Propaganda and Moral Persuasion – Towards a Stevensonian Theory

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"How, then, are moralists and propagandists to be distinguished?"
(Stevenson 1944, 243)

1. To Seem a Saint

In the first act of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Lady Anne mourns her father-in-law, Henry VI, whom Richard III has slain. Confronted by the murderer, she inveighs against him:

> Vouchsafe, defused infection of a man,
> For these known evils, but to give me leave,
> By circumstance, to curse thy cursed self. (Shakespeare 2020b, 1.2.253-5)

You might think, given the circumstances and her express sentiments, that Anne is done with Richard. She has his moral measure. But she is quickly (too quickly) won around to the possibility of a rapprochement – indeed of marriage – by Richard's cunning and deliberate manipulation of her feelings. Yes, Richard did kill her father-in-law. And yes, he supposes that he was also somewhat culpable in the murder of her husband. *But*, what Lady Anne fails to appreciate, is that all of this was done for love of her: "Thine eyes, sweet lady, have infected mine." This is a pattern of behaviour with Richard. Throughout the play, he weaponizes the feelings of others in his pursuit of power. He ruthlessly exploits and subverts social expectations concerning family, love, religion, and his physique:

> But then I sigh; and, with a piece of scripture,
> Tell them that God bids us do good for evil:
> And thus I clothe my naked villany
> With old odd ends stolen out of holy writ;
> And seem a saint, when most I play the devil. (Shakespeare 2020b, 1.3.806-810)

Richard has made an art of the emotive *sigh.* What looks like a good faith appeal to morality to persuade the listener – what looks like *moral persuasion* – on the part of the antihero, is revealed time and again as something that we might more aptly term *propaganda* (fitting, in a play that itself presents as historical morality tale, while functioning, more insidiously, as Tudor agitprop).

In the mid-century metaethical masterpiece, *Ethics and Language*, C.L. Stevenson sets out to clarify the meaning and function of ethical language and to identify and "sharpen" appropriate tools for the task (1944, 1). In doing so, he develops a defence of the emotivist view that moral statements do not consist in statements of fact, but rather serve to express the moral feelings of the speaker and to exhort listeners to participate in those feelings. Stevenson seeks to conduct his metaethical project as a "scientist," or, as Hume would say, an "anatomist" – that is, without engaging in first-order moral disputation (which is to say, emotive disputation). He aims to scrutinise what those engaged in normative ethics are doing without directly participating, lest he deprive his analysis of "detachment and distort a relatively neutral study into a plea for some special code of morals" (Stevenson 1944, 1). But this commitment to avoiding substantive moral judgements, along with the distinctive form of his moral semantics, makes Stevenson vulnerable to a charge often levelled against emotivists, expressivists,

[1] Both authors contributed equally.

prescriptivists, and the credulous victims of the House of York: namely, that of being unable to draw an effective distinction between *moral persuasion* and *propaganda*.

In what follows, we set forth the problem of distinguishing moral persuasion and propaganda as it confronts the Stevensonian emotivist. Then, we consider a range of potential outcomes, from the failure of the theory to account for the distinction, to various possibilities for success.

2. A Thorny Problem

Private and public life are populated by figures whose campaigns of influence cannot aptly be described as moral persuasion. They may, like Richard III, strive to present *as if* they were engaged in moral persuasion, but those who see them clearly, recognise such claims as inauthentic. Some other form of influence is being exercised.

To mark this distinction, and the underlying assumption – that there are at least two distinct forms of persuasion with significance for moral life – we need to adopt names for the distinct forms of persuasion. In what follows, using the terms deployed above, we will refer to phenomena like the speech of the dissembling King as, "propaganda", a term often associated with mass political communication, but one that may also apply to acts of private influence as well.[2] We will contrast propaganda with what might variously be termed moral persuasion, admonition, commendation, exhortation, appeal, or, as Stevenson had it: "moralism" (1944, 243). Because "moralism" sounds a little dated, we'll use the more contemporary, "moral persuasion".

The example of Richard III amply illustrates that it is an important matter in moral life to be able to spot the propagandists, and to distinguish them from the moral persuaders. A theoretical account of ethics that lacks the capacity to make and explain a distinction between the two would accordingly appear impoverished. It might even be charged with opening the door to a kind of nihilism, insofar as it forces adherents to confront the prospect of a world in which there is no deep ethical distinction between Richard III and a sincere and saintly proselytiser.

Stevenson is sensitive to this worry as it applies to his emotivist account of ethics. A whole chapter of *Ethics and Language* is devoted to the problem of accounting for the distinction between propagandists and moralists (1944, 243-253). But why is this problem salient – why does it look like the Stevensonian emotivist will struggle to parse moral persuasion and propaganda in the first place? To respond to these questions, we need to bring key features of the Stevensonian picture into view.

In Stevenson's moral semantics, moral terms are addressed as dynamic signs possessed of two sorts of meaning: *descriptive* and *emotive*. The meaning of a sign is a dispositional property – it relates the term to the "psychological reactions of those who interpret or use it", which includes the one who deploys the sign (speaker or writer) to express cognitive states, attitudes and feelings, and its audience (hearer or reader). From the audience standpoint, a sign's descriptive meaning is its disposition to incite a response in the form of cognitive states "such as believing, thinking, supposing, presuming" (1944, 62). A sign's emotive meaning is its disposition to bring about certain emotions (1944, 59).

Take for example, the term "cultured". Stevenson tells us that there was a time when the descriptive meaning of "cultured" was "widely read and acquainted with the arts." Over time, being well-read and artistically literate acquired social favour, and the term "cultured" came concomitantly to enjoy a laudatory significance: a strong emotive meaning. References to being cultured "awakened feelings not only because of its conceptual meaning, but more

[2] A term, moreover, with its origins in the evangelical activities of the Catholic church.

directly, in its own right; for it recalled the gestures, smiles, and tone of voice which so habitually accompanied it" (1938, 332).

When undertaking analysis to understand the function of a given moral term in the discourse, the moral scientist is careful to distinguish the emotive and descriptive content of terms. In ordinary usage, neither "moral persuasion" (or its cognates) or "propaganda" function as emotively neutral terms. The former tends to be heard with a note of approval, the latter, as Stevenson observes, with "stigma" (1944, 241). It's standardly thought *good* to engage in moral persuasion, and *bad* to propagandise.[3] Although both terms can at times be heard in a laudatory or a condemnatory tone, moral persuasion is primarily associated with the former tone, and propaganda with the latter.

By contrast, when it comes to giving a descriptive account of the terms, Stevenson allows that they are very similar indeed. Consider: on Stevenson's account, moral statements function to "create an influence" – to persuade the listener by means that are not "empirical or rational" (1963, 29). Thus, exclaiming "It is good to help the poor!" does not just express the attitudes or feelings of the speaker, it functions to exhort the listener: "Let us help the poor". By proclaiming the good or the bad, the speaker issues an emotive appeal to their audience:

> A, for instance, may try to change the temperament of his opponent. He may pour out his enthusiasms in such a moving way–present the sufferings of the poor with such appeal–that he will lead his opponent to see life through different eyes. He may build up by the contagion of his feelings an influence which will modify B's temperament and create in him a sympathy for the poor which did not previously exist. This is often the only way to obtain ethical agreement, if there is any way at all. It is persuasive, not empirical or rational; but that is no reason for neglecting it. There is no reason to scorn it, either, for it is only by such means that our personalities are able to grow, through our contact with others. (1963, 29)

Stevenson's moralist is thus one who pours out their "enthusiasms" and who aims to move others by "the contagion of his feelings."

Now recall Richard, that "defused infection of a man", who excels at sentimental contagion and whose apparent acts of moral expression might aptly be interpreted as propaganda. Here is the problem: while there are, as Stevenson observes, many ways to describe the activity of propaganda – "a baffling confusion of 'ways'" (1944, 244-245) – most philosophers of propaganda would agree with the following claims: that propaganda is a form of persuasion, that it may rely on means neither empirical or rational, and that it is centrally concerned with influencing the feelings of its targets. *But these features are also characteristic of the Stevensonian conception of moral persuasion.*

The Stevensonian emotivist is vulnerable to the challenge that they struggle to distinguish propaganda and moral persuasion, in part because the terms look likely to have very close, perhaps indistinguishable, *descriptive* meanings for the emotivist: both propaganda and moral persuasion may consist in an attempt to transform the ethical commitments of others simply by means of nonrational sentimental appeal. Adherents of other theories of morality may have more options when it comes to descriptive distinction. A moral cognitivist, for example, might distinguish between moral persuasion and propaganda on the grounds that the former characteristically appeals to its audience's capacity for reason, whereas the latter only engages their emotions. But this move is not available to the Stevensonian emotivist. They believe that moral appeals often engage our emotions alone, and think that while reasoning can

[3] Of course, as Stevenson observes, though these emotive significances may be standard, they are by no means universal, and possibilities are preserved within standard usage for their use with countervailing emotive force. So, for example, the derogatory emotive significance of 'propaganda' is dominant. But the term also permits of a range of perfectly intelligible ways to refer to propaganda with a positive emotive meaning, as in: "Nice work, Shepherd! I very much approve of the propaganda you produced for Obama!".

guide the application of moral values to which individuals are already emotionally attached, it is unlikely to cause a shift in their more basic moral evaluations.

This brings us to a further problem for the Stevensonian emotivist: if propaganda and moral persuasion can't be distinguished in descriptive terms, then they must be distinguished by reference to emotive meaning, if they are to be distinguished at all. But this puts the Stevensonian in a bind. Because leaning on emotive meaning is costly.

There are three main sorts of costs to look out for. The first is explanatory: the moral scientist wants to know *why* moral persuasion and propaganda seem so importantly different in moral life – *why* they standardly invite different sorts of emotive reaction. But an emotive distinction will not support the discovery of such an explanation. The second sort of cost is methodological. Recall that the Stevensonian seeks to operate as a *detached* moral scientist – they aim to stay above the fray of first order moral disputation. But to opt for emotive definitions of the forms of persuasion can involve expressing attitudes and feelings about the target phenomena – something the moral scientist seeks assiduously to avoid.[4] The third sort of cost is aspirational: the Stevensonian hopes to offer an account of moral language that is insulated against charges of nihilism and naïve relativism. But an account of ethics that can only mark the distinction of propaganda and moral persuasion in terms of the feelings they characteristically elicit in hearers will struggle to avoid these charges.

Ultimately, all of this means that if the Stevensonian finds that the terms "propaganda" and "moral persuasion" are descriptively identical, then they are confronted by a grisly dilemmatic spectre. Either, (1) their theory has failed as an analysis of moral language – because *there is a morally significant difference* between the propagandising of a Richard III and the moral pleas of a Cordelia entirely lacking in "glib and oily art" (Shakespeare 2000a, 1.1.244), but it is one that the Stevensonian can't identify (at least within theoretical constraints); or, (2) the theory has not failed as an analysis of moral language *per se*, but this is because it *correctly* concludes that there is no deep ethical difference between propaganda and moral suasion, and thus it has nihilistic first-order implications for morality.

In what follows, we consider how best the Stevensonian might navigate (or, if possible, avoid) this morass. In doing so, we will have even more cause to observe that, like the white rose of York, the objection that Stevensonian emotivism cannot distinguish moral persuasion from propaganda is a thorny prospect indeed.

3. Boo to Problems! Hooray for Solutions!

The criticism that Stevenson's emotivism cannot support a satisfactory distinction between moral persuasion and propaganda relies on a presumed incapacity to identify distinct descriptive meanings for the terms. But this presumption may not be defensible.

[4] As a result, the Stevensonian might make a sophisticated attempt to define with reference to emotive content without engaging directly in persuasion. She might attempt, in defining the terms, to *mention*, but not *use*, their standard emotive content. She thereby skirts the methodological threat noted above. But the other costs still arise. If she, for example, proposes that "propaganda" just *means* "persuasion of which people often disapprove", then her view collapses into a form of reductive naturalism of a worryingly relativistic stripe – precisely the sort of view her account aims to disavow. If, to take another tack, she suggests that – while the descriptive meanings of "moral persuasion" and "propaganda" are the same – that accurate usage of the term "propaganda" always expresses a condemnatory attitude, then her view implies, implausibly, that it is impossible for a competent language user to say of some piece of communication "that was propaganda, and it was all-things-considered good" without engaging in some kind of insincerity or self-contradiction. After all, our datum is that the term "propaganda" is *often* used to signal disapproval, but not that the term in and of itself denotes condemnation. Conventional usage would respond that, although propaganda is often disapproved of, it is disapproved of *because it has the distinctive descriptive features of propaganda,* rather than being called propaganda *because it just happens to be disapproved of.*

Stevenson weighs the matter briefly in *Ethics and Language* as he considers how to "emotionally neutralize" the concept of propaganda, so as to reduce it to its descriptive meaning. Building on Stevenson's analysis, which is partial at best, let us consider three potential paths that the moral scientist might take. The first two are linked to a common finding. If the moral scientist finds that there is no descriptive distinction between propaganda and moral persuasion, they might then either **(i)** choose to abstain from emotive definition of the terms, or **(ii)** engage in emotive definition. Both **(i)** and **(ii)** are costly paths for reasons flagged above. But a third path **(iii)** might lead to a happy ending. It begins with a different outcome to the emotivist's initial analysis: namely, the finding that there is a descriptive distinction between propaganda and moral persuasion. If a descriptive distinction is identified, then perhaps, depending on the nature of the distinction found, the moral scientist can explain *why* moral persuasion *is not* propaganda, without abandoning her scientific stance.

So, in what follows, we push beyond Stevenson's brief survey, and examine where analysis might take the Stevensonian. We look first to the gloomier potential paths **(i)** and **(ii)** and unpack their consequences for the emotivist account. Then, we focus on the happier prospect: **(iii)**. Drawing on recent work in the philosophy of language, we present and scrutinise three potential ways to secure the descriptive distinction of moral persuasion and propaganda. Each involves advancing accounts of propaganda that are at least prima facie supported by common usage, that might have the right sort of explanatory function, and that are in the spirit of the Stevensonian project. But whether any of these approaches are ultimately defensible on grounds of usage will prove an empirical matter.

(i) No descriptive distinction, abstain from emotive definition

Strategies of emotive neutralisation help to clarify the descriptive significance of terms. They enable the moral scientist to better understand and characterise the function of terms in moral language. But the descriptive meaning/s ascertained through emotive neutralisation may not, importantly, prove reliable in future usage. Ethical terms are unstable and vague: "they are not predestined to abide by any one set of rules" (1944, 87), and the results of analysis may vary according to the context of speech.

Nonetheless, for some ethical terms, the moral scientist can hope to arrive at a descriptive account that both clarifies (in a non-persuasive fashion) some general (and generally reliable) rules for usage, and that helps to elucidate the term's emotive meaning: "A great part of the term's emotive meaning may then be dependent on the descriptive meaning." (87) But throughout, the scientist must be on high alert against the possibility of persuasive behaviour in their descriptive analysis of the term. Not because engaging in persuasion is bad *per se*, but because the metaethical scientist is a scientist, not a reformer. This means that they will generally have to resist the temptation to give a *final* or *definitive* account of a term's descriptive meaning. Moral terms tend not to have wholly fixed meanings. So, an account that says *the true meaning of propaganda is X*, will likely prove to be persuasive – that is, it will function (whether intentionally or not) to influence, rather than merely characterise, usage.

A successful account of the descriptive meaning of "propaganda" – of the sort that resists persuasive engagement and that elucidates general rules for the application of the term, including insight into the determinants of its emotive meaning – is likely to be "broad and colorless" (1944, 246).[5] In the chapter on "Moralists and Propagandists", Stevenson reviews a few promising candidates, drawn from the academic literature of the 1920s and 30s:

[5] Stevenson also considers the possibility that more narrow conceptions of propaganda, such as those which specify the method or motive of the propagandist, might also be offered. He suggests that such definitions, are perhaps more likely to be persuasive, but that they too, with sufficient care on the part of the theorist, can be emotively neutralized: "In selecting narrower senses, a theorist can make efforts to neutralise emotive meaning…and leave

1. "I would define propaganda as the dissemination of interested information and opinion."
2. "Propaganda is the deliberate effort to affect the minds and emotions, chiefly the latter, of a group in a given way for a given purpose."
3. "Any effort to persuade and win people to the acceptance of some particular proposal or support of a cause." (1944, 244)[6]

Each of these definitions could be read as emotively neutral. Moreover, as Stevenson approvingly notes, some of their authors employ a further strategy to safeguard the emotive neutrality of their definitions: namely, they point out that, in some instances, propaganda, as they conceive it, designates something *good* (1944, 245). This strategy helps to prevent the importation of the negative emotive significance that "propaganda" often has in ordinary discourse into the scientific context of description.

So far, so good. But despite the promise of these definitions as emotively neutral descriptions of propaganda, they fail to serve a critical function for the purposes of our enquiry. That is, they fail to effectively distinguish propaganda from moral persuasion. Although they have in their favour the property of being broad and colourless, and of being largely stripped of emotive content, they are so broad and colourless that they arguably collapse the distinction between propaganda and moral persuasion. As definitions of propaganda they appear to also function to describe figures who we might regard as true moral persuaders:

> All advertisers would be propagandists in such a sense; and so would all missionaries and clergy; and so would editorial writers and columnists; and so would teachers who imbue their students with ideals of citizenship. (1944, 245)[7]

Stevenson thinks of the above as professions and ambitions that we would not normally impugn with the name "propaganda". Although we might disagree with him about cases (advertisers, for example), we might yet agree that the definitions capture actors who we are habituated to conceive as moral persuaders (and not as propagandists). Of course if even the most promising descriptions of propaganda fail to distinguish it from moral persuasion – and fail to elucidate why propaganda has the emotive significance it does, then we might feel quite pessimistic about the prospect of distinguishing propaganda and moral persuasion by means of neutralized definition. But Stevenson makes it clear that he is quite comfortable with this outcome. While he does not ultimately opt for a preferred description of propaganda, he allows that:

> When the terms are completely neutralised, one may say with tranquillity that all moralists are propagandists, or that all propagandists are moralists. (1944, 252)

This scientific result, Stevenson tells the reader, will not detract from our ability to use the terms "moral persuasion" and "propaganda" with distinct emotive valence in ordinary moral discourse. The ordinary user may thus hold the terms distinct and persist in their preferred emotive usage.

But we may nonetheless find this result disappointing on theoretical grounds – surely the moral scientist should be able to achieve some insight into why these terms enjoy such

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the terms free for detached description…Such a procedure can be successful, when carefully handled, in yielding narrow senses that are without any element of persuasion." (1944, 248)

[6] Citing, respectively: Wreford 1923, 514-524; Thomson 1927, 451; and North 1932, 177.

[7] He continues, somewhat remarkably, to note that the following (apparently surprising) conclusion might be drawn, namely that: "…Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Washington's Farewell Address, considered as indispensable reading for all American schoolboys, would mark each of these statesmen as propagandists of great power." (1944, 245)

disparate emotive significance in usage? And we may worry – as Stevenson is clearly concerned that his critics will – that the emotivist has thereby opened the door to a form of moral nihilism:

> To certain ears it will sound like the bitterest cynicism… "Are all moralists, then, nothing more than propagandists? Has man no other guide than bias and prejudice? If this is the teaching of social science, or of analytic philosophy, then let us have none of it, and base our own theories on higher things. (1944, 246)

There's a flat-footed way of making this complaint – which Stevenson ably parries in *Ethics and Language*. The flat-footed approach treats the apparent descriptive identity of propaganda and moral persuasion as a *moral problem* for the emotivist: "You bad man, you can't see the fundamental difference between something bad and something good." After all, in ordinary usage, moral persuasion and propaganda standardly function as "emotive antonyms" (243). Anyone who contends that moral persuasion and propaganda share a definition will seem, *within ordinary moral discourse*, to contend that "good is bad" or "black is white". But such an objection only arises as a result of a flawed engagement with the emotivist – one that fails to take into account the fact of emotive neutralisation. It commits the fallacy of *petitio principii*: "According to you, moral persuasion is just propaganda, and boo to that!"[8]

But there are more sophisticated ways to advance worries about nihilism in light of the result that moral persuasion and propaganda are – in descriptive terms, at least – one and the same. None of these approaches impute personal moral turpitude to the Stevensonian emotivist, but they may nonetheless show Stevenson to have been imprudently sanguine about the consequences of his theory.

It might be, for example, that there is a fundamental tension in the Stevensonian project of describing moral language in entirely neutral terms whilst *not* undermining it – perhaps we cannot do both. Indeed, perhaps despite all their caution, in effecting the emotive neutralisation of propaganda and moral persuasion, the moral scientist has entered moral disputation by scientifically undermining the presuppositions of moral life.

The unfortunate intervention might be characterised as follows. Ordinary moral language users think that they approve of suasion and disapprove of propaganda *in virtue of* their descriptive differences. But if there are no descriptive differences to be found (or, if the descriptive differences do not track the difference between that which is approved of and that which is not disapproved of), then ordinary users are simply *wrong*. Thus, the scientist has not simply described moral language in a way that leaves everything as it was – she has intervened in a moral debate by undermining the presuppositions of a widely-held moral view. Ordinary moral actors must either accept that all propaganda is *qua propaganda*, fine, or more worryingly, that all moral persuasion *qua* moral persuasion is *not* fine.

Even more worryingly, ordinary moral actors might think that the legitimacy of the practice of moral communication is contingent upon there being a descriptive distinction between suasion and propaganda. The thought is that, as well as *substantive* norms (we should adopt good moral views) there are also *procedural* norms (we need to get to them in the right way). If there is no distinction between propaganda and moral persuasion, then, rather than adopting a more neutral attitude towards propaganda, as Stevenson seems inclined to do, ordinary moral agents might conclude that all moral persuasion inherits the vices of

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> "It requires only a little attention, however, to see that the phrases "nothing more than" propaganda, and "bias and prejudice", are irrelevant to the issue. They emphasize a derogation that the critic has been accustomed to associate with some narrower sense of "propaganda", and which he insistently retains for the broad and potentially neutral sense, heedless of any admonitions that might moderate his linguistic inflexibility. He finds persuasion where none is intended and enters into a confused counterpersuasion." (1944, 246)

propaganda. Since most of our moral beliefs derive, ultimately, from others, this would suggest that they are all thus condemned, and that there is no important difference between moral education and brainwashing or indoctrination.

Here then, lies the threat of nihilism, of the conclusion that moral life is founded on a (scientific) error – a threat, if substantiated, that means that the Stevensonian emotivist really is very close to being an error theorist (even if they do not realise this or want to be one).

(ii) No descriptive distinction, engage in emotive definition

In the last section, we addressed the possibility that propaganda cannot be descriptively distinguished from moral persuasion. Now some moral scientists might, with Stevenson, be content to leave things there. But to do so arguably raises the spectre of the kind of moral nihilism outlined in the previous section. And given that threat, some practitioners of the Stevensonian approach might yet prefer to opt for a departure from this method. They might say, "yes, emotive neutralisation shows propaganda to be descriptively indistinguishable in key respects from moral persuasion, but that's an unacceptable result. There's clearly a problem with the present operation of these terms that should be addressed by means of persuasive definition." It may also be that, in present usage, "propaganda" is descriptively vague to an extent that it can be compared to terms like "culture", of which Stevenson says:

> There are hundreds of words which, like "culture", have both a vague conceptual [descriptive] meaning and a rich emotive meaning. The conceptual meaning of them all is subject to constant re-definition. The words are prizes which each man seeks to bestow on qualities of his own choice. (1938, 333).

If propaganda is such a prize: if it is a term on which a user may hope to *confer* qualities of their own choosing, then why should the moral scientist abstain from the game? Would it not be better to weigh into the ongoing battle over the term, and to ascribe it a descriptive meaning that might usefully function to explain its emotive significance[9]? To this end, the scientist might say: "Propaganda is vague. We can't presently distinguish it from moral persuasion. But it clearly gestures at an important phenomenon in moral life, and we should be able to distinguish it from moral persuasion. So, let's adopt a persuasive definition that might ultimately license the distinction." They might even smile wryly, and say, "Look, persuasive definition seems nigh inescapable when dealing with a socially potent term like 'propaganda' anyway, so why not own that fact and proceed with a clear eye to the better regulation of moral life?"

This approach would depart from Stevenson's theoretical method. It would imply that, however much the *moral* scientist might hope to remain aloof from the ethical fray – keeping sharply separate the roles of anatomist and moralist – the *social* scientist, charged with understanding the workings of propaganda in the world around her, cannot maintain such scientific neutrality. Faced with the emotivist conclusion that there is no clear descriptive distinction between propaganda and suasion, the social scientist would be forced either to abandon the study of propaganda as a distinctive genus, or to engage in emotive disputation via a persuasive definition. This might be the best outcome that is in fact available, but it is one that Stevenson himself would not have welcomed.

Having considered two paths proceeding from a failure to discover a descriptive distinction – one haunted by nihilism, the other by methodological surrender – let's move to a

[9] The relative stability of the emotive meaning of a sign is secured through standard usage: I may say "Excellent!" in a lukewarm fashion and thereby communicate disappointment, but the general disposition of the term to communicate emotive approbation remains stable (as does its disposition to occasionally communicate meanings of the sort I adopt), being established through linguistic convention.

happier and more speculative horizon. Stevenson was pessimistic about the prospects of distinguishing propaganda and moral persuasion. But perhaps he was wrong.

(iii) Potential paths to a descriptive distinction

In what follows, and drawing on contemporary insights from the philosophy of propaganda, we consider three potential paths to a descriptive distinction between the meanings of "propaganda" and "moral persuasion". Each approach has advantages and shortcomings from the Stevensonian standpoint, and whether any of these approaches is ultimately successful will depend on empirical questions about moral practice and language.

Attempt 1: *nonrational moral persuasion / irrational propaganda*

Today, the dominant camp of philosophical thought concerning propaganda ascribes propaganda a characteristic connection to *irrationality* – call these "irrationalist accounts" (Hyska 2022). In such accounts, propaganda is figured as a form of communication that functions (or appears to function) to either elicit or exploit irrationality in the hearer. Propaganda is thus variously described as:

1. "...manipulation of the rational will to close off debate" (Stanley, describing the standard view, 2015, 48).
2. "...the organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual's adequately formed, rational, reflective judgement" (Marlin 2002, 22).
3. "...an epistemically defective message used with the intention to persuade a socially significant group of people…" (Ross 2002, 24).[10]

Recall that Stevenson characterises moral persuasion as a *nonrational* method of shaping or coordinating attitudes. He thereby contrasts it with "rational" methods that deploy language to the end of producing reasons, and that can be subjected to standards of logical validity (1944, 152). Now, if we can, taking a suggestion from the contemporary discourse, accurately describe propaganda as a method of persuasion that characteristically implicates *irrationality* – and contrast that with moral persuasion as *nonrational* – then this might supply the moral scientist with an illuminating way of drawing a descriptive distinction between the practices. But what is the relationship between the notion of the irrational at play in contemporary work on propaganda, and Stevenson's conception of the nonrational?

Stevenson tells us that he deliberately elects the term "nonrational" rather than "irrational" to describe moral persuasion because it clarifies both that reason need in no way be implicated in moral persuasion: "Irrational methods are rational in the sense of reason-using" (1944, 140)), and that engaging with moral claims need not induce incoherence or undermine reflective judgement.

But the distinction that Stevenson thereby draws between the irrational and the nonrational does not track the sense of irrationality used by the contemporary "irrationalist" theorists of propaganda. For these theorists, Stevenson's account of "nonrational" persuasive methods as dependent on "the sheer, direct emotional impact of words – on emotive meaning, rhetorical cadence, apt metaphor, stentorian, stimulating, or pleading tones of voice, dramatic gestures, care in establishing *rapport* with the hearer or audience, and so on" (Stevenson 1944, 139), would figure moral persuasion as largely indistinguishable from propaganda.

So, it seems as though the dominant contemporary "irrationalist" accounts of propaganda will provide little succour to the Stevensonian in search of a descriptive distinction.

[10] Hyska (2022, 4).

Now, if the *only* sense in which propaganda induced "irrationality" was by causing people to have false, unevidenced or contradictory beliefs about non-moral matters, then there would be a clear distinction between the irrational influence of propaganda and the merely nonrational influence of moral persuasion.[11] If this was the sense in which propaganda is supposed to be irrational, then we could identify a clear descriptive distinction between propaganda and moral persuasion more generally. We could say that moral persuasion merely *bypasses* reason in influencing our moral attitudes, whereas propaganda aims to affect our moral attitudes by making us believe falsely or against our evidence regarding non-moral matters. But, as the nuanced contemporary accounts of propaganda make clear, the problem with adopting such a conception of the "irrational" character of propaganda is that it would be far too narrow. Propaganda doesn't just aim to inculcate irrational beliefs about non-evaluative subjects – it also aims to affect our attitudes and evaluations directly. This is why Marlin speaks of propaganda as *circumventing* rational judgement, and why Ross's notion of "epistemically defective persuasion stretches to cover not only falsehoods and instances of misleading, but also the use of 'spurious' means, like emotional arousal, to persuade" (Hyska 2022, 6). Likewise, in a more recent treatment, Stanley, writing with Quaranto, defined propaganda simply as "an argument that bypasses reason" (Quaranto and Stanley 2021, 125).

So, there is no relief to be had here. On the contemporary "irrationalist" view, it appears that Stevenson's category of the "nonrational" is merely a subset of the irrational, and hence that moral persuasion, as he describes it, is merely a subset of propaganda. Further limiting the scope of the notion of "irrationality" implicated in definitions of propaganda might yet allow its distinction from "nonrational" moral persuasion, but arguably only at the expense of its claim to be a generic characteristic of propaganda.

Attempt 2: *moral persuasion / political propaganda*

Our second approach to the descriptive distinction of moral persuasion and propaganda begins with the contention that the contemporary irrationalist accounts of propaganda cited above are false. Propaganda does not necessarily, or even characteristically, involve eliciting or exploiting irrationality in its audience.

Megan Hyska makes the case for this position in her 'Against Irrationalism in the Theory of Propaganda' (2022). Drawing on case studies of recognizable forms of propaganda that don't bear the relation to audience-side irrationality posited by proponents of the standard view,[12] Hyska furnishes a distinct, positive conception of propaganda. She does so by bringing

[11] We might even, in such cases, want to call the resulting *moral* attitudes irrational as well, but, echoing Hume, this would be merely a "figurative and improper way of speaking," (Hume 2000, III.1.1) since, "Tis not the passion, properly speaking, which is unreasonable, but the judgement." (Ibid. II.3.3).

[12] To make her case, Hyska analyses cases of "hard propaganda" (see Haifeng Huang (2018)) and "propaganda of the deed." Hard propaganda consists of crude, heavy-handed or preposterous political messaging that does not appear to aim at circumventing or manipulating reason insofar as it is clearly liable to be seen through by ordinary witnesses. We might think of Donald Trump's manipulation of the map of Hurricane Dorian using a sharpie, or Vladimir Putin's insistence that Russia's invasion of the Ukraine is not a war. The promulgation of such outrageous lies by official organs functions not to manipulate the reason of the audience, but to demonstrate the power of the state and to intimidate its opponents. Where hard propaganda features heavy-handed expressions of establishment power, propaganda of the deed are striking, anti-establishment acts, also with pronounced symbolic import: mass protests, assassinations, disruptive acts of sabotage, etc. Both forms of propaganda are propaganda that "shows rather than tells." Whereas the function of hard propaganda is to communicate the power of the state, the function of propaganda of the deed is to demonstrate the power of the state's opponents, and to catalyse groups like the working class in opposition to state oppression. Both forms neither depend upon nor assume the irrationality of their audience for efficacy. As examples, they show that there is no necessary relation between propaganda and the bypassing of reason; and they help to illuminate a

a particular function of propaganda into view: namely, its operation as a tool of organisation. Perhaps, Hyska suggests, what is distinctive of propaganda is not its relationship to emotion, or indeed to irrationality, but *its concern with group agency*.

On this view, propaganda is properly a political undertaking. Hyska cites Hannah Arendt, who writes that the "true goal of totalitarian propaganda is not persuasion, but organisation of the polity" (Arendt 1994, 361). If this is the case, then perhaps propaganda may be descriptively distinguished from moral persuasion in terms of its practical target. We could view the two forms of suasion as subject to a sort of public / private distinction. Moral persuasion is properly concerned with the private conversion of the individual, propaganda with galvanising groups to public ends. This might explain the differing forms of concern we have with them and serve to illuminate why they enjoy distinct emotive meanings.

But it would fail to clarify the distinction that the Stevensonian cares about when they wring their hands at the difficulty of dividing moral persuasion and propaganda. If we take propaganda as a distinctively political activity, as one that does not necessarily implicate emotion, or irrationality, as one that is aimed at constituting and directing group agency, then we may see our way to its descriptive distinction from moral persuasion, which we may hold as properly concerned with individual agency. But this approach involves opting for descriptions that arguably fail to support a satisfactory explanation of the standard difference in emotive meaning between the terms (it doesn't clarify why propaganda generally has a negative emotive significance, or moral persuasion a positive one). More pressingly, it is an approach that advances a conception of propaganda that does not account for persuasive acts like Richard III's speech to Lady Anne; in which Richard clearly engages in a form of influence that we should rightly blanch at terming moral. Whether we decide that such cases are described by the term "propaganda" or not, if the Stevensonian scientist is to distinguish the manipulative, Richard III form of persuasion from ordinary *moral persuasion*, then they must find some further descriptive standard of distinction.

Attempt 3: *bypassing or extending an agent's attitudes*

Before we surrender to the pessimistic conclusion that there is no descriptive difference between propaganda and moral persuasion from the emotivist standpoint, let us canvass one more possibility. Stevenson sought to distinguish *direct* attempts to change attitudes through nonrational means from *indirect* attempts to change attitudes through the inculcation or exploitation of theoretical or epistemic irrationality. But we might note that there are two quite different ways in which the attitudes formed as a result of nonrational suasion might relate to those that preceded them.

Our moral attitudes are not just attitudes towards the world. They also relate in important ways to *other attitudes*. Imagine an individual who has broadly humanistic or universalistic benevolent moral attitudes – she cares about the welfare of all people, and thinks that even individuals to whom she has no connection matter morally. Now consider the emotions that arose in many on seeing the famous photograph of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian-Kurdish child refugee who drowned attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. In a benevolent breast, the image immediately and involuntarily summons up feelings of grief, pity, and a passionate desire to do more to help children like Kurdi. The influence of the photograph is clearly, in Stevenson's sense, nonrational. No process of reasoning or deliberation is required for the image to arouse a sympathetic response. And, indeed, other ways of conveying information about Kurdi's death – perhaps in the context of a statistical report – might not have elicited such a response. Nevertheless, the resultant emotions are ones which would have been

concern of propaganda that is characteristic (on Hyska's account) – namely, its concern with group formation, with political organization.

endorsed, antecedently, by a generally benevolent viewer – we might even say that the tokening of such specific attitudes is itself the implementation of her attitude of universal benevolent concern. Even if the effect of the photograph might be said, in Stanley and Quaranto's sense, to *bypass* reason, it does not in this case bypass the attitudes and values of the *viewer*. The resulting emotions reflect attitudes the subject already had; in an important sense, she might have got there on her own.

However, not all nonrational influence on the emotions reflects antecedent attitudes in this way. Some propaganda, such as fascist representations of persecuted minorities as rats, functions in part by creating *associations* between pre-existing objects of hatred, fear or disgust (such as vermin), and new objects of political ill-will. The audience of this type of propaganda might come to form negative attitudes towards the persecuted group which she would *not* have endorsed from the perspective of her pre-existing attitudes. Nevertheless, these new attitudes and associations might be sufficiently powerful and resilient to effect an overall change in the subject's evaluative stance. A related strategy employed by propagandists amplifies negative facts about members of a target group – for example, through focusing attention on isolated crimes committed by refugees – in order to create negative feelings about the group that are sufficiently strong to survive in the face of accurate information – such as the fact that such crimes are statistically rare. In these cases, the appeal truly *does* seem to bypass the attitudes and values of the audience; the target of such propaganda ends up with moral attitudes that she would not have antecedently endorsed, and which she could not have got to on her own.

We noted before that an adequate account of propaganda must allow the conceptual possibility that an instance of propaganda might be judged an all-things-considered good, and one might worry that the distinction to which we advert here rests on the positive associations of the case we offer as an example of moral persuasion, as opposed to the proffered examples of propaganda. But this is not the case. In a target who did not yet have any attitude of universal benevolence or active concern for the welfare of all humans, the photograph of Alan Kurdi might still have prompted a sympathetic response – not by appealing to any existing attitudes she had before, but simply by activating an underlying *disposition* to empathise with other humans. In this case, it is not clear that the new attitude is one that would be endorsed from the perspective of her antecedent attitudes – indeed, such an experience might prompt the target to *change* her attitudes, perhaps by "broadening the circle" of her benevolent concern to include foreigners she had previously excluded. For this person, the effect of Kurdi's photograph *really would* be one of propaganda. Conversely, racist broadcasts as received by an already-racist audience might function as moral persuasion – functioning to arouse a heightened enthusiasm for discriminatory violence against the target which would have been endorsed from the perspective of the subject's pre-existing attitudes.

This distinction, between emotional changes that appeal to, and those that circumvent, the audience's pre-existing attitudes, seems to speak to the sense that propaganda is generally, but not necessarily, a bad thing. In particular, it seems to capture the thought that the distinction between moral persuasion and propaganda underlies a *procedural,* rather than a *substantive* moral norm. As Hyska notes, a common feature of theories of propaganda is the association between propaganda and *manipulation*, and so we might say that the defining feature of propaganda is not its nonrational functioning, a feature which it shares with moral persuasion more generally, but its ability to circumvent the prior concerns of the audience. It is procedurally problematic to attempt to win over our targets in such a manner, and so it is normally all-things-considered objectionable to do so. Nevertheless, it may sometimes, as in the case of someone who fails to care about the welfare of foreigners, be necessary to use propaganda where moral persuasion is impossible. Contrariwise, it is procedurally innocent to engage in moral persuasion, but of course moral persuasion can be employed by those with bad morals, and so lead to repulsive conclusions, as in the case of our committed racist.

In other words, this analysis captures, using resources that are available to the Stevensonian emotivist, a *descriptive* difference between suasion and propaganda that seems to track the *evaluative* distinction that most people make between the two forms of nonrational influence. Whether the proposed definition truly corresponds to the folk understanding of propaganda, and whether it is extensionally adequate to the phenomenon as identified by social scientists, is beyond the scope of the present study. Indeed, as Stevenson would have hoped, the success of this analysis as a *descriptive* claim will be an empirical question.

Nevertheless, we think that, even if the adoption of this distinction were to some extent *revisionary* – even if it might constitute a *persuasive definition* of propaganda – this might still be a better option for the Stevensonian than accepting the far more revisionary – indeed, potentially nihilistic – conclusion that there is no important division to be drawn between propaganda and moral persuasion. If the moral scientist must propose some change to moral practice, better that it remain small.

4. Conclusion:

> March on, join bravely, let us to't pell-mell;
> If not to heaven, then hand in hand to hell.
> (Shakespeare 2000, 5.3.3827-8)

Writing in 1937, Stevenson claimed that:

> Ethical terms are instruments used in the complicated interplay and readjustment of human interests ... People praise one another, to encourage certain inclinations, and blame one another, to discourage others. The ethical terms facilitate such influence. Being suited for use in suggestion, they are a means by which men's attitudes may be led this way or that. (Stevenson 1937, 20)

Put like this, the distinction between propaganda and moral persuasion can seem hard to locate. And, indeed, at points, Stevenson seems sanguine about the idea that there is no descriptive distinction between propaganda and moral persuasion, that "propaganda" is just a term of disapprobation, used to condemn persuasion of which one disapproves. Indeed, this conclusion might seem inevitable for the Stevensonian, given that the primary distinction appealed to by social scientific theorists of propaganda – between arguments that address and those that bypass reason – is not one which is available to the emotivist, who is committed to the view that moral arguments can bypass reason.

But the emotivist should not accept this conclusion too readily. Although propaganda is something of which people often disapprove, to *call* something propaganda is not, *ipso facto*, to express an all-things-considered negative judgement. A competent language user can quite sensibly claim that a case of persuasion is propaganda, but regard it as an all-things-considered good thing. Inasmuch as the emotivist aims to retain the neutral stance of the anatomist, she should not advance an analysis at odds with this piece of common sense. More worryingly, if the Stevensonian moral scientist is committed to denying that there is any descriptive distinction between propaganda and moral persuasion, this figures her analysis as one which is *revisionary* at the level of first-order ethics. To many, propaganda is something of which we disapprove (when we disapprove of it) *because* of its distinctive descriptive features, and so to deny that there is any descriptive difference between propaganda and moral persuasion threatens to cast all persuasion as equally illegitimate.

So the Stevensonian should be relieved if there is, after all, a descriptive distinction to be found between propaganda and persuasion – even if it is not the one upon which theorists of propaganda have hitherto focused. In the penultimate section of this paper, we sketched a distinction in this domain, a distinction between attempts to instill new moral attitudes in others which do, and those that do not, address the attitudes the audience already had. And we

suggested that such an account of propaganda may bear the moral weight so often placed upon the concept – that it is apt to do service in the formulation of commonly-endorsed procedural norms governing persuasion. Whether this is so – whether ours is the distinction which ordinary moral language users are tracking when they condemn the blandishments of Richard and his ilk as base propaganda – and thus whether Stevensonian emotivist can avoid the revisionary implications that we have sketched – must remain a matter for empirical investigation. If our solution fails on the battleground of evidence, then back to the thorny problem of distinction our Stevensonian friends must march, hand in hand to hell.

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