

Introduction to Ethical Theories

Ethics, or moral philosophy, primarily deals with human actions and human agents.

Such a consideration is divided into two main parts:

A. Normative Ethics

A rational consideration which attempts to justify why any given action is called “right” and why any given thing is “good”. It can be considered as an attempt to find some criteria by which we can give a rational account of what determines the “rightness” of an action and the “goodness” of a thing.

Thus, it is the rational attempt of providing an account of why we attribute value judgements to actions and things.

B. Meta-ethics (“meta” is the Greek word for “beyond”)

As the name indicates, this is a study which “goes beyond” the study of Normative ethics. It is primarily an analysis of the “meaning” and “character” of moral terms and a justification of our use of different moral terms.

In Meta-ethics, the philosopher is not interested in offering any set of norms for practical living, but rather is deeply interested in the meaning of the terms used in Normative ethics; for example, does “rightness” refer to a property in the world, or is it just a feeling or emotional reaction?

Principal theories in Normative Ethics:

A. Teleological An ethical judgement is made only if a certain effect is produced.
Thus, the whole criterion of a moral act is on the effect.

1. Egoistical—the result produced only affects the agent

e.g. F. Nietzsche

Epicurus

T. Hobbes

--e.g. “An action is right only if it affects my own personal well-being.”

2. Utilitarian--the result produced affects the greatest number of persons.

e.g. J. Bentham

J. S. Mill

--e.g. “One ought to do only which will produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.”

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- B. Deontological An ethical judgement is made on grounds other than just the effect produced.
(Thus, a deontological system denies what the teleological system affirms.)
1. Mixed system--a moral judgement is made in terms of consequences and also something else--usually "motive".
e.g. Aristotle
 2. Formalist--a moral judgement is made only in terms of the motive or intention of the agent.
e.g. I. Kant --e.g. "Moral worth is determined only if the respect for the moral law is intended by the agent."
Stoics
 3. Deed
Pro-Life Position; Pacifist
The deed itself is either right or wrong.

The following considerations of meta-ethics primarily refer to the nature of moral terms--i.e., Do moral terms refer to an objective reality in the world, if so, what is it; if there is no objective referent, then how do we account for ethical terms.

I. Cognitive theories:

Ethical terms do in fact refer to some type of objective fact in the world.

A. Naturalism

Ethical terms refer to some "natural, empirical" property of the world.

e.g. J.S. Mill Rightness is defined in terms of pleasure.

Thus, if Mill is correct, then in order to find out what is right, we discover what is pleasurable.

Pleasure is a natural, empirically verifiable property which everyone can experience. Thus, at least in theory, these natural properties could be measured or be determined by some type of scientific, empirical, synthetic process.

But, does rightness mean the same thing as we mean by pleasure, or any other natural property. The crucial problem is that there does not seem to be any one singular natural property which can be identified with "rightness". Thus it seems impossible to define what we mean by rightness in terms of a natural property alone.

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B. Intuitionism (Absolutism)

Ethical properties do not refer to natural properties of the world, but rather to non-natural properties, which properties are known by direct intuition or by reflective intuition.

e.g. G. E. Moore, W. D. Ross

The point of this type of theory is that the notion of rightness or the notion of goodness does not seem to be exhausted by any one natural property. The intuitionists thought that if they could consider goodness to be a “non-natural” property, then they could circumvent the problems of naturalism and yet still have an objective foundation for ethics.

These problems of naturalism forced people into intuitionism; these non-natural properties were known by intuition and not by direct empirical verification, as the naturalist would claim.

Yet, there is a crucial problem here in that this type of theory seems to immediately rule out any type of ethical disagreement and argumentation. What if a person tries as hard as he can to “intuit” this non-natural property and just doesn’t and another person says it is there--how can one person be correct and another incorrect when there is no obvious method of verification other than “intuition”. The intuitionists themselves were quite sparse in their positive writings in claiming how intuition occurs.

II. Non-cognitive theories

Ethical terms do not have any objective foundation whatsoever, but rather depend on the subjective responses of the agent.

Emotivism

Emotivism is a non-cognitive theory which attempts to come to terms with the verification theory of meaning. Ethical statements are neither analytic a priori nor synthetic a posteriori, yet they do seem to have some type of meaning. The emotivists claim that the only meaning that ethical terms have is what they call “emotive meaning” --i.e., the ethical terms mean just the expression of our emotional responses to any given moral situation. There is no such thing as an objective moral property--rather moral terms are just the actual expression of our emotions when we come in contact with any given ethical situation.

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e.g. A.J. Ayer--moral judgements are just expressions of emotions

R. Carnap--moral judgements are commands

C.L. Stevenson--moral judgements are used to express the speaker's attitudes as well as to evoke a similar attitude in others.

R.M. Hare--moral judgements are recommendations and prescriptions made to others (thus, "prescriptivism")

Summary of three positions:

There is a gradual progression from naturalism to intuitionism to emotivism.

- a. Naturalism had great problems trying to account for the one property which is always equated with goodness.
- b. Intuitionism followed directly from naturalism. If a natural property could not be found, then maybe there is a non-natural property which exists in some manner in the world and which is known by means of either direct or reflexive intuition. Thus intuitionists, in theory, saved the objective character of moral terms which was a favorable part of naturalism but did away with the problems of naturalism. However, the crucial problem is with verification--if there is no verification, then how can anyone ever be sure that there is such a thing as a non-natural property. This lack of verification leads directly to emotivism.
- c. With the advent of the verification theory of meaning, one immediately questioned the true meaningfulness of any term which could not be scientifically tested; such was the fate of the "non-natural properties". Thus the emotivists, equally impressed with the arguments against naturalism, denied the objective referent for moral terms--thus moral terms are just the expression of emotions, expressing commands, prescribing advice, etc.