

On Russell's Way Outs

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Regarding his views on ethics, Russell is typically saddled with charges of (mainly pragmatic) inconsistency for holding that ultimate ethical valuations are subjective, while, at the same time, expressing emphatic opinions on ethical questions. In this paper, I will re-examine some of the ways out of these accusations Russell himself proposed, mainly by pointing to the weaknesses of objectivism (among which its failure in matching Occamist rigor is paramount). I shall also put forward some other possible replies that he did not expressly explore. In particular, I will stress that the object-language/meta-language distinction, which has its historical roots in Russell's theory of types, can be used to hold that there is no possible contradiction in maintaining a subjectivist meta-ethics and defending substantive ethical claims. Along these lines, I will argue that Russell should have not been concerned with the charges of inconsistency of any kind, for second-order claims about the nature of moral judgments are not conceptually apt to ground first-order substantive moral views.

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1. Foreword

In this paper, I want to analyze the charges of inconsistency that have been repeatedly leveled against Russell regarding his views on ethics and the ways out of this critiques Russell himself envisaged. I will argue that, in framing some of these replies, Russell conceded some points, which in my opinion should not have been conceded. This is so because Russell's

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philosophical tools allow one to rebut such critiques without affecting Russell's vigorous non-cognitivist stance on meta-ethics. It is revealing that Russell himself did not use such tools, perhaps because he frequently seems to imply (mistakenly, in my view) that a certain kind of objectivity in metaethical might have helped the positions he defended as a political and moral activist.

On the basis of Russell's uneasiness regarding the purported "gap" between his metaethics and the passionate formulation of his political views, mainstream literature on Russell's metaethics has repeatedly proposed to revise his emotivism (conjoined with the idea that value judgments are ineludibly subjective), and change it into a blend of milder and seemingly more sensible theses. Influential works reconstructing Russell's metaethics indeed have aimed at reconstructing the "best" Russell qua moral philosopher respectively as a naturalist, a quasi-objectivist, or a missed error theorist¹. By choosing such paths, I submit, one indeed would be forced to maintain, for a series of reasons, that Russell ended up framing a somehow shaky metaethics.

In this paper, I shall go on a different path, arguing that Russell was primarily a defender of emotivism (besides being nothing less than one of its founding fathers) and this was not at odds with his role as a moral activist. In section 2, I shall briefly summarize the main metaethical theses that characterize Russell's emotivism and explain why he is better seen as a consequent emotivist rather than something else. In section 3, I address the "traditional" inconsistency charges to Russell's views and his actual and possible way outs. In section 4, I analyze and respond to a new series of criticisms which have been recently framed against Russell's emotivism and put forward some tentative replies. In section 5, I briefly take stock.

¹ See Aiken 1963: 159, Schultz 1992: 604-6, Pigden 1996. See also Potter 2006: ch 3, who speaks of an enlightened emotivism, where the enlightening element would be that "despite the impossibility of truth or falsity, a measure of objectivity remains in this form of emotivism" (at 83).

2. Russell's Metaethics Revisited

Bertrand Russell was hardly satisfied by his theorizing on ethical matters². When he identified the main problem for him qua moral philosopher, he alluded to the fact that, when he made ethical judgments on political questions, he was constantly told by critics that he had no right to do so, since he did not believe in the objectivity of ethical judgments (Russell 2010: vi). This is what I shall analyze later under the heading “the paradox of the committed emotivist”³, which is something that Russell brooded over and tried to resolve for his entire life⁴.

As we shall see later, he should not have been preoccupied with such a critique. But Russell, beyond the interest in replying to such recurring critique, was genuinely aiming at refining his views on ethics over and over. This is not surprising for someone that had an extraordinary analytical talent and was willing to revise his views constantly⁵.

The most careful reconstructions of Russell's thought in the field accurately distinguish many phases of his ethical works. Some authors have distinguished up to six phases of Russell's metaethical thinking⁶. Many of these phases, however, are just variations on the same emotivist themes. Accordingly, I shall maintain that Russell was a consequent emotivist, almost his entire

² *DBR*: 132: “I do not myself think very well of what I have said on ethics”. But this dissatisfaction was extended to other writers in ethics, as one can evince from *RoE*: 165: “I am not, myself, satisfied with what I have *read* or said on the philosophical basis of ethics” (italics added).

³ The expression is taken, *mutatis mutandis*, from Chiassoni 2012: 242, who speaks of the paradox of the committed relativist.

⁴ Russell 1969: III, 34 affirms that the impossibility of reconciling ethical feeling with ethical doctrines was a source of frustration and that “in the depths of my mind this dark frustration brooded constantly”.

⁵ See Pidgen 2018: § 1.

⁶ The main reference here is Pigden 2003: 495-504. See also Aiken 1963, who divides Russell's ethical theory into three main parts: intuitionism, emotivism, and naturalism. Pidgen 2014: §1 recognizes, however, that Russell mainly held the view that “moral judgments are *neither* true *nor* false, since their role is not to state facts or to describe the way the world is, but to express emotions, desires or even commands. This (despite some waverings) was Russell's dominant view for the rest of his life [...] He tended to call it subjectivism or “the subjectivity of moral values” though it is nowadays known as non-cognitivism, expressivism or emotivism”.

life, the only exceptions being, in my view, the first phase of his career, where he was heavily influenced by and collaborated in establishing the “intuitionism” of G.E. Moore, and his “error theory”, pioneeringly elaborated in 1922 in a paper that was not published during his lifetime⁷.

Indeed, Russell *invented* emotivism and refined it for his whole life, so that it is not surprising to find it defended one last time in his 1969 autobiography (1969: vol. III, 33)⁸. The somewhat critically received 1954 book *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* is regarded by many as a sort of interruption in Russell’s adherence to emotivism⁹. This book was sometimes referred to as a work containing an ethical theory “close to Hume’s with a dash of emotivism”¹⁰, and other times was regarded as Russell’s temporary conversion to ethical naturalism¹¹. However, in *Human Society*, Russell defended a theory that was substantially a version of emotivism, although in a more circumvoluted and less felicitous way than on other occasions. It is known that, when he came to know Aiken’s naturalistic interpretation of his theory in *Human Society*, Russell declared his puzzlement and renewed his emotivist views¹². Regarding such a period of his meta-ethical reflection and the ties Russell identified between his earlier emotivism and the theory of *Human Society*, Schultz (1992: 603) observes: “Presumably, for Russell, the crucial point of continuity [between emotivism and the theory elaborated in *Human Society*] was that he still held that there was no rock-bottom knowledge to be had in ethics, no correspondence to percepts as in facts, ultimately only an appeal to the like emotions that stood behind the proposed/reported usage”. This in turn depends on the fact that “On the theory of

⁷ *RoE*: 119-124. It is well known that Russell turned to emotivism after the criticisms put forward against his early intuitionism by Santayana. See Slater 2010: xiv-xv; Valdés-Villanueva 2006.

⁸ Pidgen 1996: 182: “Two forms of moral antirealism have dominated the 20th-century debate: emotivism, which denies that moral judgments are either true or false, and the error theory, which maintains that they are ‘truth-apt’; but false. So far as the analytic tradition is concerned, Russell invented them both. His emotivist writings anticipate those of Ayer and Stevenson (the official inventors of emotivism) by more than 20 years, and he considered and rejected a version of the error theory long before J.L. Mackie published his famous *A Refutation of Morals* in 1946”.

⁹ But see for a contrary view Slater 2010: xv.

¹⁰ As reported in Pidgen 2003: 503.

¹¹ See Aiken 1963: 155-163.

¹² See *DBR*: 98.

truth [...] most of Russell's mature views were simply variations on the correspondence theory, and he seems never to have countenanced 'moral facts' as verifiers of moral beliefs in any more robust sense than that of like emotions"¹³.

For our present objectives, Russell's emotivism may be summarized in the following theses (*RoE*: 135-144):

- 1) Moral judgments are not truth-apt, since they are not assertions, but rather optatives or evaluations, by means of which one expresses one's desires regarding attitudes of other people (ideally, all the people) about certain states of affairs (ethical sentences have thus the following logical form: "Would that everybody desired X");
- 2) There is no objective truth about ethical matters to be found;
- 3) Being ethical sentences not truth-apt, no genuinely moral knowledge is possible. As regards ethics, science can only inquire into the causes of desires and the means for realizing them.
- 4) If two persons differ about values, there is not a disagreement as to any kind of truth, but a difference of taste or desires.
- 5) Moral phenomena can be explained without positing moral properties (this is the Occamist ingredient in Russell's metaethics).

Embedded in Russell's metaethical theorizing is also the view that, whereas value judgments or moral norms are, as it were, *genetically subjective* (i.e. they can only stem from personal feelings or desires), they may have, and normally *do* have, a general content (i.e. they may claim application to a generality of people)¹⁴. But the maximum of objectivity they can reach is just intersubjective overlapping: as Russell writes, "there is nothing truly objective in

¹³ Schultz 1992: 603, fn. 10.

¹⁴ Russell 2010: 74: "Psychologically, I am bound to pursue my own good, that is to say, I shall always act from desire, and the desire is necessarily mine".

the supposed concept of “objective rightness”, except in so far as the desires of different men coincide”¹⁵.

However, Russell’s emotivism – from the *first* formulation of such a metaethical conception to several revisited versions of it – has been interpreted by many authors as a particularly developed or mild form of emotivism and so has been variously characterized as “universalistic”, “enlightened”, “objective”, etc.

All these qualifications are somehow misleading for they are used to mitigate (or even obliterate) some of the main theses of Russell’s emotivism. In some cases, the inference that is attached to these qualifications sounds quite debatable.

For instance, Lillian Aiken (1963: 109) affirms that “we might call [Russell] a universalistic emotivist meaning by this that, on the one hand ethical sentences are indeed expressions of first-personal desire or approval, but, on the other hand, the universal *object* of our desires is [...] the general interest or the happiness of all men”. And this would lead Russell, according to Aiken, to hold a theory “which is objective in the sense that ethical sentences do not merely express our private wishes but express or voice the general interests of mankind” (110). And since it is the impersonal factors which renders ethical sentences *ethical*, then Russell would ineluctably end up abandoning the emotivist camp (id.).

In my view, this argument is flawed by a major shortcoming in so far as it conflates the object on which personal ethical desires bear with the scope of the interests or objectives whose defense is expressed by means of ethical sentences¹⁶. The same mistake would be made in the legal field if someone affirmed that laws are necessarily “objective” regarding the desires of the lawgiver just because they address a generality of people. Of course, the generality of the

¹⁵ Russell 2010: 77.

¹⁶ Aiken 1963: 144 affirms that she is aware of this problem and saddle Russell himself with such a conflation. However, due to other references to the works of Russell, she argues that hers is still the best interpretation of Russell’s metaethics.

addresses of a rule does not imply the generality of interests pursued by enacting such a rule. A rule depriving everybody of their freedom of speech based on a dictator's whim would be surely general, but nobody would argue that it is an "objective" rule in so far as the general interest is concerned.

The intersubjectivity of desires as a way of identifying genuine moral *objectivity* (as opposed to mere overlapping of subjective desires) is another debatable point one can find in Aiken's (and others') reading¹⁷. This reading is clearly incompatible with an idea that Russell defended throughout his life – i.e. the twofold idea that one cannot infer theoretical truths from the fact that a thesis is widely held and practical correctness from the fact that a decision has been deliberated by a vast majority¹⁸.

But there is another argument which is internal to Russell's conception, which is pressing: if Aiken's argument is accepted, Russell's metaethics turns out to be inconsistent, since Russell expressly affirms: (1) that the notion of "objective rightness" (i.e. intersubjective moral consensus) is dependent on (or relative to) what group of people is taken as a benchmark, (2) that mankind is just a possibility among many others for identifying such a benchmark, and (3) that there is no logical argument to prove correct what is taken as "objectively right" in ethical matters by a certain group of people¹⁹. The combination of these three propositions is not

¹⁷ Aiken 1963: 146-8. Aiken refers the famous analogy with science Russell 2010: 13 formulates and that ends with the following statement: "It may be that there is some similar way of arriving at objectivity in ethics; if so, since it must involve appeal to the majority, it will take us from personal ethics into the sphere of politics, which is, in fact, very difficult to separate from ethics". As it is easy to evince from this passage, Russell's is just a possibility, which Russell does not further develop, if not in the sense I shall address later. On this point, see also Jager 2014: 479-484.

¹⁸ "The fact that an opinion has been widely held is no evidence whatever that it is not utterly absurd; indeed, in view of the silliness of the majority of mankind, a widespread belief is more likely to be foolish than sensible" (1929: 58) and that "the tyrannous power of the State, whether wielded by a monarch or by a majority, is an evil against which I will protest no matter how "negligible" may be the minority on whom it is exercised" (*RoE*: 116). According to Pidgen (*RoE*: 153), Russell himself (2010: 105-107) was guilty of inconsistency on this point, when he affirms that "the acts which are approved of are those believed likely to have, on the balance, effects of certain kinds, while opposite effects are expected from acts that are disapproved of". Even though Russell is far from clear on this point, I think that the four ethical propositions one finds in *Human Society* (id., 105, *RoE*: 161-163) are second-order sociological propositions about what is considered "right" or "moral" in the generality of societies, and not first-order ethical claims.

¹⁹ Russell 2010: 69-70.

logically compatible with affirming that all ethical sentences, qua ethical, necessarily express or voice the general interests of mankind. This shows that what probably Russell wanted to state with its universalistic element in value judgments is not that moral norms are universally objective (in opposition to relative to, or depending on, individual preferences), but that moral norms are by and large general, not particular norms (and this allows one to distinguish between simple preferences of taste and ethical judgments). In the terms of von Wright (1963: V.11), moral norms, understood as Russell does, are *eminently general*, for they are general regarding both the subject and the occasion (i.e. the space-time dimension in which they ought to be applied). But this is not a problematic feature for an emotivist, since there is nothing in emotivism that bars the possibility that value judgments have a universal scope regarding subjects and occasions, even though they are the product of subjective tastes, preferences, or desires.

In what are probably his last views on the matter, Russell suggests that the highest point of his reflection on ethics was the doctrine of compossibility²⁰, which probably contains the first foundations of what is now called “expressivist logic”²¹. Russell doctrine of compossibility affirms that two moral norms are not compossible whenever they cannot be both fulfilled or satisfied. It also provides a criterion of comparability between sets of moral rules when affirming that a system which makes more states of things compossible is better than another with a more restricted number of compossible state of affairs. Accordingly, compossibility is a formal criterion, in two senses. First, it provides a tool to determine whether a certain value

²⁰ As Pigden (2003: 502) correctly observes: “Not only did Russell anticipate Ayer and Stevenson but also his version of emotivism is distinctly superior to the versions they went on to invent. The early emotivists had trouble making room for moral contradictions – special curlicues had to be added to allow ‘X is good’ and ‘X is bad’ to contradict one another. This is not a problem for Russell. Two optatives contradict one another if the desires expressed cannot be jointly realized. For Russell ‘X is good’, means ‘Would that everyone desired X!’ and ‘X is bad’, means ‘Would that nobody desired X!’ – a pair of optatives which cannot both be fulfilled. Thus, we have moral contradictions without the need of curlicues. More generally, Russell’s theory allows for logical relations between moral judgments which the theories of Stevenson and Ayer notoriously do not. We can define a consequence relation for optatives such that optative B is a consequence of the set of optatives A and a (possibly empty) set of propositions C, iff A cannot be realized under circumstances C unless B is realized too”.

²¹ Alchourrón, Bulygin (1981); Dalla Pozza et al. (2020); Ratti (2018).

(e.g. general happiness) gives rise to more compossible state of affairs than another value (e.g. domination of the powerful over the weak). Second, on this criterion, moral systems that tend to be permissive (i.e. moral systems which as a rule authorize rather than prohibiting) are “logically” preferable, since they will give rise, by definition, to a higher number of compossible behaviors²². For its formal character, it must be clear that such a doctrine is not a *basis* for ethics, since its use is mainly that of comparing moral systems which have different degrees of fulfillment or satisfaction regarding a certain value, but it is incapable of proving the ultimate value on which such a comparison is carried out²³.

Whatever the indubitable merits of Russell’s emotivism, Charles Pigden has repeatedly affirmed that the best conception of morals that Russell ever entertained was his own formulation of the error theory, elaborated in a wonderful short paper written in 1922 and published only several decades after. In such a paper, following his famous theory of meaning elaborated in *On Denoting*, Russell defends the view that ethical sentences express descriptive propositions bearing upon goodness and badness. But, since such properties do not exist, all ethical sentences are systematically false. But this conclusion, whatever its theoretical merits, would be a total failure for Russell qua moral activist, since “once they accept error theory and Falsity, error theorists have to abandon their moral beliefs” (Kalf 2019: 4). Something that Russell opposes fiercely, when he affirms that “I am not prepared to forgo my right to feel and express ethical passions [...] I am not prepared to give up all this than I am to give up the multiplication table” (*RoE*: 146). This is one of the reasons – probably the main one – why Russell did never give up emotivism in favor of the error theory²⁴.

²² Alchourrón 1991: 417: “In relation to permissive norms we expect that the agent has an opportunity to perform the authorized action but we do not expect the existence of an opportunity to perform all the actions authorized by several permissions. So we may say that a set of permissive norms (norm-sentences) is consistent iff it is possible to perform each of the actions authorized by the norms of the set”.

²³ Russell 1969: III, 34.

²⁴ See Pigden 1996: 194. Other reasons are explored by Pigden 1996: 194 ff.

3. The Traditional Inconsistency Charges and Russell's Replies

For all his life, when approaching ethical matters, Russell was saddled and preoccupied by what we have called the “paradox of the committed emotivist”, consisting in holding ethical positions apparently at odds with his metaethical assumptions. Formulating vehement ethical judgments without the conceptual possibility of determining whether they are right or wrong was something that made both Russell and his critics unsatisfied²⁵. According to the formulation of the paradox articulated by the great Argentinean moral and legal philosopher Carlos Nino (1980: 365): “Consistent or not with his theoretical views, when defending his pacifistic stance Bertrand Russell wanted to give *reasons* in its favor, and not simply to exercise a causal influence on his audience”²⁶. The main idea of Nino is that “if we want our conduct to be rational, it is not the same to defend a moral stance believing that there are reasons supporting it as to defend it knowing that we only feel an emotive attraction towards it”²⁷ (*ibid*). Emotivism of the kind of Russell's, according to Nino, “destroys morality for, if the meaning of moral discourse is mainly emotive, there is no way of deciding rationally between conflicting moral judgments”²⁸ (*ibid*).

In replying to or preventing this kind of criticism, based on the idea of inconsistency between his metaethics and practical ethics, and on the idea that practical ethical judgments should found a grounding in metaethics, Russell used several good arguments, but he also conceded points which in my view should not have been conceded. Here I shall briefly recall

²⁵ The classical references are to Perry 1915 and Buchler 1944.

²⁶ “Sea o no coherente con sus convicciones teóricas, seguramente cuando Bertrand Russell defendía su posición pacifista pretendía dar razones en apoyo de ella y no meramente ejercer una influencia causal sobre sus oyentes”

²⁷ “Si pretendemos que nuestra conducta sea racional, no es lo mismo defender una posición moral creyendo que hay razones en su apoyo que hacerlo a sabiendas que sólo hay una atracción emotiva hacia ella”.

²⁸ El emotivismo “destruye la moralidad, puesto que si el significado del discurso moral es principalmente emotivo, no hay manera de decidir racionalmente entre juicios morales contrapuestos”.

his main arguments and, against his concessions, try to elaborate some fresh ones based on Russell's own philosophical tools.

The Occamist Argument

The first argument is based on the famous Occam's razor and has two sides, one theoretical and the other practical. The theoretical one says that if one can account for ethical facts and practices without using the notion of an absolute good, this must be dismissed as useless. The practical one is that, there being no space for any absolute good to be described in metaethics and used in practical ethics, "an ethical argument can only have practical efficacy [...] by altering the desires or impulses of the opponents". Since no argument that shows that something is intrinsically good or bad can be framed, it follows that "ethical valuations not embodying desires or impulses cannot have any importance" (*RoE*: 117). So, far from being inconsistent, the lack of objectivity at the metaethical level and the subjective character of ethical judgments would support each other²⁹.

²⁹ Another variety of this argument conjoins the argument from relativity with Occam's razor. It is clearly reconstructed by Pidgeon (1996: 189-90) as follows: "People disagree in their basic evaluations, so even if you think your own intuitions are correct owing to your acquaintance with the good, you must believe in the possibility of false intuitions, in which people wrongly perceive goodness to inhere in states that are, in fact, bad or indifferent. These mistaken intuitions are presumably due to natural causes, to upbringing, indoctrination, temperamental bias, and so forth. But if other people's basic evaluations can be (and indeed must be) explained away in this manner, why cannot the other people return the compliment and explain away your own alleged perceptions in the same way? The diversity of moral opinion [...] suggests that real properties of goodness and badness are not needed to underwrite the phenomenology of value or to account for people's beliefs [...]. If moral properties are not needed to account for people's beliefs, they are not needed at all, because they can influence events only through the medium of human action. Hence they are ripe for the razor".

The Argument from the Genetical Irrelevance of Metaethics

Another argument used by Russell against the paradox under examination is that metaethical issues are not relevant for practical questions³⁰. Russell hints at this argument when he affirms (*RoE*: 143): “The sort of life that most of us admire is one which is guided by large impersonal desires; now such desires can, no doubt, be encouraged by example, education, and knowledge, but they can hardly be created by the mere abstract belief that they are good, nor discouraged by an analysis of what is meant by the word *good*”. So, again, there is no possible inconsistency of any sort between one’s metaethics and his or her practical judgments, since the latter are *genetically* independent from the former, that is metaethics has no part in framing full-blooded ethical judgment.

The Argument from Consequentiality

However, the main argument Russell deploys against the critics is that its ethical judgments are perfectly attuned to his metaethical stipulations. For him, the main function of the words “good” and “bad” is to express certain kinds of desires. So, when formulating ethical judgments, one is indeed expressing his or her own desires regarding other people’s desires about some relevant feature of public life or interests. In Russell’s own words, “By my own theory, I am, in [formulating ethical judgments], expressing vehement desires as to the desires of mankind; I feel such desires, so why not express them?” (*RoE*: 147-8). The argument is quite good. However, it does not respond to the critiques’ challenge regarding the inability of Russell’s metaethics in distinguish between right and wrong answers to moral questions.

³⁰ Schultz 1992: 607-8: “*Philosophers are fond of endless puzzles about ultimate ethical values and the basis of morals. My own belief is that so far as politics and practical living are concerned, we can sweep aside all these puzzles, and use common sense principles.* In this, one might say that Russell’s life and work amply, if curiously, testify to the claim, notably associated with Rawls, that substantive moral and political work need not wait on the resolution of metaethical issues” (italicized words are Russell’s).

Russell seems to find this last critique compelling and ends up making an unexpected and unnecessary concession. Russell in fact writes: “But what are ‘good’ desires? Are they anything more than desires that you share? Certainly there *seems* to be something more”. And he adds that, in framing ethical judgments, “I should *feel*, not only that I was expressing my desires, but that my desires in the matter are *right*, whatever that may mean” (*RoE*: 149). This has been read by more than a commentator as the spark of a “conversion” to objectivism, which allows one to regard moral judgments as truth-apt³¹. As Pidgen observes (2018: §8.7): “in admitting that he could not help feeling that he would be right (that is, correct) to oppose [a certain practice], Russell, was admitting to feelings which suggest that his meta-ethic is false. Moreover the very fact that he *had* these feelings provides evidence for his theory’s falsehood”. In my view, this interpretation is too radical, and Russell’s words might be interpreted as a kind of psychological reconstruction of the process of uttering and publicly presenting ethical judgments. In so far as ethical judgments involve (entails or even are equivalent to) a rule, they present themselves as answers to practical questions, in the sense that they recommend a certain course of action to its addressees. It is in the “nature” of arguing morally that one presents his or her ethical judgments as correct, even though he or she has no *ultimate* grounds to do so in a justified manner³². However, there is still an argument at least that can be used to retort against any charge of inconsistency for a committed emotivist, one which is based upon the fundamental distinction between language and metalanguage – another tool that, if not directly invented by Russell with such a terminology, undeniably has its roots in his works.

³¹ Pidgen 2018; Aiken 1963: 143-151. See also Schultz 1992: 604.

³² It is possible, of course, to think that a moral judgment is correct *within* a certain moral system, in the sense that it constitutes a logical consequence of its basic principles (in combination perhaps with certain factual premises).]

The Argument from the Orders of Languages

Another way out of the perplexing paradox of the committed emotivist – one that subtracts importance to the paradox, by undermining its possibility – rests on the fundamental distinction between language and metalanguage. According to relevant literature³³, such a distinction stems from Russell’s theory of types and has his first expressed formulation in Russell’s introduction to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*³⁴. As is known, Russell uses it overtly in 1950 paper on “Logical Positivism”³⁵. It is quite telling that Russell, as far as I can see, never thought of using it in his works on ethics to reply to the charges of inconsistency. Indeed, it is quite natural to regard meta-ethics as a second-order metalanguage bearing upon the first-order language of practical ethics. Now, the second-order metalanguage can be a descriptive one, which clarifies or reconstruct certain feature of the first-order discourse. But it can also be a prescriptive or justificatory one, whose function is to justify or support first-order ethical evaluations. Many, if not all, forms of objectivism try to find in metaethics a justificatory basis for their first-order judgments, whereas emotivism (and non-cognitivism in general) regard meta-ethics as a genuine descriptive (or conceptual) enterprise, incapable of grounding any substantial first-order ethical judgment. Practical ethics and metaethics are on two different linguistic levels (metaethics bearing upon first order practical ethics), and it is not possible to derive a conclusion in a certain language deriving it from premises that belong to a different language (i.e. a metalanguage)³⁶. It is manifest that, if we understand meta-ethics in this second way (i.e. as a descriptive, or conceptual, second-order metalanguage), no inconsistency is possible for the committed emotivist. S/he can formulate his/her first-order optatives when debating in the public arena, and explain the moral discourse as a set of personal evaluations

³³ Copi 1971: 50; 107-8; Church 1976. Kennedy 1980: 74 attributes it to Frege and affirms that Peano was not aware of the distinction. On Peano, see also Quine 1987.

³⁴ Russell 1922.

³⁵ Russell 1950: 7.

³⁶ Guastini 2012: 154.

when accounting for its “nature” in the second-order metalanguage. An interesting consequence of such a reconstruction is that objectivism, being prescriptive or justificatory in character, can be reconstructed as a set of second-order expressions of desires bearing upon first-order optatives. However, being these second-order expressions of desires in need for a justification, objectivism is inevitably doomed to infinite regress.

4. The New Challenges

A new series of incisive criticisms to Russell’s emotivist metaethics have been formulated by Charles Pigden in several studies.

A foundational problem for Russell, and for any emotivist, is that “value judgments certainly *look* like propositions and are normally taken to be capable of truth and falsity” (Pigden, in *RoE*: 135). For the emotivist, accordingly, value judgements are optatives under the guise of indicatives. Pigden retorts that “it does seem a little odd that we should have so radically misunderstood our own concept”. This is what Pigden calls the “Duck argument” (2018: § 8.7): if something looks, swims and quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck. Analogously, if something *looks* like a truth-apt expression (since on the surface it is in the indicative mood), if it *behaves* logically like a truth-apt expression (which again is what “*X* is good” undoubtedly does), if it is *treated* by the people whose use sustains its meaning *as if* it were truth-apt, then, absent compelling arguments to the contrary, it probably is truth-apt.

There are at least four arguments, I submit, that can be articulated against the Duck argument: the argument of the logical form, the membership argument, the ambiguity argument, and the inutility argument. Let me briefly present them in this order.

The Argument of the Logical Form

Again, Russell's philosophical tools are crucial in replying to this critique. It may certainly be the case that some kinds of sentences are disproportionately formulated as indicatives but, despite their grammatical appearances, are to be reconstructed by means of the logical forms of other kinds of sentences. Regarding logical form, Russell (1996: 53) writes: "Some kind of knowledge of logical forms, though with most people it is not explicit, is involved in all understanding of discourse. It is the business of philosophical logic to extract this knowledge from its concrete integuments, and to render it explicit and pure". It is a task of metaethics to reconstruct, *inter alia*, the logical form of value judgments, beyond their grammatical one. Analogously, it is a task for the legal philosopher to discover the logical form of normative authorities' precepts, beyond their grammatical forms. Take, for instance, the first amendment of the US constitution. Like many other laws, it is phrased in indicative terms: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances". Nobody doubts, however, that it expresses no proposition. It rather expresses several rules, prohibiting Congress to infringe certain basic rights of the people. Its aim is to prescribe, no to describe. Many articles of several European civil codes are phrased in the indicative mood. Take for instance art. 1154 of the French Civil Code: "En toute matière, la condamnation à une indemnité emporte intérêts au taux légal même en l'absence de demande ou de disposition spéciale du jugement" (In all matters, the condemnation to compensation comprises interests at the legal rate even in the absence of a request or a special provision of the judgment). Again, the surface syntax is that of an indicative, but nobody has doubts about the fact that the article expresses a rule imposing on judges and other law-applying organs the duty to add interests in calculating compensation. The same goes for value judgments in ethical discourses: their indicative surface

is not decisive in determining their logical form³⁷. And, analogously to what happens within the legal domain, it is much more reasonable to think that one uses value judgments – whatever their grammatical form might be – to *evaluate* a certain behavior or state of affairs (that is, to show approval or disapproval regarding it) rather than to describe its purported “moral properties”.

The Membership Argument

No doubt, moral systems are sets of rules or evaluations, aiming at guiding conduct: so, why interpret its members as assertions? This can be called the “membership argument”. Just to follow up with animal analogy, we can say that when we see a herd of buffalos, it is quite probable that, if we take a picture of a member of such herd, we would indeed get a picture of a buffalo. Analogously, if we analyze a set of moral evaluations (i.e. a moral system intended to evaluate or guide conduct), it is quite probable that if we look at a member of such a set what we see is a moral evaluation (also intended to guide conduct). It is possible that a normative system, from time to time, contains a descriptive sentence. However, a normative system containing such a descriptive sentence is commonly held to be an “impure” normative system, in that it contains a descriptive consequence which is at odds with the general prescriptive function of the system at hand³⁸.

³⁷ Russell 2010: 77: “ethical argument [...] differs from scientific argument in being addressed to emotions, however it may disguise itself by use of the indicative mood”.

³⁸ Alchourrón, Bulygin 1971: ch. 4.

The Inutility Argument

Let us suppose that sentences like “X is good” are, according to the Duck argument, thoroughly descriptive. So understood, they describe a (purported) moral property of X, in the same way as the sentence “Mountains are high” is a description of a property of (some) mountains. But what follows, normatively, from such descriptions? Absolutely nothing. The fact that mountains are high is not, per se, a reason to carry out a certain course of action (such as climbing or paragliding). The same goes for “X is good”: the sole “fact” that X is good is no reason to carry out a certain course of action. Accordingly, ethical sentences, understood as descriptions of moral properties, are morally useless, which is obviously quite paradoxical for someone desiring to persuade the others to follow his moral recommendation³⁹.

The Ambiguity Argument

There is a remark, which is very common in analytical legal philosophy regarding deontic sentences⁴⁰, which helps in better clarifying the meaning of ethical sentences. Indeed, one should note that ethical sentences such as “X is good” are systematically ambiguous since they can be used, in different contexts and on different occasions, to express evaluations or to express descriptive assertions about moral evaluations (in particular, regarding their membership to normative sets)⁴¹. So, the surface syntax of ethical sentences may be misleading, for it conceals

³⁹ Classical references are to Smith 1994 and Waldron 1999: ch. 8. Chiassoni 2012: 243 calls this feature of objectivism “the paradox of the inutility of objectivism”.

⁴⁰ Bulygin 2015 a: 188-206; Navarro, Rodríguez 2014: 78-85.

⁴¹ Bulygin 2015b: 356: “It is important to observe that value terms, like ‘good’, ‘right’, ‘reasonable’ etc. play different roles in different contexts: they can be used to express valuations or to state that in a given case the conditions required in order that something be regarded as valuable (good or right) are satisfied. In this second case the sentence ‘x is good’ may not express any approval: in such case it is not a valuation, but a mere factual description. This allows distinguishing between value judgments, which are expressive of valuations, and what can conveniently be named axiological propositions – which in spite of the occurrence of value-terms – do not express valuations, but are purely descriptive and hence true or false. The situation is analogous to norms and norm propositions. In both cases, we have expressive sentences (expressing either norms or valuations), which lack truth values, and on the other hand, true or false descriptive propositions (normative or axiological). The logical behavior of norm propositions and of axiological propositions is similar”.

two different logical forms. Where someone sees just one duck, others see a duck and a swan. We shall return to this argument in a moment, when dealing with the Frege-Geach problem.

One of the other arguments recently raised against Russell's emotivism by Pidgen, so that it is rendered unpalatable to metaethical gourmands, is the reframing of the famous Frege-Geach problem for Russell's metaethics.

In the words of Pigden (2018: §8.5), Russell's failure would be one of impossible reconstruction of value judgements in different contexts. In particular, Russell could only account for a limited array of cases where sentences of the form "*X* is good" are used to frame a value judgment, but not the numerous cases in which such sentences are "embedded" as components of larger sentences.

Pidgen writes:

"*X* is good" would sometimes be a disguised optative and sometimes something else. [...] Now, consider the following argument schema:

- i. *X is good*.
 - ii. If ***X is good*** then *Q*.
- Therefore
- iii. *Q*

In this argument "*X* is good" would have one meaning in premise (i)—in which it would be an optative—and another in premise (ii)—in which it would be a creature of some other semantic kind. (I have emphasized the point by putting the first occurrence in italics and the second in bold.) But an argument is only valid if the words involved retain the same meanings throughout the inference. If not, we have an instance of the fallacy of equivocation. So it looks as if any attempt to deal with Geach's *first* problem by explaining how "good" works in unasserted contexts would have the unintended side-effect of converting obviously valid arguments such as the above into instances of equivocation. Not only is the theory radically incomplete—if it *were* completed, it would reduce a huge number of obviously valid arguments to invalidity by construing them as equivocal.

According to Pidgen (id.), this is the knock-out argument against Russell's emotivism (and, for what matters here, emotivism in general):

Russell's theory faces ship-wreck unless this problem can be solved and, in my opinion, the problem is insoluble.

Again, we can use Russell's philosophical tools to rebut to this powerful criticism and save Russell's emotivism once more⁴². Sentences such "X is good" are systematically ambiguous, since they can express, depending on the context, optative meanings in the object language of practical ethics or descriptions of value judgments belonging to a certain system of morality at the meta-linguistic level of metaethics⁴³. I shall call the first kind of meanings "value judgments", while the second kind shall be dubbed "axiological propositions".

In the first case, the sentence "X is good" expresses a value judgment: in Russell's terms, something of the sort of "I desire that everybody desires X" (in symbols: !p). In the second case, it expresses a proposition such as "X is a behavior required by a moral system" (in symbols: "!p" ∈ S). Once this ambiguity is detected, there are three possible ways of reading Geach's piece of reasoning. The symbolization of these three readings makes it clear that Russell's emotivism is on quite safe ground.

The first reading rests on the possibility of reconstructing Geach's puzzling inference as one concerning *only* descriptive propositions about value judgments. The reading would be as follows:

Reasoning with axiological propositions

- i'. X is good ("!p" ∈ S)
- ii'. If X is good then Q. ("!p" ∈ S → "!q" ∈ S)
- Therefore
- iii'. Q ("!q" ∈ S)

This piece of reasoning clearly contains no flaw. Premise (i') states that the value-judgment "!p" belongs to the moral system S. Premise (ii') asserts that if the value-judgment

⁴² See also Carnap 1971: 308.

⁴³ Moreso 2007.

“!p” belongs to S, then also the value-judgment “!q” does so belong. It is now easy to derive the consequence, according to which the value-judgment “!q” belongs to S. The deduction is sound and unequivocal.

Another possibility consists of reading Geach’s inference as made solely of value judgments. This can be framed as follows:

Reasoning with value judgments

i”. X is good (!p)
 ii”. If X is good then Q. (!p→q)
 Therefore
 iii”. Q (!q)

This inference explains that if we commit to the value judgments !p (X is good) and !(p→q) (It is good that if X then Q), then !q (It is good that Q) follows. Of course, one can rebut that premise (ii”) was trickily understood, for the occurrence of “X is good” is here embedded and consequently it is not the same as in premise (i”) where it expresses a genuine value judgment. In my view, there is nothing wrong in interpreting (ii”) the way I did, since I can see no reason why p could be the argument of a preference alone but cannot be the argument of a conditional preference⁴⁴.

In any case, there is a third way of reconstructing the inference, which makes Russell hardly attackable.

Reasoning with conditional value judgments

i*. X is good (“!p” ∈ S)
 ii*. If X is good then Q. (“!p” ∈ S →!q)

⁴⁴ An alternative way of symbolizing the inference is the following:

- (a) !p
- (b) !p →!q
- Therefore
- (c) !q

Such a reconstruction is completely safe regarding the problem discussed in the text. For this reason, it is probably the best way to represent the piece of reasoning at hand, understood as an inference with value judgments.

Therefore
iii*. Q (!q)

In this third reading, the fact that preference “!p” belongs to a certain moral system S is a sufficient condition for committing to a full-blooded value judgment “!q”. This is expressed by premise (ii*). Premise (i*) states that indeed preference “!p” belongs to the moral system S. Hence, value judgment “!q” follows.

This is further clarified if we unpack this kind of inferential schemes by means of semi-formalized inferences and the aid of predicate logic.

- (1) $\forall x$ (x is a behavior prohibited by a moral system \rightarrow It is morally wrong [to instigate someone to carry out x])
- (2) Torturing cats is forbidden by a moral system
- (3) It is morally wrong [to instigate someone to torture cats]

What we have here is a conditional value judgment as premise (1). The antecedent of such a norm is a proposition about a value judgment belonging to a certain moral system; its consequent is a categorical value judgment characterizing as wrong carrying out behavior that is prohibited by that very moral system. Premise (2) states that a certain behavior (“torturing cats”) is indeed forbidden by the moral system of reference. From such premises, a value judgment follows, according to which it is morally wrong to instigate someone to torture cats.

Nothing is wrong in this piece of reasoning per se. Criticisms might be made at a higher level of philosophical reflection, by arguing that value judgments (or, more generally, norms) composed of a descriptive antecedent and a prescriptive consequent are logical hybrids that are philosophically inadmissible, but this is a topic for another occasion⁴⁵. In any case, I submit,

⁴⁵ Von Wright 1983: 151. Elaborating on arguments articulated by Prior (1960), Pigden has maintained, in [*RoE*: 38], that Russell’s logic is somehow committed to accepting such kinds of formal constructs and this would be another great problem for Russell. This argument – which I cannot address here – is relevant both to the so-called Jorgensen’s dilemma and for the paradoxes of implication (see Navarro, Rodríguez 2014: 50-4, 91-105). On the

the reconstruction provided above is sufficient for replying to the Frege-Geach puzzle when applied to Russell's emotivism.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Russell's metaethics is best seen, for the greatest part of its development, as an emotivist one. I reconstructed its main tenets, which are common to the various revisions it underwent, and tried to defend it against several criticisms, mainly pointing to its purported inconsistencies or explanatory failures. In doing so, I have used philosophical tools that Russell himself had invented for other purposes and that, quite surprisingly, did not employ in arguing in favor of his ethical theory. The overall coherence of Russell's philosophy – theoretical and practical – is indeed increased, I submit, by such a kind of reading.

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former, see also Bulygin 2015a: 267. On the latter, see also Cassina 1949: 139-140. Cassina was a direct pupil of Peano and in the paper just referred to there is a discussion of Russell's view regarding the paradoxes of implication.

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