Ayer’s Ethical Theory: Emotivism or Subjectivism?*

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1. In 1936, in a chapter of *Language, Truth and Logic* clearly influenced by Hume (though inconsistent with Hume) and influenced also (Ayer later conjectured) by Ogden’s and Richards’s *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), Ayer claimed that judgments of value, in so far as they are not scientific statements, are not in the literal sense significant but are simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true nor false. To say ‘You acted wrongly in stealing that money’ is not to state any more than one would have stated by merely saying ‘you stole that money’. To add that the action was wrong is not to make a further statement about it, but simply to evince one’s moral disapproval. ‘It is as if I had said “you stole that money” in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation mark. The tone or the exclamation mark adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings of the speaker’ (*LTL*, 107).

Ayer adds that ethical terms like ‘wrong’ not only express feeling. ‘They are also calculated to arouse feeling and to stimulate action’ (*LTL*, 108). Some, for instance, like the term ‘duty’ as it occurs in ‘It is your duty to tell the truth’, may be regarded both as the expression of a certain sort of feeling about truthfulness and as the expression of a command, ‘Tell the truth’. What distinguishes the phrases ‘You ought to’ and ‘it is good to’ from ‘It is your duty to’ is simply a diminution of emphasis that can reduce a command such as ‘Tell the truth’ to a less categorical command and then to a mere suggestion. ‘In fact, we may define the meaning of the various ethical words in terms of the different feelings they are ordinarily taken to express and the different responses they are calculated to provoke’ (*LTL*, 108).

2. What this implies about moral disagreement, Ayer says, is that, since there are really no specifically moral *statements*, strictly speaking (whatever their makers may think) there is no moral disagreement.

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'Another man may disagree with me about the wrongness of stealing, in the sense that he may not have the same feelings about stealing as I have, and he may quarrel with me on account of my moral sentiments. But he cannot, strictly speaking, contradict me. For in saying that a certain type of actions is right or wrong, I am not making any factual statement, not even a statement about my own state of mind. I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments' \((LTL, 107, my \text{ italics})\). The quarrel feels like real disagreement, perhaps. But given the real nature of the conflict, which is revealed by philosophy, Ayer claims that there is no point in asking which of the parties is \textit{in the right}.

3. This is the moment to say that Ayer's emotivism was shaped by his positivism. At the time of writing \textit{Language, Truth and Logic}, Ayer held that every significant sentence was either analytic and, as such, the (however complex or indirect) upshot of symbolic conventions, or else synthetic and, as such, possessed of a content controlled (and strictly speaking exhausted) by the method associated with the sentence of accepting or rejecting the sentence on the basis of sense perception. Such a position leaves no room to construe moral judgments as declarative. So one cannot help but ask what we are now to think about positivism. The view I take of the matter is that logical positivism fails badly on both sides of the division it makes between analytic and non-analytic statements.

In the case of the analytic, its first difficulty is that, if we say that an analytic statement is one that is true in virtue of meaning, then, since our grasp of the meanings of most verbs, substantives and adjectives is actually \textit{a posteriori}, it seems there is a real danger that most of the sentences that Ayer wanted to say expressed analytic truths will be \textit{a posteriori}. If Ayer responds to this unwelcome conclusion by reverting to Frege's much clearer and less fugitive definition of 'analytic' (see Frege, 1953, 4) to say that an analytic sentence is one whose truth follows from logic and explicit definitions, then our second difficulty is that terribly few verbs, substantives or adjectives have the explicit definitions that Fregean analytically will require. This is surely a reflection of our grasp of these senses being empirically conditioned. And our third difficulty is that it is perfectly obscure, in any case, how the stipulative theory of the \textit{a priori}, or any other account that seeks in positivist fashion to demystify non-empirical truths and cut them down to size in this way, can furnish an account of 'follows from' that will confer upon analytic sentences the property of \textit{truth} (contrast the property of being an accepted stipulation) that analytic sentences aspire to. How in particular can they share in the very same property of truth that is enjoyed by non-analytic sentences, or stand side by side with the non-analytic in arguments that are advertised as preserving that prop-
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property? How can stipulation confer on a sentence the same property that another sentence gets by empirical confirmation?

But that is not the worst of it. Further difficulties make their appearance when we pass from the positivist’s attempt to explain all in one go how necessary truths have their meaning and status to his attempt to show how contingent judgments in general, or (coextensively for the positivist) synthetic judgments in general, are meaningful. If it is obscure (and surely it is obscure) how a species of brute sensation can sustain the meaning of a synthetic sentence, and if it seems arbitrary to try to delimit in advance just how far a meaningful sentence can sit from direct observation without lapsing into cognitive meaninglessness, then it is hard to find any non-arbitrary ruling about what else can sustain the full cognitive import or understanding of a sentence.

I conclude that the situation is this. It seems—I readily concede this to Ayer—that to every declarative sentence that actually declares anything there must correspond something that is at issue or something on which the truth of falsity of the sentence turns or depends. So maybe it is right that to every a posteriori sentence (indeed to every sentence) there corresponds some kind of test that can help, however weakly, in some suitable context to confirm it. Certainly there is something special about the test of observation. Observation is one of the things that can force us independently of our will, albeit not independently of cognitive background, into a belief or out of a belief. That is what we want truth to be like. That is why stipulation was so mysterious a way of making truths. But waiving any need there may be to qualify the claim I have allowed about every sentence possessing a test, the relation thus claimed to hold between cognitive meaning and tests of truth provides no remit for us to reverse the order of quantifiers and make a stronger assertion: namely that there is a kind of test such that, for every non a priori sentence, a test of that kind can confirm the sentence. For there is simply no prospect of rolling up once and for all, in terms of tests or observation as the positivist understands these (or in terms of any other single thing), the nature and extent of non-analytic truths. How could one delimit in advance the whole province of non-analytic cognitive meaning? We can say, if we like, that for every sentence there has to be some way that arises from its sense of making the claim stick that is made by the sentence. But at most this is a schema for the piecemeal criticism of different kinds of cognitive pretension.

4. If what was convincing in positivism can create no general presumption against the cognitive aspirations even of moral discourse, the next question is what sound reasons Ayer had to think that his emotivism was ‘valid on its own account’. This is the claim he made in the 1946 preface for the second edition of Language, Truth and Logic.
First, I suppose, there is the plausible point that it represents human morality as independent of revelation and as a matter to be determined by human assessment.

Second, emotivism is in harmony with explanatory (or Humean) naturalism, the sensible and defensible position (not to be confused with the reductive moral naturalism that provoked the passion and fury of Moore) that tries to see man as part of nature and tries to explain morality as arising out of man’s nature and situation.

The third point is more special to morals as such. The emotivist theory delivers, vindicates and explains the independently manifest truth, (or so Ayer and I would count it) that, in tens of thousands of uses (even if not in all, e.g. as used in questions or conditionals or some past-tense statement etc.), evaluative sentences both express feelings and arouse feelings, some of these being feelings that are strong enough to issue directly or indirectly in action. Thus acceptance of a judgment commits us to respond in a certain way. Even if emotivism is not alone in having this merit, it vividly portrays at least some of the connections that exist between judgment and action.

5. These are substantial virtues in a theory of morals. Not only that. They are independent of positivism. The chief question is whether the non-descriptive analysis of moral language that distinguishes emotivism from its predecessors is essential to their attainment. The question is important because the non-descriptive analysis offered by emotivism appears both as the source of all the difficulties of the position and as inessential to the emotivist’s claim that valuational language is expressive.

6. The non-descriptive analysis appears inessential to the expressiveness of moral language because in the right context I can surely express a feeling such as hate by saying in the right way, either to or about the person hated, any of all sorts of things. I can say imperatively ‘There go my heart’s abhorrence’ or ‘Water your damned flower pots do.’ Or interrogatively, I can say ‘If hate killed men, would not mine kill you?’ Or simply indicatively, I can come out with the words ‘You are odious’. In the right context (a Spanish cloister, an allotment, a back garden) any or all of these will represent expressions of hatred.

The non-descriptive analysis appears as a source of difficulty for emotivism for two reasons. First because one finds it hard to understand, along the lines that the emotivist suggests, the negative or conditional uses of valuational language or its use in judgments about things remote from all present concern. (Whereas a descriptive analysis would make it easy to understand these things and easy to predict which of the more straightforward uses are likely to turn out to be apt vehicles for the expression of feeling. All this will be especially easy if an account can be offered of how feelings enter into the determination of the sense
of valuational language.) The second difficulty with the non-descriptive analysis offered by emotivism is that, if one looks outwards to real life, it is simply not believable that, when I say ‘x is odious’, all that I am doing is making as if to growl ‘G-r-r-r!’ at x. One can find this no more credible than that, when one makes the fully fledged and sufficiently reflected utterance ‘That hurts’, one is simply doing as if to say ‘Ouch.’

On this last claim, I offer one more point. When I say ‘x is odious’, I give voice to a reaction in which I expect others to concur with me, and to concur not mindlessly but on the normal basis that this man really does ‘possess qualities whose tendency is pernicious’ (as Hume puts it, Inquiry Concerning the principles of Morals, Section IX, part 1). But surely I do then say something about x. Just as I say something when, instead of crying ‘Ouch’, I say I am in pain or that that hurts. When I say that I am in pain, I can expect to be asked how it hurts and how that resulted from whatever else happened to me. In each of these cases, the valuational and the mental, what one says in the fully fledged case can have its origin in something expressive like ‘G-r-r-r’ or ‘Ouch’. But in the sophisticated language that we actually speak, things have moved a long way from that simple origin. If the declarative has indeed come into existence out of the expressive, it now has an altogether new relation to the expressive.

7. All these points about emotivism and its doubtful claim to unique possession of the three advantages it does possess I should labour much more if it did not seem that Ayer had come very close even in 1936 to conceding that one can express one thing by making the declaration of another (see LTL, 111), if the ‘Grrr’/’Ouch’ comparison were not suggested by what Ayer himself wrote, and if Ayer himself had not more recently, that is in 1984, volunteered another important concession. This is that there is even something to be said for devising an assertoric form which could be adapted to the use of emotive expressions in conditional contexts and apparently deductive reasoning. Suppose that we render ‘This is good’ as ‘This is to be approved of’, where ‘is to be’ is construed in a purely prescriptive fashion. Then we can rewrite our examples [‘if he did that, he acted rightly’ and ‘He would have been a better man if he had had a stricter upbringing’], admittedly in a somewhat clumsy English, as ‘if he did that, he is to be approved of’, ‘He would be more to be approved of if he had been more strictly brought up’, and [in the case of ‘If A is better than B and B is better than C then A is better than C’], more straightforwardly, as ‘If A is more to be approved of than B and B is more to be approved of than C, then A is more to be approved of than C’. This device has the advantage of locating the emotive reaction in the present, whatever the dating of its ‘object’.  

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and whether the object is actual or hypothetical, and it also has the advantage of bringing out the prescriptive element in our use of ethical terms. (FM, 30).

It may be unclear that this quotation, conveying what I claim is the third of Ayer's three concessions, really amounts to what I say it does, however. So I shall offer a commentary on it before going any further. Ayer says that that 'there is something to be aside for devising [the] assertoric form' ['this is to be approved of']. At least one thing Ayer means to discourage by his careful choice of language in the passage I have just quoted is the idea that the use of the assertoric form carries with it some automatic commitment to find full-blooded truth in normative or value judgments so paraphrased. In this I concur. That is indeed a further question. (See sections 12 and 20 below.) But what are we to make of Ayer's claim that in 'this is to be approved of' the 'is to be' is to be 'construed' in a 'purely prescriptive' fashion? Scarcely that the form 'is to be approved of' is a variant of 'Hurrah' that just happens—this being the only difference—to behave as a predicate. That would be tantamount to the denial that there was ever any difficulty in the first place. If such a variant were possible then we ought to have been able to do what we found we could not and understand 'Hurrah' itself both in the ordinary way and simultaneously as a predicate. But if indeed we cannot do that, then it seems that Ayer must be deemed to have allowed that it is possible for a value predicate to have transcended the condition of 'Hurrah' and to have graduated, with some corresponding semantic shift, to the status of a genuine predicate—the transition from 'Ouch' to 'That hurts' again points the way—and all this without loss of prescriptivity, i.e. without any weakening in the link between assenting and being motivated. But if so much is true, then surely 'is to be approved of' must really mean 'merits or deserves approval' or 'is such as to make approval appropriate'.

The immediate importance of this is that it appears that, by 1984, Ayer no longer saw the rejection of the indicative construal of moral language as essential to the general view he wanted to take of evaluative judgments. In effect he had given up any idea that his position required any analytical reduction of moral language, still less any reduction of the normative to the non-normative. 1 One with Ayer's world-view need not dismiss ethics. (Of course, he never did dismiss it: he tirelessly debated ethical questions, from a broadly utilitarian point of view.) But he need not give definitions of its content. What he has to do is to try to

1 Thus Ayer comes by his own route to anticipate a conclusion reached in different ways and with different motivations from his by John McDowell, (1985, 117–120) and by myself at p. 187 of 'A Sensible Subjectivism?', in (Wiggins, 1987, 187).
understand it better, first in its own terms and then perhaps in more ambitious terms (see below section 11 foll.).

8. So much for the commentary upon the third of three points I take Ayer to have in some way conceded about the special difficulties of emotivism, and so much for the possibility of gaining all the advantages of emotivism without actually embracing the claims that chiefly distinguished the position from all its predecessors. But in the course of the argument I think it has become plain that there is a further interest in the conclusion that Ayer arrived at so many years after writing *Language, Truth and Logic*. What we catch sight of in the passage from the 1984 essay is the possibility of a reconciliation between emotivism and an older position that went under the name of subjectivism. (I do not mean by this the position that Ayer calls subjectivism. Ayer means by 'subjectivism' the position G. E. Moore attacked but never even attempted to impute to Hume.) Such a reconciliation may be all the easier to effect if the older position can be brought to life by allowing Hume's authority to outweigh Moore's over what exactly that position is.

9. Ayer's 1984 proposal is that x is good if and only if x is to be approved of. (A suggestion we may see as furnishing a schema that one could elaborate further: x is [a] good [f] if and only if x is good [as among the fs] if and only if x is to be approved of [as within the reference group of fs] . . . and similarly *mutatis mutandis* for other value predicates.) Whereas Hume, for his part, declares that he defines virtue to be any mental quality that occasions an agreeable sentiment of approbation in the observer, and that 'when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it' (T. 469).

There are similarities and there are differences here, and there is room for mutual accommodation. In so far as what we have here are rival models for the *philosophical analysis* of moral terms, Ayer's version obviously comes closer to satisfying the subtle and exacting standards of necessity and sufficiency to which Ayer himself worked and encouraged others to work.¹

¹ I would also note that, if Hume's claims were amended on the model of Ayer's (using his 'is to be approved of'), the possibility would loom that Hume was not irrevocably committed by his subjective starting point or by his doctrine of the sovereignty of moral subjects to the claim (*Treatise*, 547) that 'There is just so much vice or virtue in any character as every one places in it and 'tis impossible in this particular we can ever be mistaken.' The subjectivist can say something more subtle than this. Hume makes a start upon this himself in 'Of the Standard of Taste'.

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On the other hand, there could be an accommodation in the opposite direction. As Ayer himself perceived on occasions when he wrote directly about Hume, it seems that, even when Hume said he would ‘define’ virtue or vice, Hume’s real concern was not definition or analysis as twentieth-century philosophers have conceived this, but explanation and commentary. Had Hume been confronted with the delicate questions of analysis that exercised G. E. Moore in *Principia Ethica* (1903) and *Ethics* (1912) and Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic* then, so far from responding to them either with Ayer’s device or with the ‘x is good if and only if I approve of x’ type of equivalence implausibly attributed to the subjectivist by Moore, he would surely have done best to respond by saying that, wherever taste or morals ‘gilds’ or stains natural objects with colours borrowed from natural sentiment (Inquiry into Principles of Morals, Appendix One), what they raise up is always ‘in a manner a new creation’—not, that is, something it is the business of the moral scientist (or of any sane philosophy) to try to define or analyse, but something *sui generis* that can be recognized as *sui generis* by explanatory naturalist and positivist alike. The philosopher’s or moral scientist’s business, he might have said, is not to reduce the content of what is said to something else, but to explain as well and as fully as he can the enabling conditions of its emergence (see below, section 11 foll.) and to determine in detail the contribution of feeling to the fixing of the sense of the language that conveys this content. Roughly speaking, value terms will have their sense by being annexed to that which in the object calls for certain shareable responses of feeling and action, namely the responses it *makes appropriate.*

In proposing this possibility of alliance between Ayer and the tradition of Hume, I am asserting in effect that the important thing is to disentangle the central aims and insights of proper subjectivism—the real position of Protagoras, Hobbes, Hume and (I like to think) Ayer—from niceties of linguistic analysis that were as inessential to Ayer’s world-view as they were to Hume’s. It is true that it was an important theme of *Language, Truth and Logic* that the proper business of philosophy was analysis. (Yet another thing Ayer inherited from G. E. Moore.) But in time Ayer came to insist less and less upon this. (There are other signs, for instance in the 1984 essay from which I have quoted, that Ayer was in retreat from that general stand about the nature of philosophy.) And in any case, as I said, we are invited in the preface to

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3 See notes 1 and 2.

4 In *Language, Truth and Logic* Ayer had a fourfold division of ethical propositions. These were roughly (1) definitions (2) descriptions of the phenomena of moral experience (3) exhortations (4) actual ethical judgments.
the 2nd edition of *Language, Truth and Logic* to consider Ayer’s moral philosophy both independently of positivism and strictly on its own merits. Once we acquiesce in that invitation and reassess the attractions of subjectivism in that light, I think it is apparent that subjectivism was not only a position that Ayer needed to borrow from (as he did) but a position he should have embraced on equal terms as an ally to his main philosophical concerns.

A further claim I would now make—but this is potentially more controversial—is that it would then have been open to Ayer, if he had proceeded in this way, to decide that it was not essential to subjectivism as such that the theory be introduced either by philosophical denials of the type with which Hume introduces the theory in the *Treatise* (some of these being wisely relegated in the *Inquiry* to an appendix) or by the *enfant terrible* pronouncements about moral judgments with which Ogden and Richards, Winston F. Barnes, Ayer and others affrighted polite society and the worlds of learning and letters. What really matters is not to issue shocking and imprecise denials but to elaborate and refine some positive account of the genesis in feeling and emotion of morality and moral language and then to study and improve an account like Hume’s of how a social process that ignores partial sentiments, but reinforces sentiments and judgments which depart from our private and particular situation and appeal to the point of view that shall be common to one person with another, can cause there to emerge public standards, standards at once contestable and impersonal, for the assessment of personal merit and the discrimination of right and wrong acts.

It may pose a problem for positivism that the moral language that is talked at the end of this process is fully as declarative in its aspirations as the language that is talked at the end of the process by which psychological states come to be singled out and described by their possessors. But it need not pose any problem for that world-view itself to which Ayer gave expression in his positivism. Or so I claim.

10. The position I am commending to Ayer is a naturalist position in the familiar sense in which Hume’s speculations were naturalist. But it is not naturalist in Moore’s sense, or in any sense that ought to have worried Ayer.

Reading G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* in the way I suggest we should read it (a way further encouraged and fortified by Casimir Lewy’s résumé and interpretation of the preface Moore drafted for a reprint of *Principia Ethica* but never in the event published (Lewy, 1964)), a naturalistic property is *either* one with which it is the business
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of the natural sciences of experimental psychology to deal (cf. *Principia*, 40) or a property which can be completely defined in terms of such properties.\(^5\) Naturalism is then the philosophical position that seeks to *define* good by predicates that stand for such naturalistic properties. But now one notes that there is simply no reason why the Humean position that Ayer’s 1984 declaration revives should engage at all in such forbidden definitions.

11. Concentrating on what subjectivist doctrine positively asserts about the origin and basis of morality, rather than on what Hume and Ayer deny about the prospects of morality’s constituting a subject matter in which there can be knowledge or truth, what I think we shall find is that the negative claim Hume and Ayer put into the exposition of subjectivism turns up rather in the guise of a real, undecided *question*, a question that has to be resolved by *working out* the consequences of the positive subjective view. Pending that working out, we shall have non-natural predicates with a distinctive sentiment-involving kind of sense, which may or may not turn out to stand for genuine or real properties. In the only serious and appropriate sense of ‘real’, they will stand for real properties according as whether the indicative form ‘x is good’ (etc) does or does not prove capable of sustaining a more than merely formal attribution of truth. Having sought in conversation with him to interest Ayer in my own view (expressed elsewhere\(^6\)) of what it turns on whether or not value-statements can sustain such an attribution, I shall not however, pursue that particular matter much further now. For if we are to focus on Ayer’s own views, it seems much more urgent to fill out the subjectivism we have recovered from his emotivism by drawing for this purpose upon Ayer’s account of moral dispute and disagreement.

12. Ayer’s account of moral dispute and moral disagreement may be reproduced as follows:

(a) We hold that one really never does dispute about questions of value. This may seem at first sight, to be a very paradoxical assertion. For we certainly do engage in disputes which are ordinarily regarded as disputes about questions of value. But, in all such cases, we find, if we consider the matter closely, that the dispute is not really about a question of value, but about a question of fact. When someone disagrees with us about the moral value of a certain action or type of action, we do admittedly resort to argument in order to win him over.

\(^5\) Then in *Principia* the idea of the natural is extended to the metaphysical. A metaphysical property is a property that stands to some supersensible object in the same relation in which natural properties stand to natural objects. See Lewy, 1964–5.

\(^6\) See my ‘A Sensible Subjectivism’ and chapter 4 of (Wiggins, 1987 also, ibid. Postscript sections 3, 4).
to our way of thinking. But we do not attempt to show by our arguments that he has the ‘wrong’ ethical feeling towards a situation whose nature he has correctly apprehended. What we attempt to show is that he is mistaken about the facts of the case. We argue that he has misconceived the agent’s motive; or that he has misjudged the effects of the action, or its probable effects in view of the agent’s knowledge; or that he has failed to take into account the special circumstances in which the agent was placed. Or else we employ more general arguments about the effects which actions of a certain type tend to produce, or the qualities which are usually manifested in their performance. We do this in the hope that we have only to get our opponent to agree with us about the nature of the empirical facts for him to adopt the same moral attitude towards them as we do. (LTL, 119–20)

(β) ‘... if our opponent happens to have undergone a different process of moral ‘conditioning’ from ourselves, so that, even when he acknowledges all the facts, he still disagrees with us about the moral value of the actions under discussion, then we abandon the attempt to convince him by argument. We say that it is impossible to argue with him because he has a distorted or undeveloped moral sense; which signifies merely that he employs a different set of values from our own. We feel that our own system of values is superior, and therefore speak in such derogatory terms of his.’ (LTL, 120; Cf. LTL, 2nd edn, intro., 22)

(γ) ‘But we cannot bring forward any arguments to show that our system is superior. For our judgement that it is so is itself a judgement of value, and accordingly outside the scope of argument. It is because argument fails us when we come to deal with pure questions of value, as distinct from questions of fact, that we finally resort to mere abuse.’ (LTL, 120)

(δ) ‘In short, we find that argument is possible on moral questions only if some system of values is presupposed. If our opponent concurs with us in expressing moral disapproval of all actions of a given type t, then we may get him to condemn a particular action A, by bringing forward arguments to show that A is of type t. For the question whether A does or does not belong to that type is a plain question of fact. Given that a man has certain moral principles, we argue that he must, in order to be consistent, react morally to certain things in a certain way. What we do not and cannot argue about is the validity of these moral principles. We merely praise or condemn them in the light of our own feelings.’ (LTL, 120)

13. Here, as so often in Humean and latter-day subjectivist writings, one finds much to admire in what is affirmed positively about the
nature and substance of morals and moral disputation [especially e.g. under (α)], but one finds precipitate and less persuasive the negative claims, which may or may not turn out to be correct when the subjectivist viewpoint is properly recovered and more fully developed. It may turn out that vindicating explanations of moral beliefs, explanations that explain the existence of beliefs by virtue of their correctness, can be mustered for the more important contentions of morality as subjectively conceived. Or it may not turn out that way. But until the possibility is disproved, it is premature to declare that the only response to deep-seated disagreement is abuse [see (γ)].

Another assumption that Ayer makes, and that seems unwarranted by the emotivist or subjectivist starting point, concerns the inner structure and cohesion of a moral outlook. Ayer’s picture of a person’s moral outlook in potential collision with the moral outlook of some other person is that of a tree-like structure, in which less general beliefs and context-dependent reactions to practical questions or to actions or situations, are directly or indirectly supported by one or more general attitudes which either are or repose upon fully general attitudes, attitudes that are pictured as basic, as mutually independent and (if not as immutable) as not mutable by ordinary moral persuasion. (Which, by having always to presuppose more basic principles, cf. (δ), is seen by Ayer as cut off from the scrutiny of the most basic, load-bearing principles.) But I should say that Ayer has no adequate reason to embrace this particular picture or conception. Conceiving morality as the subjectivist conceives it, Ayer should be wide open to the possibility that what sustains it is a vast multiplicity of sentiments of varying origin and strength, and he should be ready for the possibility that logically distinguishable feelings or sentiments (sentiments intentionally directed, sentiments that are thoughts) can be either loosely or tightly intertwined in the economy of feeling. Why should these not sustain one another without standing in formal relations of entailment? Why is Ayer not open to the possibility that in some cases, contrary to what he assumes, more general beliefs are sustained by much less general particular responses and tendencies? It is a matter of fact, an empirical question, not something to be settled by philosophical preconception (especially not by misconceived analogy with the case of a theory that is susceptible to being hypothetico-deductively presented), how to picture the structure of a moral outlook and how best to understand what happens when disputants with different moral outlooks find themselves in serious conflict over what to say about an object of shared attention or about an act that both agree that some agent has done. As long as this empirical question goes unexplored, there is no clear thing to mean by a distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental moral disagreements, and there is no reason to believe that, if we imagine two people

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agreeing over all non-moral facts but disagreeing in their moral reaction to some shared object of attention, then we are imagining a case where no scope remains for anything beside abuse. For any x and any y, for x and y to dispute with one another there must be something x and y agree about. No doubt. But perhaps there is nothing such that x and y must agree about this in order that they dispute—not even some basic thing. We do not, I repeat, know yet what ‘basic’ means here. For all that subjectivism says, perhaps x and y can begin almost anywhere. No doubt it is culture and context that combine with human nature to determine a moral outlook. But it is an open question what forms of moral argument this determination must in a given case foreclose or render for ever ineffective. In advance, there is nothing a subjectivist or emotivist is committed to think about any of this.

14. So much for what seems unconvincing. It is what Ayer says under (a) that seems fresh, admirable, and capable of taking on an altogether new life if Ayer’s theory forms an alliance with subjectivism, especially if this is a version of subjectivism that accepts that moral thinking is as it is (namely persistent in what it sees as the pursuit of consistency, agreement and truth) and that leaves open the possibility that the moral is a subspecies of the factual, while at the same time refraining from seeking to ground the moral within the non-moral or searching for formal implications from the non-moral to the moral.

Ayer begins by boldly denying that we dispute at all about questions of value. But his real view is that we do dispute. All he wants to deny here is that for us to dispute is for us to seek to show anyone who disagrees with us the wrongness of their ethical feeling towards some act or situation whose nature they have correctly apprehended. Rather, what we do is try to show our opponent that he has misconceived what has happened or been done, or misconceived either the agent’s motive or the circumstances in which his act was undertaken. We do not try to dispute with our opponent about right and wrong ways, as it were, of hooking attitudes of appraisal to agreed descriptions—as if moral disagreement standardly consisted in the participants to a disagreement being adherents of different ways of moving from statements of how things are to statements of how things ought to be or ought to have been.\(^7\) For what is at issue is not normally a question of moving from an ‘-is-’ judgment to an ‘-ought-’ verdict at all. Rather it is a question of moving from some object or situation, concretely given, to ‘good’ or to ‘ought’ or ‘must’. What is centrally typical of moral difference, including the moral difference that issues in actual disagreement, is that, in the face of one and the same action or context (some actual object of

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\(^7\) Even if isolated cases of this could be produced, the point is that they are not at all typical of normal disagreement.
awareness), different moral agents begin by bringing different sensibilities or different moral emphases to bear. They respond to significantly different properties or features of the object. Each can try to persuade the other to be party to his or her own way of seeing things, as Ayer says, and each can seek to understand the other’s way. To this end, all sorts of things can be said or conveyed or pointed to. But, at least for a subjectivist, there is simply no reason to insist that what is said, either in the process of persuasion or in the course of justification of the stand taken up, should stand in a relation of implying the judgment for which the disputant is trying to gain favour. What the disputant mainly needs to do is to draw full attention to the saliency that engages with the sentiment which he expects the object to draw down upon itself, and which, if it does not already do that, he seeks to enable the other disputant to learn to catch onto when confronted with such an object. For in so far as the two disputants are within dialectical reach of one another, the language in which they dispute is language whose understanding presupposes the great fund of sentiments in which those who learn that language can learn to concur. What they have to find ways to do is to cause one another to exploit the full range, reach and resonance of these sentiments.

Here I think Ayer’s positive claim (if I have not transduced it altogether by transposing it to the context of subjectivism) solves at one stroke the problem that so many of Hume’s commentators have bogged down upon in their attempts to understand how, and with what putative special precautions, Hume himself proposed to get from ‘the usual copulations, is and is not’ to ‘the new relation or affirmation’ of an ‘ought or an ought not’ (cf. Treatise 3.1.1). Ayer’s proposal simply removes that problem by forcing upon us the thought that what disputants must focus upon is the object of attention itself.

15. Of course, Ayer’s claim (α) postpones the question of what else goes on when moral disputants seek to get the measure of one another, and it postpones other business too. What the doctrine would have to do next is to say how property-mediated linkages between kinds of thing and kinds of subjective response are altered and refined in the processes of instruction and persuasion. But that is not what I ought to attempt here. It is more urgent, if the alliance I have suggested is to have any claim to coherence or point, that I distinguish the objective/non-objective distinction, which needs (I claim) to be characterized in terms of the prospects of a class of judgments attaining substantial truth, from the non-subjective/subjective distinction. I suggest that the latter distinction may best be characterized in terms of the senses of certain kinds of sentences involving or not involving (or not always involving) for

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8 Hume’s essay ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ points the way here.
their proper elucidation some allusion to the states or responses of conscious subjects. These distinctions are different, and they have *prima facie* different points. If we call Hume's position subjectivism, then this should be to evoke (in the first instance, at least) the non-subjective/subjective distinction, not the objective/non-objective distinction. For, if we concentrate on what the theory says positively about morality, then it leaves open such possibilities as this:

The interest, on which justice is founded, is the greatest imaginable, and extends to all times and places. It cannot possibly be serv'd by any other invention. It is obvious, and discovers itself on the very first formation of society. All these causes render the rules of justice [i.e. such things as property rules] stedfast and immutable; at least, as immutable as human nature. And if they were founded on original instincts, cou'd they have any greater stability? (Treatise, 620)

This is a species of objectivity, and not one Ayer has any need to reject.

16. Confronted with this proposal of alliance and the claim that one might move forward from such Humean avowals (and his claim that between vice and virtue there is a real distinction) to something better than a merely nominal objectivity, I think Ayer would ask this question: If you think that ways of thinking can emerge and find their own subject matter; if you distinguish, as you have advocated that we should, between morality as the contribution of conscious subjects, on the one hand, and how that contribution represents things as being, on the other; and if you persuade us not to constrain the search for the thing represented by the criterion of observationality but rather by what you will claim to be the rational criteria that are immanent within the practices that make up that contribution; then is there any limit to what we shall end up countenancing? Could we not end up satisfied by saying almost anything about the absolute or Mumbo-Jumbo or whatever else at all? Could Mumbo Jumbo discourse not bring itself into being and then claim to have caught up with Mumbo Jumbo himself? What could one in the theoretical position you advocate say in criticism of the supposition that this had actually been done, and that Mumbo Jumbo himself had been ‘identified’?

The reply to this question must hark back to my section 3 and what I claimed there about positivism. To every sentence there corresponds something that its correctness must turn upon, even perhaps some test that can help in some suitable context to confirm it. But this is consistent (I claimed) with there being no prospect of circumscribing in advance or once and for all what can count as a test or as a thing at issue. We have to take each purported case on its merits, and accredit or discredit it on these individual merits. What Ayer wants is some non-vacuous general criterion of success or failure. Is there such a thing? It
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would indeed be wonderful to have a substantial but completely general account of what can force us (malgré nous, as Leibniz would say) to believe or disbelieve something. But are we utterly lost if we cannot find this? Why can Ayer not see it as more than enough of a problem for those who want to talk of God that, habitually (or so one like Ayer or me might declare), either these people say nothing that even a disbeliever need reject or they put forward an account of things that is internally incoherent or they put forward an account of the origin and nature of the world that generates at least as many questions as it answers? Why is it not enough of a challenge to theology for Ayer to ask it to find a way to do better than that? If Ayer thinks it is not enough and this is Ayer’s ground for rejecting the option I offer him (an option which leaves it an open question, remember, whether or not a subjective morality will admit truth, knowledge and objectivity, and which does not ‘postulate’ its own adequacy to do that!), if Ayer insists that he must have belt and braces, then he will force me to suppose that he has not really given up the difficult old business of trying to establish the bounds of sense from within the bounds of sense. He will force me to doubt what I previously did not doubt, namely the separateness you remember he claimed in 1946 of his original subscription to emotivism and his original and (it will seem) residually persisting subscription to positivism.