

## REVIEW OF ETHICAL NATURALISM AS A FORM OF COGNITIVISM AND REALISM

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Ethical Naturalism is a form of a meta-ethical theory which connects ethical judgements with empirically verifiable natural factors. This makes naturalism a cognitive theory because verifiability confirms the truth/falsity. The relation of moral language to natural /empirical factors has been variously interpreted by the naturalist philosophers. Naturalism in Ethics may mean either of the following: Ethical terms may be *defined* or analysed in terms of natural facts and properties; Ethical terms denoting ethical properties are *constituted* of natural properties; Ethical properties are *dependent* on natural properties; Ethical properties are *identical* with natural properties *but cannot be defined* in terms of them, i.e. they do not have an identity in meaning. Ethical Naturalism is an interpretation of ethical language which refers to two things - firstly, that the ethical judgement expresses a knowledge by way of empirical verification; secondly, that the judgement contains ethical terms which may refer to something real or existent and is therefore verifiable. The former has an epistemological flavour while the latter a metaphysical flavour of naturalism. However, it is not that cognitivism and realism confirm one another, because a known thing can be real or unreal, again a real object may be either known or unknown. Let us, therefore, consider to what extent can an ethical naturalist theory fulfil the demands of cognitivism and realism.

In this contribution, an attempt has been made to confine myself only to the first meaning of naturalism which says that ethical judgements constitute ethical terms definable in factual terms. Hence, there is a semantic identity of moral and non-moral terms. This makes the ethical terms substitutable by factual terms. Hence, an ethical judgement may be reduced to a factual judgement which is verifiable to be true or false. The factual terms refer to natural facts of the world which are real. However, the theory does not refer to moral facts corresponding to moral terms which are real. The moral terms have their correspondence with the real world only through the factual terms which define them.

Let us examine some concrete theories of naturalism. The theories of naturalism have both subjective as well as objective factors constituting the definiens of normative terms. They may thus be classified as subjective naturalism and

objective naturalism. Those naturalists who define moral terms by subjective facts like individual feelings, attitudes, interests, desires etc. are subjective naturalists, whereas those who define them by objective facts like natural tendencies or capacities in objects are objective naturalists. Subjective naturalism declares that an ethical term in an ethical judgement may be defined in terms of feelings or emotions of an individual or a group of individuals. There are several possibilities in this regard:

- a) X is good = interest is taken in X by S (individual subjective naturalism),
- b) X is good = interest is taken in X by the members of group G (general subjective naturalism),
- c) X is good = interest is taken in X by someone i.e. anyone (Perry's interest theory of naturalism).

#### **Individual Subjective Naturalism:**

If the judgement 'X is good' or 'A is right' is identical in meaning with some proposition which expresses the attitude or feeling of one particular person, then the theory is individualistic. This is because the crucial term 'good', 'right' etc. is defined with reference to one and only one person. In this case, however, it will also be possible to distinguish the individual as 'first-person' from 'third person'. According to 'first-person' views, when we say "X is good", we mean that we have a particular feeling or emotion about X; according to 'third person' theories, a statement "X is good" means that some other person has such an emotion.

First-person theories lead us to some peculiar consequences. Firstly, it follows from such a theory that there are no disagreements about what is good. Two contradictory statements "X is good" and "X is not good" are not contradictory when uttered by two different persons or the same person at different times. They express two compatible facts – one person likes X and the other does not, or the same person likes X at one moment and does not like it at some other moment. Each of us when asserting an action to be right or wrong is merely asserting our feelings. Hence, they can never be contradictory; neither is there any scope for moral disagreement. Secondly, first-person theories state that proof of any moral judgement is constituted of only whether the particular person making the judgement does have the feeling or attitude. A. C. Ewing in his book '*Ethics*' (New York, The Free Press, 1965) offers severe criticism against this view. He says that if such a definition is correct, it follows that a man can never be wrong in ethical judgement unless he has made a mistake about his psychology. Again two people will never mean the same thing

despite commenting the same i.e. 'good' or 'bad' on any object say 'X'; they will simply be expressing their approvals or disapprovals. Finally, if a person condemns another person or an act, it won't be actually about the person or the act referred to, but will only be expressing the speaker's feelings.

Third-person theories hold that "X is good" means "S likes/approves/has a favourable attitude towards X. "This theory can avoid relativism because a third person's feeling is referred to here; it is not conditioned by the speaker's individual feelings. Again, there can be genuine moral disagreement in this context when two persons differ about the feelings of the particular individual 'S'. Despite this, the theory is not without its difficulties. It might be questioned that how can the third person designated as 'S' be specified? If it is any person chosen at random, then there is no reason why there could not be any other 'S' instead. If the 'S' is specified as God, it makes the theory a non-naturalistic one in the sense of being not empirically verifiable. If 'S' means a sovereign ruler, then people who wish to mean 'the Queen of England' by 'S' will not be satisfied.

**General Subjective Naturalism:**

Subjective naturalism may be of a general form in which moral judgements are defined in terms of feelings or emotion of a certain group of people. In such a case, the question might arise as to how is the particular group selected. Even if all members of a certain group agree on the fact that the meaning of "X is good" will be "We approve of X", it is quite possible that people outside the group might consider it a mere stipulation or reporting. They might for good reason describe it as arbitrary and hence unfair. When critically assessed, this general view seems not very different from the first-person view. By saying that "X is good" "we mean the same as "we members of group G approve of X". Now, if S who is a member of group G says "X is good", he is saying that members of group G approve of X. Again if S1 who is a member of group G1 says "X is good", he is saying that the members of group G1 approve of X. This shows that there can never be ethical disagreement between two people from different groups, because two seemingly incompatible judgements made by members of different groups are, according to this view, not incompatible. Moreover, the same person may be a member of many groups at the same time. This leads to puzzling consequences, and the view is subject to a modified and somewhat limited relativism. Now, a question arises that "How is the group chosen?" or, "

Where lies the certainty that whatever the chosen group says will be never wrong?" The argument which is most crucial in this context is: it is obvious that we ought to seek as the moral end what is intrinsically good or right just because it is good or right in itself; we ought not to seek what most people approve of just because they feel the approval of it. Therefore 'good' or 'right' cannot mean the same as 'approved by most people'.

**R.B. Perry's Interest-theory of Naturalism:**

According to Perry, an American neo-naturalist philosopher, "any object, whatever it be, acquires value when any interest, whatever it be, is taken in it; just as anything whatsoever becomes a target when anyone whosoever aims at it." (Ralph Barton Perry, *General Theory of Value*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1926). Hence, for Perry, X has value= interest is taken in X by someone, i.e., anyone. We see that Perry's subjective naturalism is much more liberal than either of the above versions. Whatever is an object of a person's interest becomes an object of value. The deeper the interest, the more valuable is the object; and the greater the number of individuals expressing an interest in the object, the greater its value. Objects increase in value concomitantly as interest is shown in them, and lose value as interest diminishes.

One objection often raised against Perry is that his theory entails relativistic consequences. If the definition he stipulated for 'good' is accepted, he is forced to accept other stipulated definitions which contradict his own because they are chosen by other philosophers. The interest-theory of value is troublesome because it is open to serious counter-examples. Some people find interest in murder, revenge, rape, cruelty, hate, war, death etc., so they are instances of 'good'. But such a view is unacceptable. Ewing in *Ethics* objected to this theory arguing that if good=desired and better = desired more, then in reality what is desired more should be more good. But this is not always the case. We may desire more about the welfare of our near and dear ones than that of people of whom we read in the newspaper. But this does not make the former case better than the latter. One of the severest critiques of Perry's Naturalism is that Perry is not very reasonable in identifying goodness with interest, because interest does not necessarily make a thing good. Feeling of interest is important for a thing to be good, but it does not have sufficient features to be equated with it.

### **Subjective Naturalism as a Form of Cognitivism:**

All the above versions of subjective naturalism refer to certain feelings/emotions of individuals or individual groups in defining value terms. We have analysed all the possible problems in dealing with subjective factors. Now, the question is whether the definition of moral terms in evaluative judgements by such subjective factors can generate moral knowledge or not. It is interesting to note at this point that though there are subjective factors in the definiens, the presence or absence of those facts makes the definition true or false, hence giving the moral judgement a cognitive value. There may be a problem with the definition itself, but if the definition is accepted and is considered as means of doing naturalism, the theory makes ethical judgements empirically verifiable as is the case in any scientific knowledge.

Here there are two aspects we are dealing with - the satisfiability of subjective naturalism in terms of its definition, and the success of the subjective naturalist theory as contributing to ethical knowledge. As seen in the individual first-person and third-person theories, the definition of a moral term 'good' in "X is good" is either in terms of the individual subject's feeling or the feeling of the group to which the subject belongs. Hence the meaning of the judgement has reference to the individual moral agent who passes the judgement, and the knowledge of the statement 'X is good' is concerning the individual who utters it. A piece of knowledge is justified to be objectively true or false with respect to its correspondence with reality. For example- on seeing a green tree if a person says, "The tree is green", he has true knowledge, whereas if he sees it with a jaundiced-eye and utters, "The tree is yellow", he has false knowledge. According to subjective naturalist theories, a person knows "X is good" when he has certain interest or feelings for it. The judgement is tested to be true or false, i.e. the statement "X is good" is tested to be true or false if he has the requisite feelings. This involves circularity. If the subject does not have the feeling, he does not utter it to be 'good', but the utterance 'good' is justified with reference to the presence/absence of feelings. Such knowledge, therefore, will be subject-related. I shall here prefer to call such knowledge not objective at all, rather, not knowledge at all.

**Objective Naturalism:**

Objective naturalism is a theory which claims that moral judgements are definable by factual judgements which refer to certain objective facts instead of appealing to the feelings of individuals or groups. Edward Westermarck, a Darwinian philosopher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century considered that moral terms are to be defined by natural tendencies in objects causing an agent to approve or disapprove of it. If the object tends to cause approval in the subject, he judges it to be 'good' and if it causes disapproval, he calls it 'bad'. (Edward Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity*, New York, Brace & World, 1932). These tendencies are inbuilt in the nature of an object and hence are objective. According to this view my saying "X is right"="X tends to cause me to approve of it". X may have a tendency to cause me to approve of it, but I do not approve of it, or I am not acquainted with X. Hence we see that the tendency may be there in an object to cause its approval by a subject, but the subject fails to do so, i.e. the tendency in the object is irrespective of the subject. This makes it an objective theory of naturalism. Westermarck says, "The doing of what ought not to be done, or the omission of what ought not to be omitted, is apt to call forth moral indignation – this is the most essential fact involved in the notion of 'ought'."(Edward Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, Vol. I, London, Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1906,). 'Ought' and 'duty' express the tendency of omitting the possibility of disapproval. It does not say anything about the consequences of the performance. The tendency in a phenomenon to arouse moral disapproval is expressed by the term 'bad' or 'wrong'. The truth/falsity of moral judgements is a function of whether or not there is this tendency. He says: "It is, of course, true that we in a given moment have a certain emotion; but in no other sense can the antithesis of true and false be applied to it."(Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity*).

Westermarck's theory may seem to be a non-cognitivist one. This is because at some point of his philosophy Westermarck had commented that all attempts of the moral philosophers, common-sense theorists to prove the objective validity of moral judgements have failed because the predicates of moral judgements are ultimately based on emotion. Since no objectivity can come from an emotion, so the moral judgements do not have objective validity and hence are non-cognitive in nature. Though Westermarck advocates the theory of the emotional origin of moral judgements, he does not mean that moral judgements imply the existence of moral

emotion in the mind of the speaker. What he intends to assert is that there is a tendency in the object to arouse the feeling of approval or disapproval in the subject upon the presentation of the object, and such tendency is a natural one irrespective of the actual feeling of approval/disapproval? Hence, this is an objective tendency view of naturalism.

Westermarck's view is not free from criticism. It is practically not conceivable that we judge a thing to be good because the thing tends to cause me to approve of it. After all, when we judge it as 'good', we do not justify the judgement by the object's causing the speaker to approve of it. Rather, it is because the thing is good that the subject approves of it. The goodness/badness of a thing is something intrinsic to the nature of the object; it cannot be contained in its approval/disapproval. Again, the same object may tend to arouse approval in one subject and disapproval in another. This makes the same object both 'good' and 'bad'. But if the tendency is objective, it cannot vary with the subject. Finally, it is as if we cannot judge a thing to be 'good' or 'bad' if we are not affected to have approval or disapproval of it. This is also not quite acceptable.

**Tendency View as a Cognitive Theory:**

Can the tendency view of naturalism be considered a cognitive theory? When an ethical judgement is empirically verifiable, it is cognisable. According to the tendency view, an ethical judgement is verifiable as true or false if the object on which the judgement is passed does/does not tend to cause approval/disapproval. Now, when a moral judgement is passed on an object, it is a mark of its approval/disapproval, i.e. if the subject marks it 'good', he approves of it, whereas if he calls it 'bad', he disapproves of it. This shows that the object must have caused the subject to have such feeling of approval/disapproval, for which he makes such comments as 'X is good' or 'X is bad'. The object's causing the approval must be due to the tendency inherent in it. Thus the tendency view asserts the presence of tendency in an object which is verifiable the moment we evaluate the object. The verifiable factor is such that there is no chance of its being false since it is there in an evaluated object irrespective of its actualisation. Hence, the utterance of moral judgement is just enough to make it a piece of knowledge. Cases where the object does not have the tendency are cases where no evaluative judgement is passed on it.

In this sense can the objective tendency view of naturalism be considered a version of cognitivism.

**Spencer's Evolutionary Naturalism:**

One of the objectivistic naturalist views which are not a tendency view is that of Herbert Spencer. Spencer was one of the foremost proponents of evolutionary naturalism. According to him, 'good' may be defined as 'more evolved'. As stated in his famous dictum, "The conduct to which we apply the name good is the relatively more evolved conduct; and bad is the name we apply to conduct which is relatively less evolved." (Herbert Spencer, *The Data of Ethics*, London, 1879). By being 'more evolved', he means 'more conducive to living'. An evolved conduct strives towards self-preservation to attain a longer and a fuller life. Hence, "...we regard as good the conduct furthering self-preservation, and as bad the conduct tending to self-destruction." Now, the surplus of enjoyment makes self-preservation desirable. An action which serves the lives of others is called a good action because it has immediate and also remote effect on all persons, that the good is universally pleasurable.

Spencer's view is directed towards a synthesis of egoism and altruism. Just as it is true that a person must seek his pleasure and preserve his own life, it is equally desirable that he does it by helping others. An individual's welfare is hampered if it fails to be altruistic. Self-happiness is gained by furthering another's happiness and general happiness is furthered by promoting self-happiness. Good conduct, therefore, produces a surplus of pleasure, and bad conduct results in a surplus of pain.

The theory gives room for moral disagreement. Two persons may disagree concerning calling a particular action good in the sense of being more conducive to living. The same action may be universally pleasure-producing to one person but may not be so to some other person. But to judge an action to be conducive to life or not and thereby to be good or not can be related to its being more evolved. A more evolved conduct implicitly refers to its advancement in time. But we see that there are throwbacks in history, thus a more evolved conduct over time may not be a more self-preservatory one. Moreover, if moral superiority is defined by being more evolved, we see that advancement in evolution is also defined by being morally superior. This involves circularity.

Spencer attempted to present the theory of evolutionary naturalism to reach utilitarianism. His prime focus was to advise for a life which is not for mere survival but is enriched in pleasurable bounties. His basic defect was laid in his assuming that life evolves for the better. We may here refer to the criticism of Spencer by Thomas E. Hill who in his book *Ethics in Theory and Practice* (New York, Crowell, 1956) points out quite rationally that with higher forms of evolution there is a rise in the level of intelligence and social organisation. This naturally creates a more complicated circumstance leading to more destructive forces and wars. The more progress in development, the more is the chance for being intelligently shrewd and cruel. Therefore, it may be said that morality does not come from development; rather development and progress depend on morality. Thus his defining of 'good' in terms of 'more evolved' is not a decisive one. Even if the definition is proper, it cannot be objectively verified whether a particular action is more evolved or not in the sense that it is self-preservatory or not as analysed by Spencer. It is important to distinguish in this context objective verification from the objective factor. The explanation given by Spencer to define 'good' refers no doubt to an objective factor but does not guarantee any objective verification for that. Hence, the definition of moral terms under evolutionary naturalism of Spencer cannot raise an evaluative judgement to the level of knowledge.

**Naturalist Theories as Forms of Realism:**

In all such cases, moral terms referring to moral properties are equated with factual terms denoting factual properties. Hence, the reality of moral properties is judged with respect to the reality of factual properties. But if such facts are behavioural, emotional, they cannot be real irrespective of the subject. Hence, the subjective naturalist theories are not to be considered as realist theories.

On the other hand, objective naturalism which equates moral terms with terms denoting objective natural facts has a claim for the existence of such facts irrespective of the subjective emotions. Hence, this version of naturalism can be considered a realist theory. As seen in Westermarck's tendency view, the object which is evaluated has a natural tendency which causes a feeling of approval/disapproval for it. This tendency being a natural constitution of the object is as much real as is the object itself. Hence, when a moral term is defined in terms of such a natural tendency, it refers to a form of realism.

As analysed in Spencer's theory, an object is good if it is more evolved. Spencer has a very specific explanation of the connotation 'being more evolved'. There may be difficulties in the definition thus suggested or maybe differences in considering whether an act or a thing has at all the specific features of being more evolved or not. But if they are present in a particular action, the action becomes good. Here also we see that an objective factor being real can be used as a mark of verification of the judgement. It is however noteworthy that, in both the forms of naturalism – subjective and objective, there is no possibility of the existence of moral property in its direct sense. Where possible, they are real only by virtue of definitional substitution of moral terms by factual terms, thereby referring to factual properties. In this sense, the realism hinted at in objective naturalism may be considered as a form of indirect realism.

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