

ETHICAL NATURALISM

Objective moral facts exist independently of human beings, moral terms can be understood by analysing the natural world; ethical statements are cognitivist and can be verified or falsified; verified moral statements are objective truths and universal. F.H. Bradley – ethical sentences express propositions; objective features of the world make propositions true or false; meta-ethical statements can be seen in scientific terms.

Introduction

Ethical Naturalism argues that actions have **objective moral properties** which we can experience or observe empirically. These properties may be reduced to entirely **non-ethical** or **natural** properties, such as desires or pleasures. Ethical naturalists include Natural Law and Utilitarian theorists.

Ethical Naturalism assumes **cognitivism** (the view that ethical sentences express **propositions** and can therefore be **true or false**).

Imagine that I say 'lying is wrong'. This is equivalent to a naturalist saying something like 'lying causes suffering and distress' or 'lying isn't in your interests'. We can substitute the word 'wrong' in this way with some natural feature of lying which we claim is observable, cognitively provable to be true from experience. In this way ethical statements can be verified, for example, by observing whether lying really does cause human distress.

Naturalists also argue that the meanings of these ethical sentences can be expressed as **natural properties** without the use of ethical terms (e.g. "good", "right", etc).

It suggests that inquiry into the **natural world** can increase our **moral knowledge** in just the same way it increases our **scientific knowledge**, and that any “ethical value” is confirmable through the methods of science. C. D. Broad observed that “If naturalism be true, ethics is not an autonomous science; it is a department or an application of one or more of the natural or historical sciences” (Broad, 1946, p. 103). Moral facts are therefore **facts of nature**.

Goodness as ‘satisfying interests’

James Rachels (1941-2003) prefers to cash the word ‘wrong’ in terms of ‘interests’ than in terms of pleasure or pain. This is closer to the form of ethical naturalism known as **preference utilitarianism**.

“The most plausible form of ethical naturalism begins by identifying goodness with satisfying our interests, while “interests” are explained in turn as the objects of preferences. Protecting our eyesight, for example, is in our interests because we have desires that would be frustrated if we could not see; and that is why unimpaired eyesight is a good thing. Again, protecting children is a good thing because we care about children and we do not want to see them hurt. As Hobbes put it, “Whatever is the object of any man’s appetite or desire, that is it which he for his part calls good” (Hobbes, 1651, p. 28). Reasoning about what to do, therefore, is at bottom reasoning about how to satisfy our interests.”

James Rachels (2002)

G.E. Moore and the Open Question Argument

Critics point out that a good definition of “natural property” is difficult, but it would normally refer to a property which can be discovered by **sense observation** or experience, **experiment**, or through any of the available means of **science**, and this cannot apply in the case of ethical statements.

The British philosopher G. E. Moore has posed the **Open Question Argument** in opposition to Ethical Naturalism, in which he states that the question “What is good?” is an **open** one, as it cannot be answered using **natural terms** (such as “blue”, “rough”, “smooth”, “pleasurable”), and yet neither can it be said to have **supernatural** properties.

Moore called this a naturalistic fallacy, because the term “good”, in the sense of intrinsic value, is effectively indefinable. Moore propounded instead a doctrine of Ethical Non-Naturalism.

David Hume and the is-ought problem

David Hume (1711-1776) wrote:

“In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it”.

(Hume, 1739, p. 468)

Hume is pointing out that factual statements and moral statements are of a different kind. There are two points we can make here:

1. Hume's argument is an argument about the missing premise. He is saying people move too quickly from a descriptive statement 'this is causing me pain' to a normative statement 'this is wrong' without establishing what is wrong about pain. The two statements are essentially different.
2. Hume's argument is about moral motivation. Hume points out that we need to explain what is obligatory in an 'ought statement' as these statements are action-guiding. Ought statements have power 'to cause or prevent actions'. But says Hume, it is our feelings and desires which provide the motivation. So for Hume the missing premise is to say 'I don't want to be hurt' – this is what makes pain morally 'wrong'.

F.H. Bradley and the nature of ethical statements

F.H. Bradley (1846 – 1924) believed that ethical statements expressed propositions which were provable as true or false. Bradley uses this to confirm his view that moral judgment necessarily involves a reference to what is real.

“For consider - a judgment must be true or false, and its truth or falsehood cannot lie in itself. They involve a reference to a something beyond. And this, about which or of which we judge, if it is not fact, what else can it be?”

(1883:41)

So Bradley is a naturalist because morality rests on certain facts about ourselves, our goals, and our place in society. So he believed that to be moral is to live in accordance with the moral tradition of one's country.

“We have found the end, we have found self realisation, duty and happiness in one – yes, we have found ourselves, when we have found our station and its duties, our function as an organ of the social organism.”

(1927:34)

Our place and role in the historical community provide us with a measurable observable basis for a satisfying life. Our goal is to realise our true self, which we learn (through observation) in the family and community, and adapt the values of our society – and those of other societies that offer sound criticisms of our society.

This places us in the empirical world and offers the best possibility of satisfaction. To be a 'good' person, we must know our station and its duties, Bradley argued, and hence his argument is a form of **cognitivism**. We can know objectively and test empirically the proposition that 'honesty is good' as this means, 'honesty helps realise my potential and my place in society'.

The good society is about hard work and obedience. Once my position in life is decided, I have a duty to perform the function of that station. Doing wrong is not a case of breaking certain rules (as in normative ethics); rather it is going against your role in society.

Conclusion

Our sense perceptions – the things we see, hear, touch, smell and taste – and principles of logic are the tools that a moral person uses to make judgments about ethics. These moral truths are facts like numbers or biological data. I can conclude that something is wrong from observation and analysis. When I hear a lie being told, what I see isn't only the facts of how a statement is untrue, who said it and what actually happens – I also perceive the fact that it's morally wrong. The wrongness of lying is as much a fact of the universe as the fact that the exposure of the lie as untrue can stop its effects. This means that moral facts aren't views or opinions, personal likes or dislikes. Nor are they based on some sort of spiritual or intuitive sense.

When I observe that something is wrong, it's an objective moral fact of the universe.

References

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