

it is *false* that beliefs are justified or known, not that epistemic judgments are neither-true-nor-false.

Epistemic emotivism is thus at odds with standard assumptions. For many, it might seem obviously implausible and worthy of immediate dismissal. I will argue that it has an immediately important implication in that it undercuts any epistemic support Ayer and Stevenson offered for their ethical emotivisms. This is because if epistemic emotivism is true then *all* epistemic judgments are neither true nor false, so it is neither true nor false that anyone *should* accept ethical emotivism or is *justified* in believing it (or any other view, including *epistemic* emotivism, for that matter). But if it's not true that anyone, from an intellectual point of view, should accept emotivism, then no one should.

Ayer and Stevenson might have had strong feelings for their views, but that's no reason to accept them. Their perspectives are self-undermining, truthfully should be rejected, and that's not just how we might feel about it.

2. Ayer's Critique of Ethical Naturalisms and Non-Naturalisms

Like other logical positivists, Ayer was an ethical emotivist. He also thought emotivism was "valid on its own account" apart from positivistic inspirations.¹ I will argue that the arguments he offers for ethical emotivism suggests analogous arguments for epistemological emotivism as well. I then evaluate this result.

Ayer considered the famous concluding paragraph from Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* an "excellent statement of the positivist's position":²

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these [empiricist] principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

Positivists accepted Hume's sentiment: they claimed that a sentence is either true or false, i.e., it expresses a proposition and so might be believed, if, and only if, it is either analytic or empirically verifiable.³ Sen-

¹ A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 20. Subsequent references to this work will be marked in the footnotes by reference to its title and page number.

² A.J. Ayer, "Editor's Introduction", in Ayer, ed., *Logical Positivism* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 10.

³ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 5. A sentence was considered empirically verifiable, roughly, if it was an "observation statement" or entailed by observation statements in conjunction with analytic propositions (13). Analytic propositions were said to "enlighten us by illustrating the way in which we use certain symbols" (*Language, Truth and Logic*, 79). Too little was said about the meaning of meaning, but a sentence was considered analytic "if it is true solely in virtue of the meaning of its constituent sym-

tences that met these criteria were said to be "cognitively meaningful" or have "cognitive meaning".

Ayer conceded that this criterion was never adequately formulated,⁴ little argument was ever offered in its defense, and it is cognitively meaningless according to its own standards. But, ignoring these problems, if it is combined with the premise that judgments about what's morally good/bad, right/wrong, just/unjust and virtuous/vicious are neither analytic nor empirically verifiable, it implies that these judgments are neither true nor false.

Ayer accepted that argument. He thought that moral judgments were neither analytic nor empirically verifiable. Sentences like 'Eve's beating her baby today was wrong' are not analytic since, if true, are not true in virtue of meaning (on nearly any view of meaning), are not formal truths or definitions, are not contradictory to deny and *can* be refuted by an empirical fact such as that Eve never beat her baby. If analytic, they would have none of these features.

Ayer's arguments that moral judgments were not empirically verifiable depended on his arguments against ethical naturalisms and non-naturalisms.

Naturalists defined moral terms in naturalistic terms. They claimed that moral expressions are synonymous with empirical expressions and that, therefore, moral properties just *are* natural properties. Utilitarian-naturalists claimed that 'x is right' *means* 'x produces the most happiness'; subjectivist-naturalists reduced judgments of rightness to judgments of individual or collective approvals. Naturalists argued that since those latter judgments are verifiable, moral judgments are verifiable as well.

Ayer argued that naturalistic definitions were not analytic since it isn't self-contradictory to deny them and it is an 'open question' for competent speakers whether acts with some proposed natural property (e.g., maximizing pleasure) have some moral property (e.g., being right). If the naturalists' various definitions were correct, these questions would be as 'closed' as the question 'are right actions right?'⁵ That question's answer is 'obviously, yes!' but answers to questions whether acts with the proposed natural property are right are, at least, not obvious, or, according to some critics of naturalisms, obviously not what naturalists thought.

Ayer concluded that naturalist definitions were not "consistent with the conventions of our actual language"⁶ and, thus, their analytic bridges to reduce moral judgments to empirical judgments were burned down. His arguments here did not depend on positivism; Moore made the same arguments. But Ayer could have also observed that naturalistic defini-

and cannot therefore be either confirmed or refuted by any fact of experience" (16). Tautologies and formal propositions from logic and mathematics were considered analytic (41).

⁴ A.J. Ayer, *The Central Questions of Philosophy* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 27.

⁵ Or, 'If there are (or were) any right actions, are right actions right?'

⁶ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 105.

tions are not empirically verifiable either and concluded that, according to positivism, they are neither true nor false. However, he seemed content with these definitions being only false.

Non-naturalists, like Moore and Ross, whom Ayer called “absolutists”,⁷ claimed that moral terms were either undefinable or definable only in other moral terms: e.g., ‘x is right’ is synonymous with ‘x produces the most good’, but ‘good’ is either undefinable or definable only in other moral terms (e.g., “worth having for its own sake”⁸). They claimed moral judgments were synthetic but that moral properties could be verified by non-empirical intuition.

But Ayer rejected appeals to intuition, calling it ‘mysterious’.⁹ Many claim to intuitively ‘see’ goodness, but since there is no empirical test to adjudicate between competing moral visions, Ayer thought these appeals were “worthless”.¹⁰ He argued that since there is no moral intuition, no terms’ meanings are such that they stand for properties that can be verified non-empirically. He concluded that non-naturalists’ epistemology, semantics and metaphysics were mistaken.

Unlike his arguments against naturalism, these arguments are distinctly positivistic.¹¹ But, even if one rejected positivism, one *might* find appeals to intuition independently suspicious and draw not merely a skeptical conclusion (i.e., ‘There *is* goodness, but unfortunately no belief that something is good is ever epistemically justified or known’) but positivist-like semantic and metaphysical conclusions.

3. Ayer's Ethical Emotivism

If moral terms have cognitive meaning, their meanings must be the same as either naturalistic or non-naturalistic expressions’ meanings. Ayer thought he refuted both possibilities (and if moral terms lack cognitive meaning, that’s another reason why moral judgments aren’t analytic, i.e., true in virtue of cognitive meaning).

His final assessment was that ethical concepts are “pseudo-concepts”,¹² but he did not think that they were meaningless, in the sense of being incomprehensible gibberish. His proposal was that moral terms were meaningful but that their meaning was of a different kind: emotive, not

⁷ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 106.

⁸ G.E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), 94.

⁹ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 106.

¹⁰ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 106

¹¹ Non-naturalistic definitions are not empirically verifiable, but Ayer did not argue they were not analytic. He did not argue that their denials weren’t self-contradictory or that they failed open question tests. So, he had no argument that they were neither true nor false. Since the definitions do not *in themselves* imply that there is non-empirical intuition, Ayer had no argument that they were false either. His argument was more at non-naturalistic *perspectives* as a whole; in particular, the moral epistemologies they conjoined with their definitions.

¹² *Language, Truth and Logic*, 107.

cognitive. The meanings of these terms are such that when people use them, to make moral judgments, they are *expressing* (not describing) states of mind that are “simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true nor false”.¹³ He suggested that moral judgments “are calculated also to arouse feelings, and so to stimulate action”.¹⁴

He illustrated his position this way:

If ... I ... say, “Stealing money is wrong”, I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning—that is, expresses no proposition which can be either true or false. It is as if I had written “Stealing money!!”—where the shape and thickness of the exclamation marks show, by a suitable convention, that a special sort of moral disapproval is the feeling which is being expressed. It is clear that there is nothing said here which can be true or false. 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 action 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. And the man who is ostensibly contradicting me is merely expressing his moral sentiments. So there is plainly no sense in asking which of us is in the right. For neither of us is asserting a genuine proposition.¹⁵

Cognitivists, i.e., naturalists and non-naturalists, agree that strong feelings sometimes, if not often, accompany moral judgments and that we often voice moral judgments to try to influence feelings and behavior. But they deny that this is a necessary consequence of the meanings of moral terms; they maintain that one could make a moral judgment that fails to influence *any* feelings or behavior (including one’s own). Since emotivists think that moral judgments just *are* the expression of feelings, they deny this possibility.

This is Ayer’s perspective on ethics. Later I will discuss Ayer’s response to the “only criticism which appeared to threaten it”.¹⁶

4. Ayer, Positivism and Epistemology

While many objections have been raised to emotivism, I wish to raise a new objection to Ayer’s defense of it. He said his emotivist analysis ap-

¹³ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 103.

¹⁴ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 108.

¹⁵ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 107-108. Ayer did, however, think that moral judgments have some descriptive content when they entail an empirical proposition. In the preceding paragraph he writes, “[I]f I say to someone, ‘You acted wrongly in stealing the money’, I am not stating anything more than if I had said, ‘You stole the money’. In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, ‘You stole the money’, in a particular tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. The tone, or the exclamation marks, 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”.

¹⁶ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 112.

plied to aesthetic judgments, but my interest is what this perspective implies for epistemic judgments and definitions. On the face of it, it seems that they would have a similar fate. I will argue that this is an unacceptable implication.

Consider some particular epistemic judgments, e.g., some of Ayer's. Surely he, like many people, thought of many of his beliefs were reasonable and justified for him, if not sometimes known. Using his preferred terminology, he might have said he had "the right to be sure" of them.¹⁷ But it seems that these epistemic judgments (e.g., 'I am *justified* in believing that the lights are on', 'It is *reasonable* to believe that I have hands', 'As a positivist, I have a *right to be sure* of the emotive account of ethics', etc.) are not analytic since they are not definitions, tautologies, or formal truths: by the standards Ayer accepted in ethics, investigating the meanings of the words or linguistic conventions would not reveal their truth values. And, at least *prima facie*, they don't seem empirically verifiable either: scientific observation might, presumably, reveal that one has some belief but it wouldn't show its epistemic status.

These considerations seem applicable to any epistemic judgment that some belief is justified or reasonable, or is something that one should or ought believe, and so on. So it is plausible to think that, on positivistic grounds, particular epistemic judgments are—like ethical judgments—also neither true nor false.¹⁸ Since epistemic platitudes, such as Ayer's suggestion that "certain standards of evidence *ought* always to be observed in the formation of our beliefs",¹⁹ are neither analytic nor empirical either, it's presumably not true that you ought to follow your evidence, but it's not false either.

One might resist these conclusions by arguing that they follow only if one is sufficiently inattentive to the meanings of epistemic terms. Perhaps, given true definitions or analyses of epistemological terms, epistemic judgments meet the positivistic criterion for cognitive meaning.

¹⁷ *The Problem of Knowledge* (Edinburgh: Penguin Books, 1956), 31-35. Ayer analyzes knowledge into the conditions "first that what one is said to know be true, secondly that one be sure of it, and thirdly that one should have the right to be sure" (35).

¹⁸ Ayer says of particular ethical judgments that "inasmuch as they are certainly neither definitions nor comments upon definitions, nor quotations, we may say decisively that they do not belong to ethical philosophy. A strictly philosophical treatise on ethics should therefore make no ethical pronouncements" (*Language, Truth and Logic*, 103). Perhaps these remarks would apply to particular epistemic judgments as well (e.g., whether a belief is Gettier case, whether victims of 'evil demons' have justified beliefs), and so a "strictly philosophical treatise" on epistemology would contain no judgments about the epistemic qualities of particular beliefs or believers. While there is no point in debating what is "strictly philosophical", insofar as current epistemologists use judgments about actual or hypothetical particular cases to evaluate epistemic definitions (or analyses or principles), Ayer's suggestion would, surprisingly, seem to suggest that this aspect of epistemological inquiry is not strictly philosophical. And, if my arguments are sound, positivism implies that these particular judgments are neither true nor false anyway.

¹⁹ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 100.

While the question of moral terms' meanings has been much discussed, there has been little comparably intense discussion about the meanings of epistemic terms. But if epistemic terms have cognitive meaning, those meanings are either naturalistic or non-naturalistic expressions. But then they will likely fall prey to Ayer's objections to ethical definitions. If ethical definitions were of no help in making moral judgments analytic or empirically verifiable (and hence either true or false), epistemological definitions are of no help either.

5. *Against Naturalistic Epistemological Definitions*

Let us first consider some naturalistic epistemological definitions or analyses. While any would do, let us use Ayer's. He said that "we define a rational belief as one which is arrived at by the methods which we now consider reliable" and that "to be rational *is* simply to employ a self-consistent accredited procedure in the formation of all of one's beliefs".²⁰

These analyses were likely attractive to him since they identified epistemic judgments with psychological-causal-logical judgments that (ignoring possible grave difficulties in identifying 'methods' and 'procedures' and understanding 'reliability') were, at least in principle, empirically verifiable. In this way they were like naturalistic definitions of ethical terms. But then they were, therefore, also subject to the exact same objections, which Ayer did not seem to realize or press against them.

We might grant that the presence of these psychological-causal-logical states is in principle empirically verifiable, but to deny these definitions does not seem to utter a contradiction. Although this is not fully clear since Ayer does not define 'reliable', it does not seem that one contradicts oneself by saying 'this belief is rational but it was not brought about by a method which we now consider reliable.' Linguistic conventions surely were never so much in Ayer's favor to make that claim analytic. These definitions are also subject to 'open question' arguments, since one can sensibly (or quite confusedly) ask, 'This belief has been formed by the employment of a "self-consistent accredited procedure", but is it a *rational* belief?' If 'rational' meant *that*, then there wouldn't be a question here.

Ayer thought that these tests show that naturalistic definitions of ethical terms are not analytic, that they are false, and that, therefore, moral properties are not natural properties and moral judgments are not empirical judgments.²¹ Unless epistemic definitions are an exception to the semantic rules that Ayer accept in the context of ethics (and there is no reason to think that they are), these tests also imply that naturalistic epistemological definitions are not analytic, are false, and so epistemic

²⁰ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 100, emphasis mine. Presumably, these weren't mere stipulations.

²¹ This reasoning was founded on the false assumption that if 'A's are not B's' is not analytic then that A'B. For the sake of argument, here I ignore this.

properties are not natural properties and epistemic judgments are not empirical judgments either.²²

So, given what Ayer said about ethical naturalism, he should have rejected his own naturalistic epistemological definitions. Although it is not clear what he thought about this, if he thought epistemic judgments were empirical judgments, that was inconsistent with his reasoning against ethical naturalism (and if he thought recognized inconsistency *should* be avoided, that too is inconsistent with his principles). Since naturalistic epistemological definitions are also not empirically verifiable, it seems that, on positivistic principles, they should be considered not merely false, but neither true nor false. That also seems follow from Ayer's position, which he also did not realize.

6. *Against Non-Naturalistic Epistemological Definitions*

If naturalistic epistemological definitions are mistaken since they are not analytic, then a non-naturalistic definition must be correct, if any are. But Ayer's objections to ethical non-naturalisms apply to epistemic non-naturalisms as well.

If what a person believes can in principle be empirically verified, many aspects of beliefs are empirically verifiable as well. The various effects of those beliefs (i.e., causal properties of those beliefs) are presumably verifiable, e.g., that it makes someone happy or sad, or is financially productive. Beliefs' psychological properties of being held with a certain level of strength, confidence or doubt are empirically verifiable. Formal, logical properties of a belief can also be identified, i.e., logical relations to other propositions, although positivists would likely claim that these relations can be identified because they are analytic.²³

But whether some belief is justified or reasonable, or whether there is sufficient evidence for some belief, does not seem to be an empirical matter: observation and experiment do not show the epistemic status of a belief.²⁴ Lab results do not show if some experience or belief is evidence, or if some evidence is sufficient, if some proposition ought to be believed, or if some explanation is more reasonable than another: in fact, lab life depends on antecedent capacities for epistemic assessment.

Empirical information is often relevant to epistemic evaluation (e.g., whether *S* believes *p* is relevant to whether *S*'s believing *p* is justified). But identifying the epistemic status of belief seems to be a matter of something that might be best described as non-empirical intuition. And Ayer rejected views that appealed to intuition since he thought there sim-

²² That seems correct, apart from any concerns about Ayer: even if reliabilism and other naturalistic epistemic theories were true, would not be *analytically* true or true by definition.

²³ This appears to presuppose some kind of non-empirical intuition that is likely hard to account for on positivistic perspectives, but I will not press that point.

²⁴ This isn't at all to say that scientific information or, especially common-sense empirical information is not or could not be relevant to whether some belief is justified or whether it should be judged as justified.

ply is no such thing. He thought intuition was especially troublesome in ethics since there is no test to decide between conflicting intuitions other than further intuitions: there is no empirical tie-breaker. But the same is true in epistemology: there is no empirical test to adjudicate competing intuitions about what's reasonable or justified, or whether some evidence is sufficient evidence, or if some belief-forming-process is *the* process that justifies some belief. If intuition is 'worthless' in ethics, it is equally worthless in epistemology.

Ayer rejected ethical non-naturalism because of its intuitionism; he concluded that moral terms do not mean "cognitively meaningless" non-natural terms, there are no non-natural moral properties and, thus, that moral judgments are neither true nor false. It seems that analogous conclusions would follow for epistemology as well: any theory that implies that epistemic terms *mean* terms that are non-empirically verifiable is equally worthy of rejection from positivistic perspectives. In case he did, Ayer should not have thought that epistemic terms' meanings are non-natural expressions. He should have rejected non-naturalistic definitions and analyses that claimed that epistemic terms are indefinable or definable only in other epistemic terms (e.g., 'a belief is rational' *means* the same as 'there are good reasons for that belief' or 'a belief is justified if, and only if, it is supported by the evidence').

7. *Epistemic Emotivism*

Since naturalistic definitions fail to be analytic and non-naturalistic definitions presuppose intuition, it seems that Ayer should have rejected them both. He should have concluded that epistemic terms lack cognitive meaning altogether and so epistemic judgments are neither true nor false. These results are not idiosyncratic to Ayer's epistemology: on positivistic assumptions, contemporary epistemologies—both naturalistic and non-naturalistic—would be "cognitively meaningless" as well.

Unless epistemic judgments are declared completely meaningless, it seems likely that, on positivism, their meaning would also be emotive (although not necessarily, since there are other non-cognitivist interpretations of epistemic language that are, in some sense, "consistent" with epistemic sentences lacking truth values).²⁵ On epistemic emotivism, to say that some belief *p* is justified (or unjustified) would be to *express* one's favorable (or unfavorable) feelings towards believing *p* and to attempt arouse the feelings of others regarding believing *p* and stimulate them to believe (or disbelieve) *p*. The view would have it that like (other?) "statements of value",²⁶ the presence of an epistemic term in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. So, in saying 'Your belief that *p* is unjusti-

²⁵ *Should* positivists only accept views that are consistent with their position (insofar as propositions can be consistent with the principle of verification, a sentence that seems to fail to be a proposition, on positivistic)? While positivists might wish to answer, 'Yes', I argue below that they *truthfully* cannot.

²⁶ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 102.

fied and unreasonable' one might not saying anything more than 'You believe p!?!?' in, as Ayer suggested, "a particular tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks" to express one's feelings of disapproval and, perhaps, to try to command the believer to cease believing p.²⁷ A creationist's statement, 'evolution is not supported by the evidence', would be not be a proposition: it would be an expression of disapproval of belief in evolution and an attempt to persuade people to reject the theory. An evolutionist's response that creationists are irrational would be equally emotive. Neither party would be attempting to state facts about the epistemic quality of their respective beliefs or attribute epistemic properties.

This interpretation of epistemic judgments is strongly suggested by Ayer's positivistic critique of ethics. Since most philosophers think that epistemic judgments are propositional attitudes, and epistemic emotivism denies this, it is at odds with common assumptions. As far as I know, not even Ayer and other positivists accepted it (or even noticed that it is implied by their broader perspective). Perhaps it is shocking enough, for many, to serve as (yet another!) *reductio* of their principles.²⁸

8. Why Epistemic Emotivism Undercuts Ethical Emotivism

For now, I wish to note that this emotive consequence for epistemic judgments has important implications for arguments from positivism to ethical emotivism. This is because epistemic emotivism seems to have implications for what to think about *all* arguments and reasoning.²⁹ These implications are likely troublesome for positivists and those who reject ethical cognitivism for Ayer's reasons.

To see this, consider the main argument under consideration in this paper:

- (1) A sentence states a proposition if, and only if, it is either analytic or empirically verifiable.
- (2) Moral and epistemic sentences—particular judgments (and, clearly, naturalistic definitions)—are neither analytic nor empirically verifiable.
- (3) Therefore, moral and epistemic sentences do not state truth-apt propositions.

(1) is "paradoxical" in that if it is true, it implies that it is neither true nor false. Perhaps it was intended to *express* feelings of approval for analytic and empirically verifiable sentences and disapproval for all others,

²⁷ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 107, 108.

²⁸ Elsewhere I investigate in greater details whether this *reductio* could be resisted and whether epistemological emotivisms or expressivisms could be plausibly maintained and defended. I will argue that it can't.

²⁹ I say *seems* to have implications: although a statement of epistemic emotivism might entail other propositions, claims like 'those who accept epistemic emotivism ought to accept these implications' are neither true nor false, according to epistemic emotivism. This is a puzzling consequence.

but this is doubtful. I will ignore these problems and, for the sake of argument, accept (1) as true. And I have argued that (2) as true as well, especially on positivistic assumptions.

So, we have a recognized-as-valid argument with premises that, for the sake of argument, we accept as true. Now, the problem: should we accept the conclusion? Would we be justified in doing so? That is, are the sentences 'We *should* accept this conclusion' and 'We are justified in believing (3)' true? Neither of these sentences is analytic or empirically verifiable. So, insofar as (1) can have implications, it seems to imply that they are neither true nor false.³⁰ A sentence even like 'someone who believes an argument to be valid, thinks the premises are true, sees that the premises entail the conclusion, and is more confident of the premises than the denial of the conclusion *ought* to accept the conclusion' seems to be neither true nor false either; it is clearly not empirical and doesn't seem analytic either: it isn't a logical truth and doesn't seem to be established by the meanings of the terms.

From positivistic perspectives, naturalistic epistemological definitions that might be offered (in conjunction with empirical premises about psychological states) to reduce these epistemic judgments to empirical judgments would be refuted by open-question arguments; definitions that wouldn't be refuted this way would require a kind of intuition that they found too mysterious. Thus, according to positivism, it is neither true nor false that anyone epistemically should (or should not) accept ethical emotivism. A response that 'you *should* be an ethical emotivist but you should resist these arguments for epistemic emotivism!' would be neither true nor false either.

Logical relations among propositions are one issue, and a fully legitimate one, on positivistic assumptions. (However Ayer's analysis of judgments of probabilistic logical relations has been subject to the same objections I have raised to his treatment of epistemic judgments,³¹ so perhaps all he can truthfully make are judgments about entailments and their absence). But what you *should* conclude (given your experiences and other things you believe), how you *ought* to reason, what you are *justified* in believing, etc. are different questions. Not all epistemic judgments appeal to logic, and reasoning and evaluating arguments is more than displaying sets of statements in various logical relations. Seeing these relations does not establish what one, epistemically, should believe. Reasoning typically involves presumptions that 'given this, you *ought* to believe that' and 'you *should* drop this belief if you want to retain that belief'³²

³⁰ However, I argue below that, on positivism, any principle like 'if someone recognizes that p entails q then she ought to believe q' (or, ideally, a more refined and plausible principle) is neither true nor false.

³¹ R.F. Atkinson persuasively argues that the positions Ayer takes in ethics and probability are inconsistent. See his "'Good' and 'Right' and 'Probable' in Language, Truth and Logic", *Mind*, 64 (1955), 242-246.

³² Some suggest that epistemic imperatives are categorical imperatives: if you want X, believe p; you want X, so believe p. But this doesn't solve any problems because we

and 'it is *better* to believe this than that' and so forth. In practice, it seems to presuppose an imperative of consistency, a presumption that it's better to have consistent beliefs than inconsistent ones.

Typically, these epistemic *should's*, *ought's* and value judgments are understood realistically. Few think that we are *merely* expressing our emotions when talking about good and bad reasoning, and what we should believe.³³ In cases where we might be expressing emotions in making epistemic judgments, few of us think that we are *only* expressing our emotions. But positivism seems unable to accommodate these judgments since none of these claims about reasoning and what we should believe or what is reasonable meet their criteria for being cognitively meaningful. Ethical emotivists have been criticized for being unable to account for the role of reason in ethics—since they offered no mechanism to explain which emotive responses are appropriate (and typically claimed that there were no truths about which feelings 'fit' a situation) and how one might give reasons for one's ethical perspectives—but my arguments run deeper in that I'm arguing that, if positivism is the basis of their emotivism, then they are unable to account for good and bad reasoning *simpliciter* since they think that all such judgments are neither true nor false. Ethical emotivists might express strong *feelings* about believing emotivism and try to arouse our sentiments so we might accept it, but it's not clear how those are *reasons* to accept it. And, at least if positivism is the motivation for ethical emotivism, there's no truth to the claim that we *should* be reasonable, or *ought* to have intellectually defensible views anyway.³⁴

If positivism undercuts the truth of any epistemic judgments, including judgments about what is and isn't good reasoning, this is yet another reason to reject positivism and undercuts a historically influential motivation for moral non-cognitivism and anti-realism (that I suspect is still lingering in some 'naturalistic' perspectives). Below I will consider some ways that positivists and epistemic emotivists might try to resist these arguments.

9. Non-Positivist-Based Ethical and Epistemic Emotivism

Ayer also thought ethical emotivism was "valid on its own account", apart from positivism. He didn't say why he thought this, but I will briefly mention some considerations for it and note that they apply to epistemic

are still left with the question whether some principle like 'if you want X and Y is a means to X, then do Y' is a proposition, if it is true, and, if so, what makes it true. Hypothetical imperatives presuppose all the metaphysical and semantic baggage that categorical imperatives do; to avoid a regress, they seem to presuppose a categorical imperatives as well.

³³ Allen Gibbard and Simon Blackburn are notable exceptions: they recognize that the arguments of ethical emotivism, and other non-realist meta-ethics, have implications beyond what Ayer and Stevenson saw for them. I discuss their views elsewhere.

³⁴ What if someone desires that she be able to defend her views, give considerations in their favor, respond to objections, etc.? On positivism, that's not a good thing, or admirable, or an attitude that people ought to strive to have.

judgments as well. Some of these overlap with positivistic reasons, but one needn't be a positivist to accept them.

Ayer calls moral (and aesthetic) judgments "statements of value" and notes that they "cannot with any show of justice be represented as hypotheses, which are used to predict the course of our sensations".³⁵ He argues that naturalist definitions are not analytic, so moral judgments can't be reduced to empirical judgments. While some say that moral judgments can be verified by "intuition", Ayer rejects appeals to intuitions since they can conflict and there seems to be no empirical test to adjudicate between them. He notes that what seems intuitively, certainly right or good to someone may seem doubtful, or even obviously false, to another. He observes that moral debates typically are more contentious and emotionally expressive than debates about empirical matters.³⁶

Someone might conclude, given all this (and without any thought of positivism), that people are just expressing their emotions when making moral judgments: perhaps this would seem to be the best explanation of the phenomena. But all these considerations apply to epistemic judgments as well: judgments about what's reasonable or justified don't predict sensations, aren't empirically verifiable, and seem to be the result of "intuitions" which, when conflicting, can't be resolved by empirical testing. Epistemic terms are hard to define in empirical terms and debates about whether it's rational to believe something or some evidence is sufficient evidence (and even if something *is* evidence) are often contentious, inconclusive and feelings can run equally high. Epistemic judgments also seem to be a kind of "value judgment" anyway: to say that a belief is justified or reasonable is to impart some kind of positive value to it.³⁷ There are judgments of epistemic virtue and vice, judgments that knowledge is intrinsically good, and assumptions that knowledge is *better* than "mere" (i.e., unjustified) true belief, all value judgments in themselves. As suggested above, the presumption that there is good and bad reasoning seems to presuppose value judgments as well. So, if these general, non-positivistic based considerations support ethical emotivism, they support epistemological emotivism as well.

10. Conclusions on Ayer's Epistemic Emotivism

Thus, if Ayer's reasons given for ethical emotivism are genuinely good reasons to accept it, then they are good reasons to accept epistemic

³⁵ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 102

³⁶ In *Logical Positivism*, Ayer claims, "[Moral] arguments do not work in the way that logical or scientific arguments do" (22). That might be true, but if my arguments are sound, logical and scientific arguments do not work the way Ayer thinks they do either.

³⁷ Allan Gibbard, quoting Hilary Putnam states, "The terms that ground our conception of rational acceptability—'coherent', 'simple', 'justified', and the like—are often used as terms of *praise*", and they "have too many characteristics in common with the paradigmatic value terms for us to deny that that is what they are". See Gibbard's *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 32.

emotivism as well. But few are willing to think that there are (or, perhaps, even could be) good reasons to accept epistemic emotivism. It might render those concepts incoherent since, if an Ayer-inspired epistemic emotivism is true, to say that 'there are good reasons to believe that view' is merely express one's feelings about believing it. Most philosophers, even positivists, think that, truthfully, epistemic emotivism *should* be rejected, and that's not just how they 'feel' about it.

Since epistemic emotivism (or some other non-cognitivist interpretation of epistemic discourse) seems to follow from positivism, positivists and so motivated ethical emotivists have a dilemma: accept the consequence and go emotivist more broadly to include epistemic and 'logical' judgments, or drop positivism. A more global emotivism seems quite implausible and would be very difficult, if not impossible, to coherently defend (due to epistemic emotivism's making all epistemic judgments emotive), so that's an unattractive response. Dropping positivism wouldn't require dropping ethical emotivism since it *could* be retained on independent grounds. But many of these reasons would likely suggest epistemic emotivism as well.³⁸ The easiest response is to drop positivism (especially since there is no reason to accept it in the first place), but this eliminates a traditional justification for ethical emotivism. But since other justifications for ethical emotivism likely suggest epistemic emotivism, those justifications should be dropped as well. So, one should reject both ethical and epistemic emotivism and the cases Ayer offered in their favor.

11. *Objections and Replies*

As far as I can tell, there is no hope for retaining positivism and Ayer's case for ethical emotivism but resisting the conclusion that epistemic judgments are neither true nor false also. The only response might be that epistemic emotivism is as palatable as ethical emotivism. They thought the latter wasn't a problematic position, so why should they think the former is problematic? But it is very difficult to see how epistemic emotivism isn't anything but a very difficult position to hold.

To see why this is so, let us first consider how epistemic emotivism makes it difficult to defend ethical emotivism. Ayer considered only one objection to ethical emotivism: that if it is true, there are no moral disagreements since there are no moral propositions that one person might accept and another reject. Since people seem to disagree, the objector concludes that emotivism is mistaken. Ayer accepted the implication but thought, surprisingly, that people do not disagree about moral matters.³⁹ He claimed that in *all* cases, the dispute is about cognitively meaningful questions of logic or empirical matters of fact and their relevance to the

³⁸ One way to avoid arguments for ethical non-cognitivism being converted to argument for epistemic non-cognitivism is to make the major premises so 'narrow' and non-general that they apply only to moral judgments. This, of course, would make the arguments weaker since they would appear more and more 'question-begging'.

³⁹ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 110-112.

moral question. He claimed that "we do not and cannot argue about ... the validity of ... moral principles. We merely praise or condemn them in light of our own feelings".

That seems mistaken since it seems we can reason about moral principles since it seems that they *can* figure into truth-functional logical operations. But if epistemic emotivism were true, Ayer's even diminished account of moral disagreement is mistaken because we do not, strictly speaking, disagree on what we *should* think about logical and factual matters either.

Ayer claims that much moral debate consists in getting people's particular judgments to fall in line with the principles they accept. He claims that if "a man has certain moral principles ... he *must*, in order to be consistent, react morally to certain things in a certain way".⁴⁰ But that imperative does not appear to be an analytic or empirical truth, so it is presumably neither true nor false. If it is a moral principle, Ayer has only praised it in light of his own feelings. So logical correction, in terms of how one ought to reason, is not a cognitively meaningful resource for Ayer to appeal to.

Empirical correction is the "attempt to show that [someone] is mistaken about the [non-moral] facts of the case ... has misconceived the agent's motive ... has misjudged the effects of the action ... or has failed to take into account the special circumstances in which the agent was placed".⁴¹ But this activity appears to presume epistemic standards, that, given certain experiences and other beliefs, someone *ought* to have some specified belief. As I argued above, these kinds of judgments are cognitively meaningless on Ayer's principles. There is no truth to claims that someone's beliefs *should* change if new information is presented.

Ayer claimed that "one really never does dispute about questions of value". But insofar as judgments about how one ought to reason, that one should be consistent, and that one should accept some empirical judgments are neither true nor false, there are no cognitive disputes about them as well, on his principles. People can disagree, in the sense that they believe inconsistent propositions. But on his view, when someone says 'you should believe p' and someone replies, 'no, you should not believe p' they do not, strictly speaking, contradict each other.

That's a more surprising, and damning, implication than what follows from ethical emotivism alone. Thus, his response to the objection that emotivism cannot account for moral disagreement fails: it can account for it only by appealing to other non-cognitive factors. And these we also do not and cannot argue about: we merely praise or condemn epistemic standards and principles about reasoning in light of our own feelings.

It's unlikely he would have been accepted with this consequence, but he might have. He might have replied that, yes, strictly speaking, *all* evaluative or prescriptive judgments—about what one *should*, *ought* or *must*

⁴⁰ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 111, emphasis mine.

⁴¹ *Language, Truth and Logic*, 111.

believe, reason, or react—are neither true nor false. However, he might have responded that this was no objection to the view because he had no need for epistemic language. He could observe that it is fully legitimate on his principles to make descriptive statements, e.g., about what people believe *if* he's careful to not describe these statements in epistemic terms, e.g. 'justified' or 'rational', etc. And he has logic (although perhaps not non-deductive logic). So, in argumentative contexts, he can point out logical relations between propositions and what follows and does not follow from what people believe: he can note that some propositions are inconsistent with someone's beliefs or are entailed by them, and note how confident someone is in some beliefs. He might also claim that some belief was, or was not, 'arrived at by the methods which we now consider reliable' or that 'a self-consistent accredited procedure' was employed in the formation of some beliefs. Ayer might claim that making these kinds of observations is all that is needed for argumentative discourse: evaluative epistemic talk can be abandoned with no loss.

However, it seems clear that there would be a loss. For one, competent speakers could understand these claims have no clue what is supposed to follow from them: they might think, 'Why is Ayer telling me this, even if what he says is true?' If they thought that, given her understanding of Ayer's claims, they *should* then believe or do something, this response is designed just to avoid appeal to illegitimate 'shoulds'. But even if Ayer pointed out some inconsistency, the question of what to believe seems unavoidable: *should* they keep a premise, reject a conclusion, or reject Ayer's judgment that there is an entailment? That's a question that Ayer's descriptions alone couldn't answer and his positivism precludes there being a true answer to. Perhaps Ayer would hope that people care about avoiding inconsistency and that this would typically lead them to think as he wished, but surely even if a person lacked such concerns, epistemic questions about what she should believe remain.

In sum, it seems that epistemic language is unavoidable. For practical reasons (i.e., boredom, frustration and the sense that we have better things to do), we might abandon attempts to argue with someone who refused to acknowledge any epistemic standards, and in some contexts might even resort to mere abuse.⁴² But we would attribute failure of acknowledgment as a failure to *see* the truth about epistemic standards. And it's not merely that we *would* do this; rather, from an epistemic point of view, it's true that we *should* do this. To deny this is, fundamentally, to accept a view that is unable to accommodate good reasoning, the common presumptions of epistemic judgments and seems to lapse into epistemic incoherence.

Thus, I have argued that Ayer's case for ethical emotivism has deep and troubling implications for the cognitive status of epistemic discourse. Since, for a variety of reasons, the standard, cognitivist, fact-stating in-

⁴² Ayer notes that this is how we might respond to someone who fails to agree with us about some moral question, in spite of empirical and logical correction. *Language, Truth and Logic*, 111.

terpretation of epistemic judgments *truthfully* should be maintained and Ayer's principles should be rejected. Thus, his case in favor of ethical emotivism is undercut.

12. C.L. Stevenson's Ethical and Epistemic Emotivisms

I now turn briefly to C.L. Stevenson's ethical emotivism. Fortunately, Stevenson was not a positivist, so his perspective lacked that semantic and metaphysical baggage.

His emotivism was much more developed and subtle than Ayer's, but the basic position was similar. He thought that ethical sentences typically *express* attitudes and invite others to share those attitudes. By 'attitudes' he meant "tendencies to be for or against something, as typified by like, disliking, approving, disapproving, favoring, disfavoring, and so on".⁴³ Attitudes contrasted with 'beliefs'. So, e.g., if A says that '*p* ought to be done' but B responds that '*p* ought not to be done', then—according to Stevenson—they disagree in *attitude*, not in belief (however, this disagreement could be a consequence of a disagreement in non-moral belief, but not necessarily since Stevenson allows for fundamental disagreements in how people feel about something).

Cognitivists agree that, sometimes (if not typically) when people judge something to be right or good, they have certain emotive attitudes about that thing and, were they to express their attitudes out loud, they would be trying to influence others. But Stevenson thought that the 'function' of ethical sentences was the service of this expression: there wasn't a mere contingent connection. On his final analyses of 'good', to say something is good is to say that one approves of something, but said in such a way that one's expression of approval would evoke favorable feelings in their hearer.⁴⁴ This expression is a consequence of moral terms' meanings. He said: "The emotive meaning of a word is a tendency of a word, arising through the history of its usage, to produce (result from) affective responses in people. It is the immediate aura of feeling which hovers about a word."⁴⁵ Given these meanings, moral judgments are not beliefs, since they have no emotive influence; rather they are non-cognitive expressions.

Stevenson's analyses have been criticized as not capturing the correct meanings of moral terms, but I will not review those criticisms here.⁴⁶ I wish only to argue that his considerations in favor of emotivism also tend to support epistemological emotivism. Insofar as this is an undesirable consequence in itself and had problematic implications for the rational

⁴³ "Ethical Fallibility", in Richard T. De George (ed.), *Ethics and Society: Original Essays on Contemporary Moral Problems* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books), 199.

⁴⁴ *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 90; 206-226.

⁴⁵ "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms", in his *Fact and Values* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963) 21.

⁴⁶ For a summary of these criticisms, see Fred Feldman's *Introductory Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1978), 223-231.

acceptability of Ayer's defense of emotion, Stevenson's position (and its defense) has analogous difficulties.

Much of Stevenson's discussion consists of detailed descriptions of what it's like to engage in moral discourse and debate; e.g., what someone would say, how feelings might be roused, how one's interlocutor might respond, how confidence levels might change, when disputants might be satisfied and end the dispute, and so on. Thus, ethical discourse has what he calls a "dynamic" aspect.

If these observations were intended to provide support for emotivism, they seem equally applicable to disagreements about what's epistemically justified or rational as well. One could do a phenomenology of epistemic disagreements and observe that heated emotions often get *expressed* in debates over whether it's reasonable to believe empirical claims (about, for example, the causes of diseases, the utility of various research methods, the age of the earth, consequences of tax cuts, *philosophical* topics and many much more mundane issues). And calling a belief 'irrational' or 'unjustified' *can* be an attempt to influence others and 'invite' them to share one's belief. There are, of course, many more 'colorful' and obviously expressive terms of epistemic appraisal as well. If the fact that emotions often accompany a kind of discourse and it sometimes has a persuasive effect suggests an emotivist analysis, then epistemic language seems fit for that analysis as well.

Stevenson's main explicit argument for his emotivism was based on a claim about moral terms' alleged 'magnetism'. He asserted: "A person who recognizes X to be 'good' *must* ipso facto acquire a stronger tendency to act in its favor than he otherwise would have had."⁴⁷ Following Hume's theory of motivation, he thought this showed that moral judgments are not beliefs, since beliefs do not, in themselves, provide motivation to act or influence affections. He thus concluded that moral judgments were emotive attitudes. In a recent thorough discussion of these motivational issues, Russ Shafer-Landau concludes that "we are misled if we move from the obvious fact that moral judgments are usually motivating, to the stronger claim that they cannot fail to be."⁴⁸ He suggests that Stevenson was misled in just this way. Here I can only add a too brief, and too autobiographical, response to arguments from motivation: I find them unmotivated. I just don't find any necessary, 'internal' connection between moral judgment and motivational or affective 'oomph', and find 'amoralists' quite conceivable (and, in fact, actual).⁴⁹

However, for my purposes, it's only important to note that it seems that if someone were impressed by these 'internalist' considerations in

⁴⁷ "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms", 13. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁸ *Moral Realism: A Defense* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 161.

⁴⁹ Michael Smith asserts that "all else being equal, to have a moral opinion simply is to find yourself with a motivation to act". Unfortunately, he does not explain what might not be equal, but I simply deny his assertion: I lack this intuition and my moral experience suggests otherwise. See his "Realism" in Peter Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 400.

ethics, she might also think that there's some kind of necessary connection between epistemic judgments like 'p is not justified for me' and one's affective states as well. Consider someone, e.g., a religious believer, or scientist, who comes to think that he doesn't have particularly good reasons for some of his belief. Someone convinced that 'morally good' has a 'magnetism' might easily also think that this judgment of epistemic badness would *necessarily* be accompanied by a desire or motivation to not have that belief. Similarly, someone might think that judging a belief to be justified entails a desire to believe it. If one thought either of these, then one might adopt something like a Stevensonian analysis of epistemic judgments and conclude that they too are not beliefs and that the meanings of epistemic terms is emotive. This position seems as motivated as the more common position regarding moral judgments. Thus, if motivational concerns suggest ethical emotivism, they suggest epistemic emotivism as well.

Finally, Stevenson considers a disappointed reader who wants to know the *truth* about whether something is morally good: she doesn't want merely be empirically corrected or emotional persuasion, which is all Stevenson's position has to offer. In response, Stevenson asks:

What is this truth to be *about*? For I recollect no Platonic Idea, nor do I know what to *try* to recollect. I find no indefinable property nor do I know what to look for. And the 'self-evident' deliverances of reason, which so many philosophers have mentioned, seem on examination to be deliverances of their respective reasons only (if of anyone's) and not of mine. I strongly suspect, indeed, that any sense of 'good' which is expected to both unite itself in synthetic a priori with other concepts and to influence interests as well, is really a great confusion.⁵⁰

Later, he rejects what he calls the "ethical analogue of a fact", stating that he "find[s] nothing 'out there' for our attitudes to represent", copy or be faithful to.⁵¹ Basically, he is saying that he cannot understand what a moral property would be like or what a truth-maker for a moral judgment could be.⁵²

His position seems, in some ways, to echo Hume's. Recall his famous passage:

Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call *vice*. In whichever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in

⁵⁰ "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms", 30-31.

⁵¹ "Ethical Fallibility", 212, 214.

⁵² Stevenson says that he cannot understand what an intrinsically motivating fact would be. That *might* be incomprehensible, but cognitivists or realists needn't think that anyway.

yourself, not in the object. So 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.⁵³

Despite their differences, both of them report that they can only see ‘natural’ properties; they can’t find moral ones. But it seems that if one cannot find *moral* properties, epistemic properties, and facts about what one should and shouldn’t believe, should be hard to find as well. This is because, to use Stevenson’s terms, it seems equally hard to see what might be ‘out there’ for our epistemic attitudes (or on the common, cognitivist presumption, our *beliefs* about what we *should* believe) to represent, copy or be faithful to. But, if that’s so, it’s not clear what could make it such that anyone rationally *ought* to accept Stevenson’s emotivism, or Hume’s views, or any other view. That too would seem to be a matter of feeling, not reason.

Thus, Stevenson’s arguments from the phenomenology of moral debate, the ‘magnetism of good’ and the mysteries of moral truth and properties suggest analogous arguments concerning epistemology: that there are no epistemic truths or properties and epistemic discourse is emotive. This is a difficult implication in itself and, like it did with Ayer’s views, make it the case that it’s untruthful to say we should believe them. Thus it again appears that the assumptions supporting ethical emotivism undercut their very defense.

13. *Conclusion: Brief Remarks on Gibbard*

I have argued that the reasons Ayer and Stevenson offered in favor of their ethical emotivism suggest analogous epistemic emotivisms. This has important general epistemic consequences and, in particular, for the epistemic status of ethical emotivism. As far as I know, Ayer and Stevenson did not realize that their arguments for ethical emotivism had these consequences. They seemed content confining emotivism to ethics and aesthetics, but I have argued that this is difficult since it naturally seems to spill into judgments about epistemology, probability, and critical reasoning. Insofar as Ayer and Stevenson, and most of their defenders, probably would not have been inclined to accept these kinds of emotivism, these are reasons to reject their cases in favor of ethical emotivism.

Alan Gibbard, on the other hand, explicitly accepts both kinds of emotivism, or expressivism. Briefly, his view is that “[t]o call something rational is to express one’s acceptance of norms that permit it. [It is] ... not to attribute some particular property to that thing—not even the property of being permitted by accepted norms”.⁵⁴ He claims that since to

call something rational is to endorse that thing, these judgments are expressive, neither true nor false.

In further work, I argue that the considerations Gibbard offers in favor of his “norm expressivism” are unconvincing and that, on Gibbard’s own view, it is very difficult to understand why anyone *should* accept the view. Either it is true that someone—given his or her understanding of the theory—should accept it, or it is not. If it is not, then, of course, it shouldn’t be accepted, but if it is true, that would seem to be inconsistent with the theory itself. While Gibbard’s view may avoid some of the objections to Ayer and Stevenson’s theories, I will argue that there is still no plausible sense that one *ought* to accept it. Gibbard’s own norms *might* “permit” him in believing it, but that’s no reason why anyone should to accept it, or come to share Gibbard’s norms. Epistemic emotivism is as unwieldy in Gibbard’s hands as with earlier emotivists.⁵⁵

⁵³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 468-469

⁵⁴ *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 7, 8.

⁵⁵ A version of this paper was presented at the Bled Conference in Ethics, summer 2003. I am grateful to Mylan Engel for the invitation to present and the audience for their helpful questions and comments. I am especially grateful to Bruce Russell and Alastair Norcross for their encouragement and suggestions.