

SEMANTIC IMPORT OF MORAL TERMS: COGNITIVISM VS. NONCOGNITIVISM

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An important discussion in the area of metaethics is about the meaning of ethical terms which in turn relates to the epistemic status of moral judgements. The purpose of this paper is to understand the specific approach towards ‘meaning’ when there is a discussion about meaning of a term; thereby investigating the claim towards epistemic import of a judgement, if at all justified. The paper seeks to interconnect the two independent philosophical approaches to ethical language and hence prove that there is no convergence or divergence strictly as to relate the meaning of an ethical term with the judgement being cognitive or non-cognitive. In this contribution and also for the sake of precision, a focus has been made on Hume’s theory as a version of naturalism along-with Ayer’s theory as a version of emotivism in order to execute the plan of action proposed. The aim is to establish that the approach in understanding the meaning of an ethical term by a naturalist and an emotivist being basically distinct and different, the claim for cognitive/non-cognitive status of an ethical judgement by both becomes irrelevant for comparison if considered on the same platform.

Meta-ethics is a philosophical discussion on the import of ethical language - be it semantic, epistemic or meta-physical. There are discussions on meaning of an ethical term ranging from naturalism to non-naturalism, emotivism, prescriptivism etc., and also discussions where philosophers concentrate on the cognitive status of an ethical judgement ranging from cognitivism to non-cognitivism, or on the ontological status of moral properties ranging from moral realism or non-realism to anti-realism. It is a conventional attitude of philosophers to identify naturalism or intuitionism as cognitivist schools, whereas emotivism, or prescriptivism as noncognitivist schools. The intention is to explore the semantic and epistemic understanding of ethical language separately and thereby try to understand whether the divisions within one approach correspond to that within another, or whether they are over-lapping divisions having based on exclusive standards.

In this contribution let us consider two specific approaches based on two different standards and thereby examine their semantic and epistemic claims in order to find out if at all they confirm to any sort of correspondence or coherence to/with the other. The first focus is the Humean theory regarding value-judgements as explicated in his famous work ‘Treatise of Human Nature’. The celebrated work is popularly interpreted as meaning there is a logical gap between ‘is-statements’ and ‘ought-statements’ and hence introducing the is-ought dichotomy in the area of metaethics. The second focus will be on the emotivist school as propounded by A. J. Ayer. In the celebrated work “Language, Truth and Logic”, Ayer makes an attempt to view ethical judgements in the eyes of Logical Positivism which he followed. In both the theories we may find claims to meaning and cognition in their own ways. My endeavour will be to highlight the difference in their basic standards for the claims, so that the two worlds are shown to be of different paradigms with different standards of interpretation which makes comparisons irrelevant.

I

David Hume in his book ‘A Treatise of Human Nature’ commented that perceptions are the only constituents of our mind. Whatever we see, feel, or do are in any way connected to our perceptions. Our mind cannot engage in any activity which is not connected to perception. Hence, when we make a distinction between good or bad, right or wrong, we are actually making judgements on the basis of perceptions. This opinion is in contrast to the view that ‘virtue is nothing but a conformity to reason’. 1 The argument which is held in favour of rational morality is that, every rational being agrees or disagrees to things in the like manner and thereby is in an obligation to do good things and abstain from bad ones due to their rationality. They hold that sense of morality is derived from idea or relations of ideas just as truth. We need to understand here how Hume has considered this matter of morality derived from reason.1

In the *Book III* Part I Section I of his book *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume has given a clear analysis of whether and how can reason help us in distinguishing moral good from evil. Morality, Hume says, is a part of Practical Philosophy as it greatly influences our passions and actions. We can very well

confirm this by our common experiences that many of our actions are done from a sense of duty or obligation towards others; many others are avoided as being unjustified. Hence we are guided by our moral sense in our activities. This also shows that our actions are not always guided by reason. Now, from the above analysis, we may say that because actions are guided by morality and not by rationality alone, it follows that morality is not connected to rationality. Our passions are instigated through morals and therefore, leads us to do or not do actions. Reason can never initiate an action on its own. The inference stands thus:

Reason alone cannot have any influence on our passions/actions.

Morality has an influence on our passions/actions.

Therefore, morality cannot be derived from reason or understanding.

The inference is based on the assumption of the principle that reason is not sufficient to influence our actions. Hume clarifies this principle and presents the relevant argument for his assuming so in the context of morality. He says that the role of reason is in the establishment of truth/falsehood. Truth/falsehood is determined by agreement/disagreement with real relations of ideas or matters of fact. Whatever cannot be conceived as agreeing/disagreeing with reality cannot be determined as true/false and is therefore not a subject of reason. In case of our passions/volitions/actions, they are original facts and realities and are therefore complete in themselves; so, there is no context of agreement/disagreement with reality, and is therefore not susceptible to be determined as true/false. Therefore the merit or demerit of an action/volition is not in accordance to its conformity/disconformity to reason, an action can be appreciable/blameable, but cannot be reasonable/unreasonable.²

After having rejected the option of morality as being a relation of ideas springing out of reason, Hume tries to examine whether it can be a matter of fact discovered by reason. If it is neither, we may conclude satisfactorily that morality is not an object of reason. Let us take the instance of a vicious action, say murder. Can we see the vice as a matter of fact? What can be found is only certain passion, motive, volition, thought, no other matter of fact as vice. Thus vice is not an objective fact which we come across. Rather, we find a sentiment or feeling of disapprobation

towards the action when we introspect ourselves. So, the vice involved in the action can be identified with this object of feeling as approval/disapproval. This feeling is surely a matter of fact; a matter of fact discoverable by emotion, sentiment and not by reason. It is present not in the object outside us, but in the feelings inside us. As Hume says, "Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compared to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind". We may, therefore, following Hume consider morality as subjective facts instead of corresponding to objective facts. Both the facts being natural, we understand that Hume is a Naturalist philosopher. But his version of Naturalism is subjective naturalism. To quote Hume again, "Here is a matter of fact: but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object." 3

In the immediately following paragraph, Hume comments that he finds it suitable in this context to highlight on the matter that, in every system of morality there is a passage from 'is' to 'ought', a passage from rational assertions to moral prescriptions. This passage is invalid according to Hume because the change of the relation from assertion to prescription is imperceptible and also inconceivable. The claim which Hume makes here is clearly understood in context of the arguments he presents before to show that morality is not grounded in reason. Naturally it is not correct to deduce the irrational moral judgements from rational assertive statements. The passage from 'is' to 'ought' is surely unjustified in that sense.

Geoffrey Hunter in his article 'Hume on is and ought' written in the book *The Is-Ought Question* addresses the defects of the most popular interpretation of Hume on morality. He refers to it as the 'Brief Guide Interpretation' of Hume. Hunter shows that Hume is misunderstood as claiming that moral judgements are very different from factual judgements. He gives his counter-arguments for interpreting Hume as claiming that moral judgements are but a subclass of factual judgements, i.e., it is a peculiar category of factual judgements resulting from a causal relation between contemplation of an action by the speaker and his having a peculiar sentiment or feeling towards it as a result. When Hume says that 'the passage from 'is' statement to 'ought' statement seems altogether inconceivable', the stress is actually on 'seems', which means that with a deeper understanding the sense of the passage may be revealed. Hunter points out that the interpreters of Hume generally fail to

understand this intention of Hume as expressed in the passage. He also says that Hume may be interpreted as meaning that moral judgements are in no way deducible from factual judgements, because, the ‘ought’ statements are basically paraphrases of ‘is’ statements. So there is no question of deducing ‘ought’ from ‘is’. To explain moral judgements are actually certain factual judgements caused by sentiments or feelings. These feelings are in turn caused by contemplation of a certain action by the subject. So the deduction is explained not in terms of moral judgements deduced from factual judgements, but in terms of moral judgements, as a class of factual judgements, deduced from certain emotional facts whatsoever. Hume, according to Hunter, does not differentiate moral judgements from factual judgements. His emphasis is on differentiating them when factual judgements are taken in the scientific sense of the term, as based on reason or understanding alone. But moral judgements are not known by understanding alone, but by sentiments which are the objects of our feelings or sentiments.⁴

Let us know go back to the first and primary assertion which Hume had made in the context of understanding the nature and the origin of morality. He admits that it is impossible to ignore the moral distinctions we make in our everyday lives. He further says that whatever we perceive are all activities of our mind. Hence moral distinctions are also no exception to this. They also originate in our minds. He clarifies that whatever is present in our minds can either be matters of fact or relations of ideas. Hume gives sufficient arguments to show that morality cannot be a relation of ideas. He also analyses the sense in which morality is a matter of fact, though not an objective fact in the scientific sense of the term. Moral distinctions are perceived; what is it exactly that we perceive? Hume divides perceptions into impressions and ideas. Because moral relations are not ideas as already explained, they are impressions of some kind. We can rather say that morality is not judged of, but felt. But the feeling or sentiment is so soft and gentle, unlike the vivid nature of an impression, that we are often confused to consider it an idea.

What is the nature of such impression? And what role does it play in affecting our minds? Hume answers that the feeling of pleasure can be identified as the associate of virtue, whereas the feeling of pain as that of vice. The feeling of pleasure or pain is further equated with the more general feeling of agreeability or non-

agreeability. This feeling is aroused when we have the experience of a particular action. Hence, certain actions are the cause of the feeling of pleasure/pain, and with it simultaneously of approval/disapproval. But on having such feeling we do not judge or infer the action to be virtuous/vicious. Just when we have the feelings of pleasure or pain, we in effect can feel the action to be virtuous or vicious. Hence, morality is not a matter of inference, it is only a feeling or sentiment.

Hume objected to the traditional way of rationalising what is right and wrong. He argues that we cannot deduce an ‘ought’ statement from an ‘is’ statement meaning ‘ought’ statements are independent of reason or argument. They are only dependent on certain feelings or sentiments which are part of our sensations. From the feeling that we have regarding an action, we do not infer anything good/bad about it, we only have the feeling of pleasure/pain which results in a sentiment of approval/disapproval towards that action. Thus we make a distinction between a good action and a bad action through our actions resulting from sentiments. 5

The role of reason is to produce truth/falsehood on the basis of correspondence with reality. Anything which cannot have such correspondence with reality is not subject to being true/false. Morality, which depicts only feelings or sentiments, felt, is natural facts which cannot be empirically verified. They are such facts which are directly felt. Hence they are not known. Such a version of naturalism is a non-cognitive theory unlike the other versions of naturalism, if cognition is taken in the scientific sense of the term referring to objective knowledge. But if cognition is understood in a wider sense as covering any human activity involving the brain and senses, then feeling should also be counted as a sort of cognition. Humean internal naturalism refers to facts within human nature, viz. feelings, sentiments instead of external facts concerning objects. Therefore it is a version of subjective naturalism which is also a version of cognitivism in an un-conventional sense undoubtedly.

II

Emotivism as a theory of morals arose in response to the theories of naturalism on the one hand and intuitionism on the other. All such theories present a meta-ethical discussion on the import of moral language. As regards the meaning of ethical terms, philosophers differ on the basic point of interpreting the meaning of

'meaning'. The naturalists or the intuitionists understand by the meaning of an ethical expression, the reference of the particular term – whether a natural or a non-natural property. The emotivists, on the contrary, emphasise on the use of an ethical expression while understanding its meaning. They are of opinion that a moral judgement is used to express our feelings directly. Hence, they do not state or assert anything and are therefore neither true nor false. Here I mean that they do not state or assert either an objective fact or a subjective fact.¹

Emotivism, as propounded by A. J. Ayer in his celebrated work 'Language, Truth and Logic', laid the foundation-stone of noncognitivism in the area of meta-ethics which was later developed, further refined and modified by others like R. L. Stevenson, R. M. Hare etc. Ayer, in the 6th chapter (*Critique of Ethics and Theology*) of his book '*Language, Truth and Logic*' sets out to give an account of the 'judgements of value' in line with the British empiricist tradition as also with the analytic philosophers of language like Russell and Wittgenstein. His basic contention was that value judgements are significant only if they are scientific. He establishes that they are not so as they are neither analytic nor empirical, and scientifically valid statements, according to the classical convention are either empirically verifiable or are true by definition, i.e. either empirical or analytic. Therefore the value judgements do not have any literal significance. However they are meaningful by virtue of their functions or uses. Ethical judgements, as analysed by Ayer, are expressions of emotion or feeling and are neither true nor false.²

Ayer starts his discussion on ethical language by considering the naturalists' contention that ethical terms are definable by non-ethical terms. Naturalists are either subjectivists or utilitarians. They are subjectivists when they define 'good'/'bad' in terms of subjective feelings like approval / disapproval. On the other hand, utilitarians define 'good' in terms of 'pleasure' and interpret the sentence 'X is good' as 'X is pleasurable.' In whichever way we define it, there remains the scope of further questioning the universal applicability of the definiendum with respect to the definiens, and hence the definition does not stand valid. To make it clear, it is possible that we say that a thing is pleasurable but not good. So the definition of 'good' as 'pleasurable' is fallacious and the fallacy is known as the naturalistic fallacy which the non-naturalist cognitivist philosophers like Moore pointed out.

Naturalistic fallacy is the fallacy of defining the indefinable. Moore held the view that the ethical judgements are intrinsic in nature, and are not empirically calculable. Ethical terms exhibit a non-natural property which are known intuitively. Mere appeal to intuition cannot sufficiently prove the validity of a proposition, hence ethical judgements are not verifiable. And therefore, they are not definable in empirical terms. Any attempt to define an ethical term, according to Moore, is an attempt to define the indefinable resulting in the naturalistic fallacy. 3.

Though not empirically verifiable, ethical judgements are held to be genuine synthetic propositions as they relate to our experiences. But as mentioned before, a synthetic proposition is significant only if it is verifiable. Therefore, it is necessary to understand that neither naturalism, nor intuitionism, but a third theory is needed in order to give an explanation of moral judgements consistent with radical empiricism. In this context, it is said that though not verifiable, ethical concepts can be given an explanation. They are not analysable because they are pseudo-concepts, i.e., they are not real concepts imparting any knowledge. Their presence does not add anything to the content of knowledge. Ayer takes as an example the ethical statement, ‘Stealing money is wrong.’ He says that this statement is neither true nor false and is almost equivalent to saying, ‘Stealing money!’ What Ayer wanted to point out here is that the statement is merely an expression of psychological disapproval for the particular act of stealing, it does not give us any information regarding stealing. In fact uttering ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ does not add anything, it only expresses a feeling. Ayer makes a subtle observation here, he says that we do not state the feeling, but only express it through the moral judgement. Therefore, there is no assertion involved here.

Ayer also comments that ethical terms not only express our sentiments, they also play a vital role in arousing our feelings and thus stimulate action. They also sometimes act as commands. For example- ‘It is good to tell the truth’, ‘You ought to tell the truth.’ etc., there is a tone of suggestion, command, advice regarding telling the truth along with an expression of sentiment about it.4.

Emotivism, though talks of the expression of feeling through moral judgement is not a subjectivist approach as there is no assertion made about the feeling of the subject. Subjectivism is a theory which talks of the assertion of a

subject's feeling through a moral judgement, thereby admitting moral judgements as stating facts, though subjective facts as they relate to the feelings of the speaker. It denies that the ethical judgements express propositions of a unique non-empirical character, though they do not deny ethical judgements as being genuine propositions whatsoever. Moreover, the emotivists held that moral judgements cannot be contradicted as because they are mere expressions of feelings which may naturally differ from others without being in opposition with the other. Expressions of different persons about the same object or about the same object by a person at different points of time are naturally prone to be different. However, if it would have been propositions stating feelings of the subject and there had been other propositions stating a contradictory feeling of the subject on similar matter, a verification of the actual fact on the feelings of the subject would have made one proposition true, and the other false. But this is not so when we are considering ethical judgements as only expressions and not assertions as per the emotivists.⁵

The emotivists and the subjectivists both relate ethical statements to the feelings of the speaker. Hence, the question may obviously be raised whether we can at all argue about questions of value. Ayer says that there will be no conflict if two persons have different opinions about the same action in accordance with their individual feelings, i.e. if one person considers thrift as a virtue and another person considers it as vice. As both persons express their feelings, they may be equally right. But when it comes to assertion of feeling as a matter of fact, we do have disputes over values.

The emotivists argue that moral judgements do express our feelings, and that does not create disputes or disagreements. The reason is that moral disputes are not over our feelings expressed, they are with facts asserted. To explain: When two persons quarrel over the issue whether thrift is a virtue or vice, it is not because they have different views about the values - virtue and vice; rather, it is because they have a different perception/feeling of the attitude of thrift. As Ayer puts it, "When someone disagrees with us about the moral value of a certain action or type of action, we do admittedly resort to argument in order to win him over to our way of thinking. But we do not attempt to show by our arguments that he has the 'wrong' ethical feeling towards a situation whose nature he has correctly apprehended. What we

attempt to show is that he is mistaken about the facts of the case. We argue that he has misconceived the agent's motive: or that he has misjudged the effects of the action, or its probable effects in view of the agent's knowledge; or that he has failed to take into account the special circumstances in which the agent was placed. Or else we employ more general arguments about the effects which actions of a certain type tend to produce, or the qualities which are usually manifested in their performance."⁶

Ayer points out that having grown up in similar environment, it is not possible for two persons to differ in their values, the point of difference is possible only with respect to the interpretation of the circumstances or the facts on which the moral judgement is passed. Thus, on removal of all misunderstandings, it is expected that the opponent gets convinced of holding the same attitude of morality towards the object. If it is otherwise, no further attempt is made on it and is considered a hopeless one. It is easily understood therefore, that, under similar conditionings we presuppose a specific account of morality to which we are to conform. This presupposed notion may be considered a principle which is not further questionable. Thus we see that the emotive theory surpasses the major objection of subjectivity raised against it and establishes the non-cognitive version of moral judgement satisfactorily. ⁷

Emotivism differs from the Humean tradition in being absolutely opposed to naturalism. They deny morality as factual derivations or as depictions by direct sensations of natural feelings. They are neither known nor felt. They are rather expressions of feelings or sentiments and is to be distinguished from cognitivism on the one hand and naturalism on the other. Emotivism has different interpretations in the writings of different philosophers. Ayer's theory of emotivism shares the basic conviction with the Humean theory of morals that values are not any part of the objective world. This is the general line of thought in the empiricist theory of morals. A clear reflection of such an idea is found in Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus': "The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value – and if there were it would be of no value. If there is any value which is of value, it must lie outside all happenings and being so, for all happening and being so is accidental."

The logical positivists were exclusively concerned about scientific discourse, i.e. in those which were strictly fact-stating. Any other use of language which does not refer to facts were considered vicious. Thus Ayer considered ethical terms as mere ‘pseudo-concepts’, whereas Wittgenstein in the ‘Tractatus’ denied the existence of any ethical proposition. Ayer also basically had a negative mentality for ethics, in that he tried to actually throw out ethical discussions by justifying it as being non-scientific. Though he characterised ethical language as emotive, he further showed very little interest in it.

III

It is now time that we comment on the two theories presented here as depicting moral language. As was our motive, we need to concentrate on the distinct approaches to the semantic theories of ethical terms in the two schools of naturalism and emotivism. Naturalism defines ethical terms through natural terms which they refer to, whereas emotivism understands the meaning or essence of an ethical term through its use/purpose. Thus meaning/essence/definition of an ethical term corresponds to reference in case of the naturalists, while to its usage in case of the emotivists. Now, ethical cognitivism is a metaethical theory which deals with the cognitive status of moral judgements. Naturally, it is relevant that the meaning of ‘cognition’ be clear and univocal. In Humean theory of naturalism as has been dealt here, morality refers to our passions/volitions which cause an action to happen. Moral judgements refer to subjective facts of feeling/emotion. Thus they are not rationally justifiable as true/false. But they may be empirically verifiable as facts. Cognition, in the empiricist sense of the term (Hume being a staunch empiricist philosopher), may be understood as vivid sense-impressions of emotions which are felt. Hence, Hume’s naturalism, though in an un-conventional sense, may be considered a form of cognitivism. On the other hand, Ayer’s emotivism as rooted in the background of logical positivism does not have a flavour of cognition outside the scientific realm, and so strictly considers objectivity as the mark of knowing. We have seen that the ethical terms, according to Ayer, though lack literal significance, are meaningful by virtue of their uses. Having mentioned this, he clearly reveals that his intention as a logical positivist philosopher is surely not to give any attention to the ethical judgements which are outside the domain of scientific knowledge. Their mind-set

clearly hints to the fact that cognition for them can be nothing outside knowledge, and knowledge is only objective scientific knowledge.

In a way of conclusion it can be said that ‘meaning’ and ‘cognition’ having different standards for naturalism and emotivism, are not comparable as meta-ethical theories on the same platform. The meta-meta-ethical understanding is equally important as is the meta-ethical understanding.

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