

Meta-ethics: Descriptivism, Emotivism & Prescriptivism

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Abstract

Here, we will discuss about some theories of meta-ethics. Meta-ethics the branch of philosophy discusses about many moral terms. It focuses on the nature of moral terms. Here the meaning of moral terms are descriptive or imperative or emotive in nature. The differences are presented by many philosophers as like Warnock, Moore, Searle, Ross and so on. They all contributed in many ways by theorizing.

Keywords: Meta-ethics; Descriptivism; Emotivism; Prescriptivism.

1. Introduction

Met ethics is a branch of analytic philosophy that explores the status, foundations, and scope of moral values, properties, and words. Whereas the fields of applied ethics and normative theory focus on what is moral, met ethics focuses on what morality itself is. Just as two people may disagree about the ethics of, for example, physician-assisted suicide, while nonetheless agreeing at the more abstract level of a general normative theory such as Utilitarianism, so too many people who disagree at the level of a general normative theory nonetheless agree about the fundamental existence and status of morality itself, or vice versa. In this way, met ethics may be thought of as a highly abstract way of thinking philosophically about morality. For this reason, met ethics is also occasionally referred to as “second-order” moral theorizing, to distinguish it from the “first-order” level of normative theory.

Meta-ethics is the branch of ethics that seeks to understand the nature of ethical properties, statements, attitudes, and judgments. Meta-ethics is one of the three branches of ethics generally studied by philosophers, the others being normative ethics and applied ethics.

While normative ethics addresses such questions as "What should I do?", evaluating specific practices and principles of action, meta-ethics addresses questions such as "What is goodness?" and "How can we tell what is good from what is bad?", seeking to understand the nature of ethical properties and evaluations.

Some theorists argue that a metaphysical account of morality is necessary for the proper evaluation of actual moral theories and for making practical moral decisions; others reason from opposite premises and suggest that studying moral judgments about proper actions can guide us to a true account of the nature of morality.

1.1 Meta-Ethical Questions

According to Richard Garner and Bernard Rosen, there are three kinds of meta-ethical problems, or three general questions:

What is the meaning of moral terms or judgments? (moral semantics)

What is the nature of moral judgments? (moral ontology)

How may moral judgments be supported or defended? (Moral epistemology)

2. Descriptivism

2.1 Origin of Traditions

One of the topics discussed in contemporary ethics is that there is a lot of moral propositions which are descriptive. In this case, the discussion begins with regard to the evaluation of the rational or incidental. Many

of the contemporary philosophers also see the relationship between these two things. These two things cannot be separated from each other. GJ Warnock made the first statement. Apart from this, more proverbs are Philippa Foot, P.T. Grach and many more

2.2 What is Naturalism?

In philosophy, naturalism is the "idea or belief that only natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces operate in the world." Adherents of naturalism (i.e., naturalists) assert that natural laws are the rules that govern the structure and behavior of the natural universe, that the changing universe at every stage is a product of these laws. According to counseling, the moral sentence provides advice, advice.

2.3 Descriptivism

Generally, this is the doctrine that the meanings of ethical or aesthetic terms and statements are purely descriptive rather than prescriptive, evaluative, or emotive. This doctrine pushes moral theories into a positive approach. This word came from Descriptive, which means ability of description. This doctrine has been reacted the prescriptivism. R.M. Hare firstly said about prescriptivism. According to him, the evaluative meaning of moral terms is dependent on its imperative characteristics. According to descriptivism, origin of value is from the description. It is similar with the form of naturalism. Therefore, they also termed this tradition as neo-naturalism.

3. Characteristics of Descriptivism

The proposers of this view consider the two things in common.

1. Although the Is statements are different from ought statement. There are relations between them.
2. Moral assumptions are not an independent from choice in any way.

3.1 Descriptive Theme

1. Descriptive meaning of a moral proposition and the evaluative meaning cannot be logically separated.

Example:

"A struck B with a stick and B was injured."

According to the tradition, there is a relation between the injuries that have been hut and the wrong of A.

Thus, here it is proved that the evaluative meaning of moral terms is derived from descriptive words.

4. J R Searle's Discussion

John Rogers Searle was born in America on July 31, 1932. He contributed to Philosophy of language, Philosophy of mind, Social Philosophy etc. Professor J.R. Searle, in an article called, "How to Derive "Ought" from "Is" which was published in the Philosophical Review described attempt to derive "Ought" from "Is".

4.1 Ought from Is

The problem between the two things is and ought is important in the subject. Many people of non-naturalism have acknowledged this fact. Hume first discussed this topic in his book "A Treatise of Human Nature". He also like others accepted that it is impossible to go Is statement to Ought statement.

According to Searle, it is possible to go from IS to Ought. But it is proof that Searle tried to reach an indictable sentence from an informational sentence in his How to Drive "Ought" from "Is".

4.2 Facts (events)

He divided the Fact into two types.

- a) Institutional Facts
- b) Brute Facts

4.3 Institutional Facts & Brute Facts

Institutional facts are limited to our structural or regulation. Brute facts are natural issues

Let's give an example,

Chess is a kind of systematic behavior. The rules of the game are Institutional Facts. And the rules of this game come out of the way that makes these institutional facts more possible. These are the organizational rules from Brute Facts.

4.4 Moral Propositions

Searle likewise said that moral sentences are created in such a way. We see the Brute Facts of the moral sentence, which creates feelings within us. Moral compulsions are created under the influence of institutional facts.

In this way he has shown in phases in such a way,

Jones uttered the words, "I hereby promise you to pay you, Smith five dollars."

Jones promised to pay Smith five dollars.

Jones placed himself under an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.

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Jones is under an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.

Jones ought to pay Smith five dollars.

Premise 1, starts with brute fact and invokes institution of promising to generate institutional fact. Premise 2 embodies the constitutive rule of the institution of promising, that to make a promise to undertake an obligation. Premises 3 and 4 are simply tautologies, resting on ordinary usage of the words “obligation” and “ought”.

He has given the statement number 1 in Brute Fact.2. Which is the same as that of the negative 3,4,5. And the same statement has been made. In this way additional statements are made. In this way, gradually go from star to light. Thus institutional facts come from Brute facts.

In this way, he thinks that in the case of morality, the obligation, commitment, responsibility, the same is the Institutional Facts. Coming from Brute Facts. By the example of the promise, he says, we promise his anguish and perform his duties responsibly. According to him, Institutional Facts is made from Brute Facts. We create critical events due to the constant events. This is how we get out of the boat.

4.5. Criticism

- a) R.M Hare compiled the book in his book "How to Derive" Ought "From" Is ". He said that Searle's description has created uncertainty. Because, for example, he gave an example of coming to Ought from IS, there should be a sudden, the matter has come. But according Logic of Tautology it is fallacy.
- b) He explained about going to ought statement to Is statement, but there is no philosophical problems been discussed.
- c) His example of promise is probable, it is not always certain.

5. Warnock's Descriptivism

Sir Geoffrey James Warnock (16 August 1923 – 8 October 1995) was a philosopher and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University. Before his knighthood (in the 1986 New Year Honors), he was commonly known as G. J. Warnock.

His famous works are -Contemporary Moral Philosophy, The Object of Morality

5.1 Response to Hare's Prescriptivism

His remarkable origins were as a reaction to the prescriptivism of Hare. Hare is a contemporary philosopher. He speaks of the universalizability of moral terms. He acknowledged the prescriptive characteristics of the moral sentence. And at the same time acknowledged the rational relation of the moral discourses. According to Warnock, moral doctrine has become formless here. Here's what Hare didn't said from the basics of which elements morality originally formed. Ethical knowledge is based on some material characteristics, and these elements have been formed based on different needs. Various needs of us, such as responsibilities,

expectations, remorse.

5.2 Human Needs

According to him, human ethics needs to be analyzed. According to human needs, humanitarian needs are the subject of morality. These are related to practical life. That is why human morality should be explained on the basis of human needs. Humanitarian needs are the prerequisites of morality.

5.3 Social Needs

we live in the society. We are social creatures. The foundation of our moral is the needs of the society. Ethics is based on our social needs. These needs of our society are the prerequisites of morality.

5.4 Changes in Morality and Change in Human and Social Needs

I have already mentioned that the material of morality is human and social needs. We call it because of human demand, it should be fair. It is right, that is not right. We make ethical rules based on social needs. All of us moral rules This is the social demand based on the known things. When moral changes are changed, moral rules change. It changes morality.

5.5 Ethics should be examined in Terms of Reality

we talk about ethics. We talk about moral rules. Hearer of universality of morality. But these moral rules have to be based on real need. Periodic basis cannot be in the case of moral rules.

5.6 His View doesn't have the Naturalistic Fallacy

while discussing the idea of Moore's good, he has talked about the naturalistic fallacy. Warnock's view doesn't have naturalistic fallacy.

5.7 His Doctrine Does Not Deny the Distinction between IS and Ought

Searle has shown in his narrative, how to go from Is to ought. According to his Warnock, he does not deny the distinction between the IS and the ought, because he decides the moral judgment of the information. But that does not mean that the moral decisions are factual. They are valuation.

6. Emotivism

Emotivism is a meta-ethical view that claims that ethical sentences do not express propositions but emotional attitudes. Hence, it is colloquially known as the hurrah/boo theory. Influenced by the growth of analytic philosophy and logical positivism in the 20th century, the theory was stated vividly by A. J. Ayer in his 1936 book *Language, Truth and Logic*, but its development owes more to C. L. Stevenson.

In the 1950s, emotivism appeared in a modified form in the universal prescriptivism of R. M. Hare. Emotivism can be considered a form of non-cognitivism or expressivist. It stands in opposition to other forms of non-cognitivism (such as quasi-realism and universal prescriptivism), as well as to all forms of cognitivism (including both moral realism and ethical subjectivism).

6.1 History of Emotivism

Emotivism reached prominence in the early 20th century, but it was born centuries earlier. In 1710, George Berkeley wrote that language in general often serves to inspire feelings as well as communicate ideas. Decades later, David Hume espoused ideas similar to Stevenson's later ones. In his 1751 book *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume considered morality not to be related to fact but "determined by sentiment". The seed of emotivism was latent in Hume's philosophy.

He made the distance between IS statement and ought statement. He Define this term as non-transgression distance. He also said that it is not possible to go to ought statement from is statement. Many of recent emotivism accepted his view. Thus we can we say that the seed of emotivism was latent in Hume's philosophy. Moore explained his view against naturalistic fallacy and said that moral judgments are not verifiable naturally.

Wittgenstein also avoided the moral discourses are meaningless and cannot be expressed in language.

7. Ayer and his Emotive Theory

Sir Alfred Jules "Freddie" Ayer FBA (29 October 1910 – 27 June 1989), usually cited as A. J. Ayer, was a British philosopher known for his promotion of logical positivism, particularly in his books *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936) and *The Problem of Knowledge* (1956).

His popular *Language Truth and Logic* for expressing emotive theory. He considered moral theories as pure emotive theory.

The emotivism espoused by Ayer in *Language Truth and Logic* was supported by his belief in the distinction between fact and value. Given, he thought, that there were no moral facts to be known, there could be no verification of such facts, and so moral utterances could have no cognitive significance. And given the connection between moral 'judgment' and motivation, and the connection between motivation and feeling, it was natural to see moral utterances as having the function of expressing our feelings, or 'emoting'. This view, Ayer was careful to point out, was not that associated with subjectivism, that in making moral claims we are describing our feelings. This latter view would make moral claims truth-evaluable, and Ayer's moral emotivism denied that they were so evaluable. So when we say: "Cruelty towards children is wrong" we are really expressing a negative attitude towards killing children, and when we say "Being kind to old people is good" we are expressing positive feelings towards such acts of kindness. The expression of such positive or negative feelings, he later thought, also contained a prescriptive element, so in such expressions we are also encouraging others to share those feelings, and to act accordingly. As this makes clear, the attitudes expressed were towards classes of acts, and not particular acts.

7.1 analytic and synthetic statements

Analytic sentences are true by definition, and are generally self-explanatory. Additionally, they often have little to no informative value. Examples of analytic sentences include:

- Frozen water is ice.
- Bachelors are unmarried men.
- Two halves make up a whole.

No additional meaning or knowledge is contained in the predicate that is not already given in the subject. Analytic sentences are redundant statements whose clarification relies entirely on definition. Analytic sentences tell us about logic and about language use. They do not give meaningful information about the world.

Synthetic statements, on the other hand, are based on our sensory data and experience. The truth-value of a synthetic statements cannot be figured out based solely on logic. If one had had no sensory input from the world, then studying the statement would not yield the meaning of the sentence, as it would for an analytic sentence. Examples of synthetic sentences are:

- Children wear hats.
- The table in the kitchen is round.
- My computer is on.

Synthetic sentences are descriptions of the world that cannot be taken for granted. Sentences that are possibly true but not necessarily true are synthetic.

8. Characteristics of Ayer's View

8.1. Emotions are related with the Moral Sentences Are Moral Propositions

If I say a person who he's a thief you didn't do well thing by snatching the bag, here exact information of my speech is you snatched the bag. There is nothing more information in this sentence and there is nothing expressed in this sentence meaningful for the lack of practical appliance. This reminds that the moral judgments are not meaningful. All the moral judgments are relatively emotive.

8.2. The Theory of Ayer Is Different From Subjective Theory

Basically, he tried to understand that the moral sentences are basically emotive. The sentences they are fully meaningless he doesn't mean on subjective viewpoint it's also about other things. He expressed about whole.

8.3. *The Aim of Making Moral Sentences Is Not Making Emotions*

“The person who does stealing, I am feared about them”

“Stealing is not good”

In the first sentence, there expressed information and emotion. But in the second sentence, only emotion is expressed. The difference means that. Moral propositions are descriptive also. Moral discourse doesn't have the aim of making emotions.

8.4. *The Moral Propositions Are Sentences Cannot Be Justified Empirically*

All the moral sentences cannot be true or false. The sentences which are not true or false they cannot be described as meaningful sentences. They are basically descriptive. But the moral sentences are not possible to be justified. He said about it in his book *Language truth and logic*.

8.5. *The Epistemology of Ayer Is Not That Compulsory In His Theory Of Emotivism*

If anyone accepts the epistemology of him, is not inevitable for his emotivism. His epistemology is not complete for expressing emotivism.

9. Criticisms of his View

1. moral sentences are not logical, it's not right. We have to know about formal logic.
2. All moral judgments are emotive, it is not right, the advice of teachers, parents are not emotive.
3. His problems are all about value thus he ignored the importance of value.
4. He said about the choice of person only in moral judgments, but moral judgments are made while thinking about others.

10. Stevenson and his Emotive Theory

Charles Leslie Stevenson (June 27, 1908 – March 14, 1979) was an American analytic philosopher best known for his work in ethics and aesthetics.

Stevenson's work has been seen both as an elaboration upon A.J. Ayer's views and as a representation of one of "two broad types of ethical emotivism." An analytic philosopher, Stevenson suggested in his 1937 essay "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms" that any ethical theory should explain three things: that intelligent disagreement can occur over moral questions, that moral terms like good are "magnetic" in encouraging action, and that the scientific method is insufficient for verifying moral claims. Stevenson's own theory was fully developed in his 1944 book *Ethics and Language*.

In the year of 1937 a journal named “Mind”, he expressed his moral theory in the heading of the emotive meaning of ethical terms. In the year of 1938 in the same Journal he expressed his another theory Persuasive Definition .He expressed more about his emotive Theory or emotivism theory in the book Ethics and Logic in the year of 1944.

His view is often considered as Modified or qualified emotivism.

9.1 Three Main Characteristics of His View

1. Meaning and form of moral terms: emotive and descriptive character.
2. Form of moral conflict: difference between belief and attitude.
3. Form and act of moral judgment.

9.1.1 He accepted the emotive character and also the descriptive character of moral terms

Ayer only accepted emotive character. Stevenson gave priority on emotive character.

9.1.2 He explained difference between Emotive and Descriptive Character

According to him, making emotion within a sentence is the main aim of emotive character.

Expressing information means descriptive character.

9.1.3 Dynamic Character of Moral Discourse

Moral language is dynamic and every moral sentences have affection or attraction. Moral language expresses the attitude. We express an attitude for the belief of something. Then it will be considered as descriptive. If we give an example as like killing is great sin then we want to express that I don't want to kill anyone and that is the descriptive form and killing is a good thing rating is the great sin is emotive. Here the sentence makes the belief hearing person.

9.1.4 Different kinds of terms and explanations of them by Stevenson

There are many moral terms as like good right ought duty. First he explain the good. He also considered good as indefinable as like moor. He considered that the term good has more emotive meaning but also it has the descriptive meaning. Gold can be considered as the greatest customs. Just like this he also considered right or ought or Duty has also the descriptive meaning.

9.2. Form of Moral Conflict: Difference between Belief and Attitude.

9.2.1 Disagreement in belief and disagreement in attitude

He considered that there are two kinds of conflicts in moral sentences. Ayer doesn't believe in conflicts in moral sentences. These two kinds of conflicts are disagreement in belief and disagreement in Attitude. If we can find that there are differences between the beliefs in two persons about the same thing then we can find the disagreement in belief. We can give an example and example is like that, Family Planning is not moral in religion and Family Planning is good for the people said by the government. If there are two kinds of attitude in two persons or are many persons about. One thing then we can find the disagreement in attitude. That means one person can support one thing but another person cannot support that thing for some reasons. I would like two person have the same notion to remove the corruption but the two person wants to remove that corruption in different ways. Thus we can find a disagreement in Attitude.

9.2.2 He Gave Priority in Disagreement in Attitude

Stevenson can explain the disagreement in Attitude within the method of persuasive method. The nature of ethical disagreement was an article where he explained the attitude. The disagreement of belief can be removed from the logical system. If we think about that by some advice parents are teachers they are persuasive method.

9.2.3 Possibilities of Dependence of Emotive Upon the Descriptive

- a) Emotive meaning may be dependent on descriptive
- b) Emotive meaning may be quasi-dependent on descriptive
- c) Emotive meaning may be independent on degrees.

9.3. Form and Act of Moral Judgment.

He explained to kind of important parts of the moral judgments. First of all is descriptive and second is emotive. Though he gave priority only emotive judgments but accepted the descriptive also said that there is no moral judgments are possible without descriptive meaning. According to Stevenson basic elements of moral judgment are emotive. We are going to give example:

This work is good

There are two kinds of meanings of this sentence descriptive meaning or information in this sentence and the another meaning is, you should work through this way. Second meaning is emotive and first meaning is descriptive.

He also considered that there are differences between imperative sentences and moral judgments. Imperative sentences are direct order of some things but moral judgments are not indirect. According to Ayer there is no true or false in the moral judgments but Stevenson accepted that is logical moral judgment.

11. Criticisms of Stevenson's view

This view makes the moral judgments as Abomination. Attitude shouldn't get priority in Moral judgments.

- a) He didn't give clear idea about solving moral conflict.
- b) He said about choice in moral judgments, but choice cannot be the process of moral judgments. We express moral judgments by thinking that are they applicable for others.

12. Conclusion

Thus we can know about some main philosophers of the field of meta-ethics. Here the descriptivism, prescriptivism, emotivism all are influenced by each other. All are originated through the reaction of each other. The analytic philosopher G.E. Moore expressed his non-naturalism in his book. There the origin of meta-ethics started and many philosopher contributed in this field after him.

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