgments are just reports of the appraiser’s attitudes, then it’s not clear why Axel and Bert disagree; each is reporting his own attitudes toward the conduct in question. Unlike Ayer, Stevenson takes this to be a problem for subjectivism. Also unlike Ayer, Stevenson thinks that the emotivist can and should have an account of moral disagreement. The emotivist understands moral disagreement, not as the assertion of incompatible propositions, but as the expression of conflicting attitudes (19-20, 26-27). According to the emotivist, Axel and Bert are not asserting anything, much less inconsistent things. They are merely expressing contrary attitudes. Their disagreement is like the one at a sushi bar when two friends look at the offerings and one says “Yum!” and the other says “Gross!” Stevenson also says the disagreement might be understood as like the practical disagreement between Axel and Bert if Axel wants to go to the beach and Bert wants to go to the mountains for a hike.
Subjectivism also seems ill-suited to explain the dynamic aspects of moral judgments, because it’s not clear why your liking something is a reason for me to like something. But if moral judgments not only report the appraiser’s attitudes but also instruct others to join in, then we can see how they have a dynamic interpersonal function (27).

Subjectivism also fails to represent the autonomy of ethics insofar as it implies that an appraiser can support her moral judgment simply by pointing out the psychological fact that she approves of the conduct in question. But that is not how we try to support moral judgments. We don’t cite autobiographical facts about ourselves to explain why apartheid is unjust. By contrast, emotivism maintains the autonomy of ethics. While reasoning about the non-moral facts may help resolve disagreements when we share fundamental attitudes and disagree only about what further attitudes the non-moral facts recommend, not all disagreements are disagreements about the non-moral facts. There are also disagreements in fundamental attitudes, and these disagreements won’t be resolved by the evidence of the sciences (27-29).

According to Stevenson, moral terms have both descriptive meaning and emotive meaning, but their emotive meaning is primary. This is reflected in the First Pattern of Analysis. But the descriptive element of the FPA is the autobiographical element that it shares with the subjectivist analysis. But the subjectivist analysis goes wrong by making moral judgments autobiographical. When I judge apartheid to be unjust, I don’t seem to be making any claim about myself or my attitudes. I seem to be making a claim about apartheid on which my attitudes are perhaps consequential. Considerations such as these, led Stevenson to introduce in Ethics and Language a Second Pattern of Analysis.

“This is good” has the meaning of “This has qualities or relations X, Y, Z ...,” except that “good” has as well a laudatory emotive meaning which permits it to express the speaker’s approval, and tends to evoke the approval of the hearer [207].

Adapting ideas from Hare, we might interpret Stevenson’s SPA as distinguishing descriptive criteria for emotive meaning and emotive meaning. On this view, any moral judgment picks out certain features of a person, action, or situation in virtue of which the appraiser expresses her attitudes (e.g. approval) toward that person, action or situation and/or encourages others to adopt those attitudes. Notice that SPA drops the subjectivist element in FPA. Emotivism, according to SPA, is not a supplement to subjectivism, however important.

QUESTIONS

Notice that emotivism analyzes moral judgments into the attitudes of appraisers. The standard analysans of emotivism are approval/disapproval. But there are a great many apparently distinct kinds of moral judgments possible: judging good, judging right, judging virtuous, judging admirable, etc. It would seem that emotivism is committed to pairing distinct moral judgments with distinct attitudes. It’s not clear that we can identify sufficiently many distinct attitudes for this purpose without invoking the very moral properties to individuate attitudes that we are trying to analyze. I don’t say that this is an insurmountable challenge for expressivism, but it is a challenge.
Emotivists seem to subscribe to internalism about moral motivation, claiming that motivational states, such as pro-attitudes, are essential parts of moral judgments. But this seems to render impossible disengaged moral judgments. We often represent the possibility of amoralist skepticism -- skepticism about the authority of moral requirements -- by the amoralist -- someone who professes indifference to the moral requirements that she recognizes. This is a philosophical amoralist, and we might think that it is a problem with emotivism or any other form of internalism that denies this possibility. Moreover, we might want to recognize non-philosophical amoralists who are indifferent to what they judge morally required, not out of philosophical principle, but out of apathy, depression, or the sort of volitional impairment that we find in those with damage to the prefrontal cortex of the brain (e.g. Phineas Gage).

Stevenson thinks emotivism superior to subjectivism, because it has a better account of moral disagreement. We might concede this comparative claim, but wonder if the emotivist account of disagreement is as good as the realist account. The realist interprets Axel as ascribing the property of impermissibility to the act type <torturing babies for fun>. By contrast, Bert denies this claim. They assert inconsistent propositions, which can’t both be true. By contrast, the emotivist sees this as a conflict of attitudes, like the conflict between wanting to go to the beach and wanting to go to the mountains. It’s not clear if this practical conflict is all that’s involved in a moral disagreement. Both impulses can be understandable, even reasonable. By contrast, it’s hard to believe that both Axel’s and Bert’s claims about torturing babies for fun can be understandable and reasonable. It seems that one of them must be right and the other wrong.

The emotivist must also count moral disagreements in unusual ways. The emotivist identifies moral agreement with agreement in noncognitive attitude and moral disagreement with disagreement in noncognitive attitude. Consider the moralist and the amoralist who intuitively share the same moral views. God believes that compliance with the Decalogue is right and approves those who are compliant. Satan also thinks that compliance with the Decalogue is morally right and disapproves of those who are compliant for that very reason. The emotivist must say that God and Satan have a moral disagreement, because they have conflicting attitudes toward the same actions. But it seems that they agree about what morality requires and disagree only in attitude.

There are also the worries about revisionary expressivism and the problems it has with the semantics and logic of moral assertion and inference. Most of these problems would seem to arise for Stevenson since he treats moral judgments, for the most part, as being not truth-apt. In Facts & Values Stevenson does help himself to a deflationary or disquotational account of ascriptions of truth (216-19). But while this may allow him to make emotivist sense of ascriptions of truth to moral judgments made by oneself or others, it is not clear that this entitles him to the property of truth, necessary, for instance, for the truth-theoretic explanation of validity. I don’t mean to suggest that there are no emotivist resources to reconstruct the relevant semantic and logical structures and relations. But this is the project of accommodationist expressivism, pursued by later expressivists, such as Gibbard and Blackburn, not by Stevenson himself.