

An Argument for Descriptivism

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong
Dartmouth College

Many philosophers deny that evaluative language is descriptive. These nay-sayers include emotivists, prescriptivists, and expressivists of various kinds.¹ They are all nondescriptivists, and their shared denial can be called nondescriptivism. I will argue that they are all wrong, because evaluative language is descriptive.

I. WHAT IS NONDESCRIPTIVISM?

To see why, we need to specify exactly what nondescriptivists deny. First, emotivists, prescriptivists, and expressivists often formulate their denial in terms of *moral* language in particular. However, if nondescriptivism holds for moral language, it should also hold for other kinds of evaluative language in a broad sense. This broad sense includes evaluative language about what is good or bad, better or worse, as well as normative language about what is right or wrong, ought or ought not to be done, and so on. It includes claims that some thing, act, or person is beautiful or ugly, pious or sacrilegious, wise or stupid, polite or rude, delicious or disgusting, virtuous or immoral, and so on. My main examples will concern morality, but my arguments will apply to other kinds of evaluation, and I will assume that nondescriptivism is about all *evaluative* language.

Some nondescriptivists might admit that *some* uses of evaluative language are descriptive, if, for example, a good can opener is just one that opens cans with relative ease, speed, and safety. However, to call a can opener *good* is still different from saying that it opens cans with relative ease, speed, and safety. So nondescriptivism seems to apply even to such uses of evaluative language. Anyway, if nondescriptivists exclude

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong is Professor of Philosophy at Dartmouth College. He has published numerous books and articles mainly on ethics, philosophy of law, and informal logic.

such uses from their claims, their reason for excluding them must be that such uses are not evaluative, even though the words in them are typically evaluative. So nondescriptivism is still about all *evaluative* uses of typically evaluative language.

Second, nondescriptivism is about evaluative *language*. Emotivists, prescriptivists, and expressivists also deny the existence of values or evaluative facts and properties. However, these metaphysical or ontological claims are separate from their claims about evaluative language, since one could agree with them about ontology while disagreeing with them about evaluative language.²

Nondescriptivism must also be distinguished from other claims made by nondescriptivists about evaluative language. Emotivists, prescriptivists, and expressivists typically make three claims.³ The first claim is that evaluative language is *not* used to assert propositions with truth values. The second claim is that evaluative language is *not* used to describe the world. The third claim is that evaluative language *is* used to express emotions, prescriptions, or other noncognitive states, such as desires. The first two claims are negative. The second two claims are about pragmatics in a broad sense.

Each of these claims is fascinating in its own way. Recent work on truth has stirred interest in the negative semantic claim that evaluative assertions lack truth values. Recent work on emotions has raised issues about the emotivists' positive pragmatic claim that evaluative assertions express emotions. Much less attention has been paid to the negative pragmatic claim that evaluative language is not descriptive. This paper will try to begin to remedy that oversight by focusing specifically on the negative pragmatic claim that defines nondescriptivism.

Nondescriptivism denies that evaluative language is descriptive, but when is language *descriptive*? Consider a trivial nonevaluative example. The sentence "This car is a blue 1937 Chevy" is descriptive because a speaker who asserts it describes the car as a blue 1937 Chevy.⁴ In contrast, if another speaker asserts the conditional, "If this car is a blue 1937 Chevy, then it is an antique," then this speaker does not describe this car as a blue 1937 Chevy, because she does not assert that this car is a blue 1937 Chevy. But that does not show that "This car is a blue 1937 Chevy" is not descriptive, because this sentence is still used to describe the car when it is asserted. Analogously, if evaluative language is descriptive, then a speaker describes a car as the best new model in years when the speaker asserts that the car has that evaluative status.⁵ In contrast, if another speaker says, "If this car really is the best new model in years, it is a good buy," then this speaker does not describe this car, since she does not assert that the car is the best new model in years, even though she

did use the evaluative sentence "This car really is the best new model in years." But this is no problem for the thesis that evaluative sentences are descriptive, as long as they are used to describe when they are asserted. Unassertive uses of sentences need not be descriptions for those sentences to be descriptive. Consequently, when nondescriptivists deny that evaluative language is descriptive, they cannot be claiming only that some *utterances* of evaluative *sentences* are not used to describe. Their claim must be that *assertions* of evaluative sentences are not used to describe or for speech acts of describing or description.

Although nondescriptivism is only about assertions rather than utterances or sentences, it must be about *all* assertions that are evaluative. If nondescriptivists claimed only that *some* evaluative assertions are not used to describe, then their position would not conflict with partial evaluative realists, who accept that sometimes speakers assert evaluative sentences just as a way of spouting off or venting their emotions, but still claim that other evaluative assertions conform to realist accounts by describing mind-independent or causally efficacious facts. To be incompatible with this traditional opponent, nondescriptivists must make the stronger universal claim that no evaluative assertions ever describe evaluative facts. Most nondescriptivists do seem to think that there is something about the very nature of values or evaluation in general that precludes any evaluative assertion from ever describing any evaluative fact. So I will focus on this strong universal version of nondescriptivism.

Although their denial is universal, nondescriptivists need not deny that some evaluative assertions are *partly* descriptive. To assert "It was morally wrong for Janet to look at her book during the closed-book exam" is partly to describe the exam as closed-book as well as to describe what Janet did. Although this is an evaluative assertion, and it is used to describe, such examples do not refute the nondescriptivist claim that no evaluative assertions are used to describe. The reason is that nondescriptivists are denying that evaluative assertions ever describe *evaluative* facts. Nondescriptivists need not deny that evaluative assertions often describe nonevaluative facts. In such cases, nondescriptivists still need to separate the evaluative content from the nonevaluative content and claim that the evaluative content is not adding to the description. For example, "It was wrong for Janet to have looked at her book during the closed-book exam" might be broken down into (a) Janet looked at her book during the closed-book exam, and (b) what she did was wrong. Nondescriptivists can then claim that (a) is the descriptive component, and (b) is not descriptive at all. There are other ways to break down such sentences, but, however they are broken down, nondescriptivists can claim

that what the evaluative term contributes to such sentences is *not* more description.

Opponents of nondescriptivism often respond that the evaluative content cannot be separated from the nonevaluative content in all cases, particularly in what are called thick moral concepts.⁶ For example, to assert "Janet is dishonest" is to describe her character and also to condemn it. In order to separate the evaluative content from the nonevaluative content in this assertion, a nondescriptivist would need to describe the kind of character that is being condemned without using any evaluative terms. That is not easy. To be dishonest is not just to distort or hide or not reveal the truth, since some deception is justified. People who throw surprise parties or bluff at poker are not dishonest. Instead, to be dishonest is to distort or hide or not reveal the truth in circumstances where doing so is unjustified. But then there might be no way to specify which acts count as dishonest without depending on moral views about whether those acts are justified. This will make evaluative content hard to pry apart from the nonevaluative content.

Hard is not impossible, so nondescriptivists might respond by trying to show how to separate the evaluative content from the nonevaluative content of such evaluative assertions. Or they might claim that there must in principle be some way to do so, even if they cannot show how in practice. This claim could be supported by an appeal to the supervenience of the evaluative on the nonevaluative. There are no conclusive arguments that evaluative content cannot in principle be separated from nonevaluative content. If this separation is possible even in principle, then nondescriptivists can claim that the nonevaluative content is the only descriptive part of thick moral concepts. Even if to assert that Janet is dishonest is to describe Janet's nonevaluative properties, this assertion still need not describe any evaluative fact or property. Such description of evaluative facts or properties is all that nondescriptivists deny.

II. ARGUMENTS FOR NONDESCRIPTIVISM

Assuming that the previous section captures what nondescriptivists deny, why do they deny it? Nondescriptivists give two main arguments for their view. The first argument infers their negative pragmatic claim from their positive pragmatic claim. The argument is simply that assertions of evaluative sentences do express emotions or prescriptions or desires, so they do not describe evaluative facts.⁷ This is a nonsequitur based on a false dichotomy. A single assertion can be used simultaneously both to describe facts and also to

express emotions, prescriptions, or desires. An assertion of "Gore is a bore" can be used both to describe Gore's personality (accurately or not) and also to express the speaker's dislike of Gore and to prescribe voting against him. All three acts can be done at the same time by a single assertion of a single sentence. Consequently, it is invalid to infer from the premise that evaluative assertions are used to express emotions, prescriptions, desires, or anything else to the conclusion that evaluative assertions are not used to describe evaluative facts. The negative conclusion does not follow from the positive premise.⁸

The second main reason to deny that evaluative assertions are descriptive uses premises about ontology. To describe a fact, it might be thought, there must be facts to be described. Nondescriptivists typically deny that there are any evaluative facts. This tempts some nondescriptivists to infer that evaluative assertions cannot be used to describe evaluative facts.

One problem with this argument is that description is intentional, so an assertion can be used descriptively or to describe, even if there really is nothing for it to describe. Someone who asserts "Santa Claus has a long, white beard" is performing the speech act of describing Santa Claus and his beard, even though Santa Claus and his beard do not exist. Analogously, an error theorist can hold that (positive) evaluative assertions describe evaluative facts, even though there really are no (positive) evaluative facts, just illusions of them. Consequently, the premise that there are no evaluative facts cannot be used to reach the conclusion that evaluative assertions are never descriptive in the sense that they are used to describe evaluative facts. Descriptivity is an issue of pragmatics, and ontology cannot settle pragmatic issues like this.

Nondescriptivists often respond that their goal is to understand common usage, and a principle of charity requires them to try to interpret common usage so that most common assertions come out true. This is a reason to avoid the position that people are constantly deluded about values in the way that young children are deluded about Santa Claus. However, language incorporates systematic errors in other places as well. Many adults used to describe witches when there were no witches. We still describe the sun as rising when we know better. Widespread error should not be attributed without an adequate reason. Still, if there is an adequate reason to see evaluative sentences as descriptive, as I will argue, then that will be an adequate reason to attribute widespread error about values, *if* there is also adequate reason to deny the existence of the described evaluative facts.

Another problem for the argument from ontology arises when we ask: What does it mean to deny that evaluative facts

exist? More generally, what is a fact? Facts are often defined in terms of truth, like this: There is a fact that *p* if and only if "*p*" is true (where "*p*" is a sentence that refers to the fact that *p*). Different kinds of facts will then result from different kinds or theories of truth. Some philosophers claim that truth requires correspondence to a mind-independent or causally efficacious reality. Nondescriptivists typically deny this maximal kind of truth to evaluative assertions. However, there are also minimal theories of truth, such as those that derive from Tarski. Tarski argued, very roughly, that a theory of truth for a language would assign individuals to names and sets to predicates in such a way as to imply all instances of Schema T: "*p*" is true if and only if *p*. If this is all there is to truth, then there is no reason to deny that evaluative assertions can be true in this minimal way. One can assign individuals to names and sets to moral predicates so as to imply Schema T. For example, one can assign Sam to "Sam" and the set of vicious things to the predicate "vicious" to get "Sam is vicious" is true if and only if Sam is vicious." If this is all there is to truth, then it is hard to see why nondescriptivists could or would deny that some evaluative assertions are true.

Moreover, there are strong reasons to believe that some evaluative assertions have some minimal kind of truth. Normal English speakers say things like, "It is true that lying is usually wrong, but this surprise party is an exception." Evaluative sentences can be negated or embedded in disjunctions or in the antecedents of conditionals, as in "If killing is wrong, then paying someone to kill for you is wrong." The most natural way to explain such common usage is to acknowledge that some evaluative assertions have at least some minimal kind of truth.

But then along with evaluative truths come evaluative facts. If there is a fact that *p* if and only if "*p*" is true, and if "*p*" is true if and only if *p*, then there is a fact that *p* if and only if *p*. If these equivalences tell us all there is to facts, then nondescriptivists must admit an evaluative fact whenever they admit an evaluative truth and even whenever they make an evaluative assertion. For example, if they assert, "Abortion is morally wrong," then they have to admit "It is true that abortion is morally wrong" and "It is a fact that abortion is morally wrong" at least in minimal senses. If nondescriptivists accept even minimal evaluative facts, then they cannot argue from the nonexistence of evaluative facts to the conclusion that evaluative assertions never describe evaluative facts. Maybe evaluative assertions describe only minimal evaluative facts, but at least there are some evaluative facts, however minimal, for evaluative assertions to describe. Nondescriptivists could even define a minimal kind of description: A sentence "*p*" describes a fact that *p* if and only if: "*p*" is true if and only if *p*.

It is hard to see why nondescriptivists would or would have to deny that evaluative assertions can describe evaluative facts in these minimal senses of description and fact.⁹

III. AN ARGUMENT FOR DESCRIPTIVISM

Although no argument shows that nondescriptivism is true, that does not prove that nondescriptivism is false. There might be no good reason for either position. However, many evaluative assertions do seem descriptive right on their face. Just consider assertions of "Your most recent paper is a lot better than your earlier ones" or "She was the best student in the class." In the absence of any strong reason to the contrary, it seems natural to see such assertions as describing the relative value of the paper or of the student. Moreover, there are general sufficient conditions of description that many evaluative assertions meet. These conditions provide an argument that at least some evaluative assertions are used to describe evaluative facts in the common sense of "describe."

To understand these conditions, we need to ask: What is description in general? Description is hard to define precisely, but some metaphors are common. It is often said that the direction of fit in description is from words to world. What this seems to mean is that, when words and world conflict, we do and should try to change our words so as to fit the world. In another metaphor, the world is seen as a target that we try to hit with our words. To describe is then to make an assertion that aims at hitting the world. Both metaphors suggest that descriptions can approximate success: They can fit the world although only loosely, or they can come close to their targets without hitting the bull's eye. We can signal that a description comes close in this way by calling it inaccurate or imprecise (even if not downright false) or by saying that it holds roughly, nearly, or almost.

This feature of descriptions suggests a test of when an assertion of a sentence is a description. For example, suppose a car is aquamarine (or some other shade between green and blue but closer to blue). This car can be described as nearly blue or almost blue. If I call this car blue without such a qualification, you might say that my description, while not incorrect, is imprecise or inaccurate, because it does not distinguish among various shades of blue. Similarly, if you say just "Italy is shaped like a boot," then we might respond that this is approximately true, but not precisely true. In contrast with such descriptions, if I simply express my emotions, as in "To hell with Italy," then what I say and my saying of it cannot be described as either accurate or inaccurate, precise or imprecise. Thus, one test of whether a sentence can be used for

the speech act of description is whether or not the sentence is subject to modifiers indicating lack of precision or accuracy, modifiers such as "roughly," "nearly," and "almost."

Passing this test might not be a necessary condition of description, if some descriptions cannot be modified with "roughly," "almost," and so on. For example, "Two plus two roughly equals four" seems to describe a sum, but two plus two equals precisely four, so "Two plus two roughly equals four" might seem to be nonsense. However, it also might be false or just understatement, in which cases it makes sense, so its making sense to apply adverbs like "roughly" still might be a necessary condition of descriptivity. I do not need to settle that issue for my present purposes, so I won't. Even if it makes no sense to modify some descriptions with "roughly," "almost," and so on, the converse still holds and gives a sufficient condition of description: Any declarative sentence that can sensibly be qualified by "roughly," "almost," "imprecise," "inaccurate," and so on, is descriptive.¹⁰

Many evaluative sentences pass this test. First, consider alternative evaluative predicates. If you say "Joe has a moral obligation to contribute to Oxfam now," then I might respond, "Not really. It would be *good* for Joe to contribute more to Oxfam, but it is inaccurate to say that he has an *obligation*, since he gave a very large contribution to them just last week." Some moralists might argue that Joe has an obligation anyway, but the point is that philosophers and common people argue about whether certain acts are obligatory or just good. That seems to be a dispute about which description of their moral status is most accurate.

Second, consider *kinds* of obligations. If you say, "I have duties to go to church and to pay my taxes," then I might respond, "That is true, but it would be more precise to say that you have a religious duty to go to church and a legal duty to pay your taxes." The same sort of example arises in morality: If you say, "I have moral duties to feed my children and to finish this paper," then I could respond, "It would be more precise to say that you have a familial moral duty to your children and a professional moral duty to finish the paper." This response seems to describe what kind of obligation there is to do each act.

Third, consider *strengths* of obligations. If you say, "I have moral duties to help all people in need, whether they are strangers or friends," I might respond, "That's true but not very precise. You do have a duty to help strangers, but it is not as strong as your duty to help friends. These duties are roughly as strong, but not quite." These strengths of obligations become important when deciding what to do in conflicts and how much to punish violators. If we want the punishment to fit the crime, we need some way to describe how bad the crime was.

In these examples and many more, we seem to describe the strengths and kinds of our moral duties, and we can do so accurately or only roughly. We can hit the target precisely or only nearly. This suggests that these evaluative assertions are descriptive in just the way that nondescriptivists deny.

Nondescriptivists might respond that, when speakers assert that one obligation is nearly as strong as another, they are saying that it is right to feel nearly as strongly about one as about the other or that it is nearly right to feel just as strongly about one as about the other. However, this response does not fit well with the expressivist's claim that to call an act obligatory is to express an emotion and *not* to say that the emotion is right. Moreover, the same problem would arise again at a new level when we ask what it means to say that it is right to feel an emotion, since "right" is itself an evaluative term.

Opponents also might object that my test fails to distinguish different ways in which expressions of belief might be inaccurate or imprecise. When Mark says, "Italy is shaped like a boot," Mark expresses his belief. In response, one might say either that (a) the *content* of this belief is imprecise, because Italy is shaped roughly but not precisely like a boot, or that (b) the *expression* of this belief is inaccurate, because Mark does not really believe what he says but only puts it this way in order to save time when he really believes that the whole issue is silly. Later reflection or objections by others often make us realize that we really do and did not believe quite what we said. This phenomenon has parallels in expressions of emotions. If one says, "To hell with Italy," then one might later realize that one was speaking too loosely, because this utterance does not reflect one's real attitude. Nondescriptivists might try to use this phenomenon to explain why evaluative assertions can be described as inaccurate, imprecise, rough, and so on. However, although this explanation does work in some cases, it does not fit the examples that I gave above. Consider the last one. If you say, "I have moral duties to help all people in need, whether they are strangers or friends," and I respond, "That's true but not precise," then what I am denying is not that you are expressing exactly the emotions and attitudes that you have. I might know that you really do have the same emotions towards helping strangers that you have towards helping friends. What I am claiming to be imprecise is the *content* of your assertion and belief. It is that kind of inaccuracy or imprecision in the content of evaluative assertions that has no parallel with pure expressions. So this move cannot save universal nondescriptivism from my argument.

Some weaker, nonuniversal version of nondescriptivism still might be true. Even if all of the evaluative assertions

mentioned above are descriptive, some other evaluative assertions still might not be descriptive. Nondescriptivists might claim that descriptive uses are nonstandard or less central in some way, or that descriptive uses are parasitic on nondescriptive uses. Even if descriptive uses are widespread and central, nondescriptivists could still deny that the speech act of description is any part of the meaning of evaluative sentences, so that the same sentence can be asserted with exactly the same meaning but without being used to perform any speech act of description. There is conceptual room for such weaker versions of nondescriptivism, even if I am right that some evaluative assertions are used to describe.

Nonetheless, our arguments against universal nondescriptivism put a heavy burden on nonuniversal nondescriptivists. They will need to specify which evaluative assertions are nondescriptive and why. Since so many common evaluative assertions can be used to describe at least minimal evaluative facts, it cannot be the fact that the nondescriptive assertions are evaluative that keeps them from being descriptive. But then what is it about those other evaluative assertions that makes them nondescriptive? If so many common evaluative assertions are used for description, then why should this speech act be any less standard or central than other speech acts that evaluative assertions are also used to perform? Why should this speech act be any less part of their meaning, if any is? Such questions must be answered in order to specify and defend any weaker version of nondescriptivism. This is a task that such nondescriptivists need to accomplish but have not yet accomplished, as far as I know. In the absence of adequate answers to these questions, I conclude that no version of nondescriptivism is true, so evaluative assertions are descriptive.¹¹

NOTES

¹ Well-known examples include Ayer, Stevenson, Hare, Blackburn, and Gibbard.

² As does J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

³ Distinguished by Daniel Stoljar, "Emotivism and Truth Conditions," *Philosophical Studies* 70 (1993): 81–101. One could accept any one of these three claims without the others. For example, Mark Timmons, *Morality without Foundations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), accepts the second claim (that is, nondescriptivism) but denies both of the other two claims.

⁴ Describing is here contrasted with prescribing and expressing rather than with calling, classifying, and exemplifying, as in J. L. Austin, "How to Talk—some simple ways," in *Philosophical Papers*, Second Edition, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 147–150.

⁵ Asserting something contrasts here with denying it, hypothesizing

it (as in the antecedent of a conditional), disjoining it, questioning it, etc. Assertion in this sense does not necessarily imply any claim to truth, so my reference to asserting evaluative sentences does not beg the question against nondescriptivists who deny that evaluative language makes any claims to truth.

⁶ By Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985). See the response by Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 112–117.

⁷ For example, Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, 7–8, criticized by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Some Problems for Gibbard's Norm-Expressivism," *Philosophical Studies* 69 (1993): 297–313, at 298.

⁸ A variation on this form of argument claims that evaluative assertions cannot be descriptive because they are evaluative. This argument assumes a suppressed premise that no evaluative assertions are descriptive. That clearly begs the question, since it is exactly what descriptivists deny. So this positive premise also fails to provide any support for the negative conclusion of nondescriptivism.

⁹ A large recent literature discusses expressivism and minimalism about truth. See, for example, Brad Hooker, ed., *Truth in Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), and references therein. My all-too-brief discussion is intended only to introduce the argument to come.

¹⁰ I add "declarative" in case "roughly" can modify questions, as in "Roughly where are you going?" It is not obvious what to say about such interrogative sentences, but they do not affect my point as long as my test works for declarative sentences, which include both indicative and subjunctive sentences.

¹¹ Thanks to Robert Fogelin, Bill Lycan, Daniel Stoljar, and Mark Timmons for helpful comments on drafts.