

Contemporary metaethics and its selected issues

Alfred Ayer (1910-1989)

Richard Mervyn Hare (1919-2002)

Metaethics is an analyses of language that is used in ethics.

Main problem: What is an object of ethical notions and statements?

Do exist moral qualities (like goodness, honesty, truthfulness, moral beauty)

For exemple:

Your motivation is high-minded. What does mean to be high minded? Where and how exists something like "being high-minded"? Is it a real property of the motivation? Or it exists only in a valuation (in personal feeling or attitude)

There are following solutions of this question (in metaethics):

Decriptivism/Cognitivism: moral statement can be truth or false, moral properties can be recognized; moral terms refer to some properties

Non-descriptivism/Non-cognitivism: moral statement cannot be truth or false, moral properties cannot be recognized; moral terms do not refer to any properties

Decriptivism/Cognitivism:

- (a) Naturalism (moral properties are "natural" – like other natural properties – hedonism; utilitarianism)
 - Objectivism (moral qualities are objective properties of behavior or attitudes)
 - Subjectivism (moral qualities are merely subjective, i.e. they exist in feeling of person/subject)
- (b) Intuitionism (moral qualities are not natural but supernatural; they are available for an "intuition" only)

Non-descriptivism/Non-cognitivism:

- (a) emotivism (a classic form of metaethics - Alfred Ayer)
- (b) prescriptivism (Richard Mervin Hare)

Alfred Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 107:

"The presence of **an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content**. Thus if I say to someone, "You acted wrongly in stealing that money," I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, "You stole that money." In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, "You stole that money," in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. ...

If now I generalise my previous statement and say, "Stealing money is wrong," I produce a sentence that has no factual meaning—that is, expresses no proposition that can be either true or false. ... **I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments.**"

Richard Mervyn Hare, *Universal Prescriptivism*:

„The main division is between *descriptivist* and *non-descriptivist* theories. These are distinguished in various more or less misleading ways (Hare, 1985b). It is said that descriptivists hold that moral judgements can be true or false, while non-descriptivists deny this. But since there is a perfectly good sense, as we shall see, in which non-descriptivists can use the term ‘true’ of moral judgements, this way of speaking obscures the issue. So does the use of the terms ‘cognitivism’ and ‘non-cognitivism’, implying that the former does, and the latter does not, allow that we can *know* that some moral judgements are true.”

“Having distinguished descriptivist from non-descriptivist ethical theories in general, we can now proceed to subdivide each of these, in order to put prescriptivism in its proper slot. Descriptivist theories can be divided broadly into naturalism and intuitionism. Both terms can be misleading, but they will serve. The dispute between these is about whether or not the truth-conditions or moral judgements, which according to descriptivism give them their meaning, are to be determined by definitions (or, more loosely, explanations of meaning) which refer only to non-moral truths or properties. Naturalists think that this is possible; intuitionists, by contrast, think that no such definitions or explanations can capture the meanings of the moral words. Note that the dispute between naturalists and their intuitionist opponents is not the same as that between descriptivists and non-descriptivists: it is a dispute *within* descriptivism. Non-descriptivists reject naturalism because they reject descriptivism of all kinds. They can use such of the intuitionist arguments against naturalism as are valid; but the main impetus of their attack is independent of these.”

“One further kind of descriptivism may be mentioned here, namely *subjectivism*. This term is used very loosely, but here we shall be using it strictly for that kind of naturalistic descriptivism which holds that the meaning of ‘ought’ and other moral words is to describe the attitudes or feelings of people - for example to attribute to people in general, or to the speaker of the sentence, an attitude or feeling of approval or disapproval towards a certain kind of act. This is intended to be understood as a statement of non-moral, psychological fact about the speaker or about people in general - a fact which could be discovered by observation or reported introspection. Thus the theory is a naturalistic one. But the fact in question (which establishes the truth of a moral judgement, and is thus its truth-condition) instead of being, as in our previous example, one about what would happen in society if wives disobeyed their husbands, is a *subjective* fact about what people disapprove of.”

“Non-descriptivism likewise can be subdivided. The earlier versions, mostly forms of emotivism, were essentially irrationalist. Having rejected the view that moral judgements are equivalent to statements of non-moral facts (naturalism) and the view that they are *sui generis* statements about moral facts discernible by intuition or appeal to convictions (intuitionism), they concluded too hastily that one cannot reason about

moral questions; moral judgements are the expressions of irrational or at least non-rational attitudes of approval or disapproval. They concluded this because they added an additional premise which is false, namely that the only questions one can reason about are factual ones.”

** These metaethical standpoints are connected with non-metaethical positions (subjectivism and objectivism) but they are not identical with them.

Objectivism (as non-metaethical position): values, norm, obligations exist objectively; they do not depend on someone's opinion or judgement

Subjectivism (as non-metaethical position): values, norms, obligations exist subjectively (in feeling, in judgment); in this meaning they depend on opinions and judgments

Relationism: values, norms and obligations are relations between subject and object.

As metaethical positions they do not refer to values or norms; they refer to understanding of our moral language.