Judging the Validity of Ethical Naturalistic Definitions

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Abstract Ethical naturalism is a complex and controversial philosophical theory that attempts to provide a naturalistic account of morality. The naturalists define natural terms with non-natural term and argue that moral terms are objective which can be discovered through empirical observation and scientific inquiry. They believe that moral truths are grounded in natural facts and can be explained in terms of these facts. On the other hand, G. E. Moore rejected ethical naturalism. He argued that moral terms like "good," "bad," "right and "wrong" cannot be defined in terms of natural properties such as pleasure, pain, or desire. Here I explore the validity of different naturalistic definitions of "good" put forth by proponents of ethical naturalism and highlights the criticisms each definition faces. Finally I examine the questions raised about the validity and adequacy of these definitions in capturing the true nature of ethics and morality.

Keywords Adequacy, Complex, Objective, Proponent, Scientific inquiry

1. Introduction

In the realm of ethics, one of the ongoing debates revolves around the validity of ethical naturalistic definitions. Ethical naturalism posits that moral concepts and values can be understood and defined within the framework of natural sciences, such as biology, psychology, or sociology. It suggests that ethical statements can be objectively analyzed and evaluated based on empirical evidence and naturalistic explanations. It claims that ethical terms can be defined by non-ethical terms, and ethical statements can be replaced by non-ethical statements without changing their meaning. "According to naturalism, William Frankenna says, "Ought can be defined in terms of is, and value in terms of fact". (1937:97).

Sometimes ethical naturalism is called definism. Some moral philosophers, for example, G. E. Moore, a British philosopher of the early 20th century, was one of the main proponents of ethical naturalism, characterize naturalism as a theory which holds that moral statements are a sub-class of empirical statements because like factual statements moral statements are also empirically verifiable, and the truth or falsehood of moral statements depends wholly on the nature of the objects where they are about. Moore says,

> According to the naturalistic ethics, ethics is an empirical or positive science; its conclusion could be all established by means of empirical observation..... Those theories of ethics, then are naturalistic, which declare the sole good to consist in some one property of

things, which exists in time; and which do so because they suppose that 'good' itself can be defined by reference to such a property. (1903:39)

The naturalists believe that there are no special moral facts or properties to be known other than by empirical observation. Instead, they think that moral terms, such as, good or right can be identified with, or reduced to natural properties. Thus, naturalism allows us to establish a scientific base for ethics. In another formation, naturalism is a theory that denies fact-value distinction. The theory that denies this distinction between establishing facts and evaluating those facts is called ethical naturalism.

Therefore, ethical naturalism is the view, in short, which denies the gap between fact and value. According to this theory, like factual statements, value statements can also be rendered either true or false by empirical verification and all these are possible because a value term can be defined by a factual one without changing its meaning. Now let us see how naturalists define the value term, such as, good.

2. Some Naturalistic Definitions of Good

The following are some popular definitions of good. Here we will see that these definitions face various criticisms from the common-sense moral point of view. The aim of these criticisms, however, is to examine the validity of these definitions.

2.1. The Autobiographical Definition

The word good has often been defined in terms of approval, interest, feeling or similar psychological attitudes. For example, according to Thomas Hobbes, good means desired by me. Hobbes says,

But whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire, that is it which he for his part calleth 'good'; and the object of his hate and aversion, 'evil'; and of his contempt 'vile' and 'inconsiderable'. For these words of good, evil, and contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: there being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil, to be takes from the nature of the objects themselves. (1958, part. I,ch.vi).

David Hume (1894:35), R.B. Perry (1954:54) and some others also defend the autobiographical definition of good. But there are also many critics of it. For example, in his article *The Elements of Ethics* Russell attacks autobiographical definition as follows:

...yet it is commonly admitted that there are bad desires; and when people speak of bad desires; they seem to mean desire for what is bad. For example, when one man desires another man's pain, it is obvious that what is desired is not good but bad. (1970:5-6).

We believe that Russell is right to say that good cannot be equivalent to someone's desire. We know that a sadist always desires and feels pleasure by imposing pain on others. But none of us accept his act as good. To define good with reference to a person's liking is nearly as old as philosophy. In ancient philosophy, Protagoras advocates that man is the measure of all things. Socrates, however, thought if a person becomes the standard or determiner of everything then there will remain nothing like morality.

Recent criticisms against autobiographical definition are based on the question as to whether morality is personal or impersonal, relative or universal. These critics argue that if good is defined by a person's attitude, liking or disliking then it becomes personal and relative and hence unacceptable. Here we will not enter into the debate as to whether the concept of good is relative or universal. Here we will just show that if good is defined by a person's approval then how that definition does fail. And in order to show this let us consider the following chain of statements:

I approve of X = X is good.
You approve of Y = Y is good.

Now if we replace X and Y by the words stealing and honesty respectively, we get-

Stealing is good.
Honesty is good.

As both stealing and honesty are good, we can write,

Stealing is honesty.

This is absolutely absurd. Stealing can never be equivalent and defined by honesty. For they are not synonyms, they have different meanings and their denotations and connotations are also different. Thus, autobiographical definition of good fails.

2.2. The Sociological Definition

According to David Hume, *X is good means X is approved by most people*. This definition is popularly known as sociological definition. Following this definition, we can say, "X is good" means the same as "The majority of people in a group approve of X". We can know the approval of majority of people by a survey or by a poll. Here majority of people means the majority of people in a social group or in a country or in the world.

This definition sounds better than the autobiographical definition because it identifies good with the desire of a group of people instead of the desire of an individual. Still this view is vulnerable to a number of objections. Many examples can be cited to show that majority fails to become the standard of truth and morality. For example, once majority believed that the earth is flat and the sun moves round the earth. All these beliefs are now false.

More importantly, real disagreement is possible about what the majority approves; the minority may differ with the majority in the point of moral approval. And it is not unlikely that majority of a group be stupid, unenlightened and mistaken. In *Republic* Plato called democracy the worst form of government. That means he discouraged and avoided majority's opinion as a standard for determining goodness. We also agree with Plato that in such a case, head counting may not be an acceptable criterion. Here we need not only quantity but also quality, just like Mill said that an unhappy Socrates is better than a thousand happy pigs. Indeed, it is commonly accepted that sometimes majority's view proves an act is good no more than the earth is flat. That the majority approves something is an interesting sociological fact, but it is of very little interest for ethics. In ethics we always justify whether or not the majority view is good. And we have seen that it may not.

2.3. The Ideal-Observer Definition

We have argued that majority's approval is not enough to determine good, that quality is more important than quantity. The ideal-observer definition gives emphasis on quality. According to this view "X is good" is equivalent to "An ideal-observer would approve of X". An ideal observer or ideal judge is he who is impartial in, has full knowledge of the facts of the situation being judged, and can imaginatively identify with every person involved in the situation. The ideal observer must possess these characteristics-he would be a perfect moral judge of any situation, being able infallibly to say what is right or what is wrong. In short, an ideal observer would be like the philosopher king of Plato's *The Republic* (1945:59) or the Arkangel of R. M. Hare's (1981:9) *Moral Thinking*. Both these characters have the qualities for being ideal-observers.

Ideal-observer theory seems an improvement over autobiographical and sociological definitions. The reason is that it might be more appropriate to identify goodness of something with what an ideal-observer approves rather than an ordinary individual or a group approve. But the problem with the ideal-observer theory is that probably no such observer exists, since no one in the world is completely

impartial, fully knowledgeable, and capable of imaginative identification. Human beings are not ideal observers. They are what Hare calls *proles* who possess incomplete knowledge about the world and mistakes in judging what is *good* and *bad*.

A defender of this theory, however, may argue that the theory does not require the existence of such a being; it says only that if there were such a being, his judgment would infallibly be correct. This view claims not only that the ideal-observer's judgment would be the correct one in every case but also that this would be so by definition. Against this argument it can be said that the ideal-observer definition becomes an impractical theory. But the naturalists are looking for definitions, which can be empirically verified. Therefore, this definition is also inadequate.

Furthermore, John Hospers (1961:570) rightly says that the ideal observer definition tells us nothing about the nature of any act, it tell us what a perfect judge would say about an act; it tells us more about the judge than about the act that is judged.

2.4. The Theological Definition

According to this definition God's approval and disapproval make something good and bad respectively. Here "X is good" is equivalent to "God approves of X". This standard is commonly accepted among the theist societies. A question may arise how do we know or can verify that X, for example, is accepted by God. The answer would be that we could know it from the revealed book(s). But here starts the problem of theological definition. For there is no single revealed book; furthermore, different book commands different and even the opposite things. For instance, some books approve polygamy and others forbid it.

The theological definition has also to face the following question. Is X Good because God approves of X, or God approves of X because X is good? A critique of the said definition may claim that latter is the case. Under this circumstance theological definition does not appear as the standard of determining good.

Theological definition makes morality dependent on God. There are many philosophers including Kant (1949:154) and Thomas Aquinas (1937:88) who support this view. But there are real dispute regarding the question as to whether morality is dependent on God or religion. The common view is that it is independent, that morality does not depend on approval of God, that an atheist can also be moral. So John Hospers rightly says.

> But even the theologically committed would do well to be aware of the implications of saying that "X is right" just means that God approves X. It implies that all ethical statements are disguised theological statements: that is a person says that something is right but does not believe in God, his statement is not only false but self-contradictory, for he would be saying that something is right (God approves it) but God does not exist and surely non-believers have views about right or wrong, even if their views are all mistaken. (1961:570)

2.5. The Evolutionary Definition

Darwin's (Moore, 1903:47) theory of *Natural Selection* is knows as theory of Survival of the fittest and the natural process by which the theory is explained is called evolution. It claims that evolution is a continuous process that persists from lower into higher. Herbert Spencer gives the emphases about the application of evolution to ethics. Spencer (Moore, 1903:49) uses the term 'more evolved' as equivalent to 'higher' or 'better' (good). He says that conduct, which is more evolved, is better.

G.E. Moore believes that Spencer commits the naturalistic identification of 'better' with 'more evolved'. He takes the term 'more evolved; as a mere synonym for 'ethically better'. Thus he commits the naturalistic fallacy. (Moore, 1903:12).

Moore again blames Spencer that he does not give adequate reason why a conduct, which is more evolved, is better. But proof is necessary. Spencer takes two sufficient conditions to prove the more evolved conduct better. One is, it should tend to produce more life; and another is, life should be worth living or contains a balance of pleasure. Moore criticizes this view as follows:

> Mr. Spencer seems to maintain that more life is decidedly better than less, if only it gives a balance of pleasure: and that contention is inconsistent with the position that pleasure is 'the ultimate moral aim.' Mr. Spencer implies that of two quantities of life, which gave an equal amount of pleasure, the larger would nevertheless be preferable to the less. And if be so, then he must maintain that quantity of life or degree of evolution is itself an ultimate condition of value. He leaves us therefore, in doubt whether he is not still retaining the evolutionistic proposition, that the more evolved is better, simply because it is more evolved alongside with the hedonistic proposition, that the pleasant is better, simply because it is more pleasant. (1903:52)

In the next, we will see that we cannot even identify pleasure with good. We also disagree that the more evolved is better. For example, when the avian influenza comes in contact with human influenza it becomes stronger and more dangerous. But we do not call it a better virus rather it is worse. Similarly, there may have many bad things whose evolution can result the destruction of many good things. We also disagree that the more pleasant, the better it is.

2.6. The Hedonistic Definition

The most discussed definition of good in meta-physics is the hedonistic definition. The term 'hedonism' comes from the Greek word 'hedone' which means pleasure. According to the hedonistic definition, good means pleasure. The sentence 'X is good' is equivalent to the sentence 'X is pleasant'. The hedonistic definition of good is popularly known as utilitarian definition.

According to hedonism, pleasure is the ultimate good. Only pleasure is the final end of human conduct, which has intrinsic value. People naturally desire happiness to

avoid pain. So men should seek pleasure, which is the only standard of morality. In ancient Greece, Cyrenaic and Epicureans are advocate of hedonism. Some of the eighteen-century English moralists like Hutcheson also claim that the objective or material end of good conduct is, "the greatest happiness of the greatest number". This phrase became the slogan of English utilitarianism, which is a form of hedonism. The classical utilitarian Bentham and Mill have defined moral term, such as, good in terms of natural properties, such as, producing happiness.

The reason why hedonists and utilitarian define good in terms of pleasure is that each person desires pleasure and pleasure is the only intrinsically good. Mill holds that pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically good; he agrees that other things, such as, health and virtue are good but he denies that their goodness is independent of the goodness of pleasure- they are good because these are means to pleasure. Mill saw that the object, which we seek originally as a means to pleasure, might come by association to be itself the object of our seeking, just as the miser who originally seeks money for the good things that it can buy comes to seek money for itself.

Thus, why hedonists define *good* by pleasure is that they believe:
  i) Each person desires his own pleasure, and
  ii) Only pleasure contains intrinsic value.

2.6.1. Criticism of Hedonism

We shall argue that hedonistic definition is not acceptable because both these claims are ill founded:

  i)   The view that each person desires his own pleasure is known as psychological hedonism. It is very popular view and many scholars support it. We know that political scientist Thomas Hobbes in his Leviathan, (1958, part-I, ch-6) mentions a natural state where each person is selfish that they are always busy to fulfill own pleasure. He thinks that behind every voluntary act of every man, the object is some good to him and someone gives something to others; he does so with an intention of good to himself. In philosophy, Moritz Schlick (1939:151) supports the view that men are selfish. He holds that anyone choosing between ends always chooses the alternative, which he believes, will produce the greatest amount of pleasure for him. St. Augustine (1958:94) described human beings in their natural state as seeking own pleasure, thus daring to violate God's command.
      But our commonsense says that self-pleasure motive is not only motive in human beings. For individuals frequently act for public good without or indirect self-pleasure. Many scholars also advocate this commonsense view. According to Joseph Butler, human nature possesses four part; self-love and benevolence are of them. Shaftesbury says that motive of public welfare is strongly operative in human nature. Hutchison holds that men have a natural tendency

towards benevolence and sometimes they act benevolently even at the cost of their own pleasure. Hume says, "...there is one benevolence, however small ...some particle of the dove kneaded into our frame, alone with the elements of the wolf and serpent." (1955:109). Buchanan holds that motivation can be both public and self-interest and that institution can influence motivation. John Clark points out that human beings are so constituted that they enjoy promoting or seeking the happiness of other people, i.e., there is a real altruism in human beings that hedonism does not admit. (For Clark's view see, W. K. Frankenna, 1973:22).
      Psychological hedonists, however, argue that no matter how benevolent an individual's behavior may look like, he is promoting his own pleasure. We do social works because we get pleasure. This argument does not satisfy us. Many would say that the pleasure experienced by social work is a consequence of it not the cause, i.e., he does social work because he loves to do it, not because he wants pleasure from it. Therefore when egoists demand that social workers get pleasure through their works, they are putting the cart before the horse, say John Hospers. (1961:148).
  ii) The view that each person desires pleasure as an end, that only pleasure is intrinsically good is also indefensible. Some philosophers hold that besides pleasure virtue, knowledge etc. are good too. Environmentalist John Benson claims that friendship, playing golf, walking in a garden, enjoying a scenery etc. are also desired by people as an end, and thus they are intrinsically good.

Hedonists will also object, as usual, that the objects mentioned above causes pleasure in us and that is why they have instrumental value. If they had not produced pleasure we would not value them. So ultimately not the object but pleasure does matter for us. We believe that John Benson rightly opposes the hedonists, argument and succeeds. He tells us to consider Robert Nozick's following imaginary example:

Suppose there was an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would and feel you were writing a great novel or making a friend or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for the pre-programming your life experiences? If you are worried about missing out on desirable experiences, we can suppose that business enterprises have researched thoroughly the lives of many others. You can pick and choose from their large library or smorgasbord of such experiences, selecting your life's experiences for say, he next two years. After two years have passed, you will have ten minutes or ten hours out of the tank to select the experiences of your next years. Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're

there; you'll think it's all actually happening. Others can also plug in to have the experiences they want, so there's no need to stay unplugged to serve them. (Ignore problem such as who will service the machines if everyone plugs in.) Would you plug in? What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside? (1974:42)

Would anyone plug is such a machine? Nozaick's answer is 'no' because it would be suicides. He writes:

What does matter to us in addition to our experiences? First, we want to do certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them. In the case of certain experiences, it is only because first we want to do the actions that we want the experiences of doing them or thinking we've done them. ...A second for not plugging in is that we want to be a certain way to be a certain sort of person. Someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob. There is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has been long in the tank. Is he courageous, kind, intelligent, witty loving? It's not merely that it's difficult to tell; there's no way he is. Plugging into the machine is a kind of suicide... Thirdly, plugging into an experience machine limits us to a man-made reality, to a world no deeper or more important than that which people can construct. There is no actual contact with any deeper reality, though the experience of it can be simulated. Many persons desire to leave themselves open to such contact and to a plumbing of deeper significance. (1974: 43)

The massage that Nozick wants to convey by the above passage is that people are not satisfied only with the pleasant psychological state. They want something more. Along with the pleasure they also want the genuine non-natural object, which produces the pleasure, and sometimes the object becomes more important than the pleasant mental state. Butler expressed a similar long ago and we agree with him.

3. The Indefinability of Good: G. E. Moore

In his book *principia Ethica*, G. E. Moore has offered the most powerful argument against naturalism. Here he tries to present arguments against naturalism and propose intuitionism. He thinks that the utilitarian as well ethical naturalists Bentham, Mill and Spencer try to define ethical term (good) by non-ethical property or natural property (pleasure). Moore strongly opposes such kind of attempt because it commits naturalistic fallacy. He says, many moral philosophers are guilty of this fallacy. Now we will consider his grounds against the definability of good.

3.1. Good is a Simple Notion

At first Moore distinguishes three kinds of definition. The first two are stipulative definition and lexical definition. According to him, everyone can logically and empirically specify a meaning of good. Such kind of definition is called stipulative definition. Lexical definition is a kind of definition, which is found in dictionary where there are commonly received rules for the use of the word. Moore believes that besides these definitions, there is another kind of definition, which is more significant than the former two. The definitions of this kind express the real character of the object or notion denoted by a word, and do not simply inform us what the word is used to mean. These definitions are only possible, when definindum is a complex notion or object. He says,

You can give a definition of a horse, because a horse has many different properties and qualities, all of which you can enumerate. But when you have enumerated them all and when you have reduced a horse to his simplest terms. They are simply something, which you think of or perceive them; you can never, by any definition make their nature known. (1903:7)

Moore holds the moral term good has no definition it is a simple idea hence is beyond of subject of analysis. Moore argues that good is a simple notion as like as color yellow is a simple notion. Nobody can able to explain yellow to a blind or a ignorant person who does not already have the knowledge of yellow. For the same logic we cannot explain what good is. We cannot equalize the word yellow as some naturalists do it with the words produce of a certain kind of vibration in the light; similarly, good is not equalized with the words produce of pleasure. We know that there are many objects that are good and may produce pleasure, but from this, we cannot infer one is substitute to another.

3.2. Statements about Good are always Synthetic

Moore accepts the differences between analytic statement and synthetic statement. In analytic statement the predicate is already contained in the concept of the subject. For example, bachelor is an unmarried male, is an analytic statement where the predicate unmarried male is already implicit in the subject bachelor. Here the predicate does not provide us any new information about the subject. Such kind of statement is true by the logical relation between subject and predicate of the statement. To deny the truth of an analytic statement involves a logical contradiction. On the other hand, in a synthetic statement, subject does not contain predicate. Thus, in a synthetic statement the predicate adds something new to our concept of the subject. To say that pleasure is good, joins two independent concepts, for the concept pleasure does not contain the idea of good. Moore believes that statements about evaluative term, such as, good are always synthetic. Analytic statements can be true merely by reference to the definitions of the terms used, but synthetic statements cannot be true in such way; its truth can be established by observation. From this, Moore deduces that the naturalistic definitions of moral terms are always synthetic not analytic. As we cannot empirically observe the value terms so any definition of this term by the natural property cannot claim as true or false.

3.3. The Good is Definable, but Good is Indefinable

Moore again differentiates substantive the good and adjective good. The good is what the adjective good applies to. He says' "...it is that to which the adjective will apply, it must be something different from that adjective itself." (1903:9). Moore believes that the good is surely definable; we can specify what it is by denotation or connotation. We can point out things that produce pleasure and may claim these are that the good denotes. And to mention the connotation of the term the good we may also claim that anything, which produces pleasure, is also either part or whole of the good. Moore's conclusion is that from this we cannot infer that good is definable. "There is no meaning in saying that pleasure is good unless good is something different from pleasure." (1903:14)

3.4. The Open Question Argument

According to open question argument, whatever definition is offered for good, it may always be asked with importance whether it is good. Suppose, good is defined as pleasure. Someone may ask, "Is pleasure good?" If this definition is correct then the question will be insignificant. And if the definition is not correct then the question is significant. Moore thinks that the question is significant and hence the definition is not correct. In order to grasp why does Moore think so, let us present the matter in the following way. Consider the following two statements:

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Pleasure is good

Pleasure is pleasure.

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Now if pleasure is good by definition then the above two statements must be equal in status, that is, whatever is true for one must be true for another. But we can easily see that they are not equal. The first statement is a synthetic, whereas the second statement is analytic. Regarding the first, one can significantly ask, "Is pleasure good?" But one cannot significantly ask, "Is pleasure pleasure?" There may have a genuine dispute as to whether pleasure is good, but there is no dispute as to whether pleasure is pleasure. Therefore, the two statements are not equal. From this it also follows that good and pleasure is not synonymous. So Moore concludes that good cannot be defined by pleasure. And any attempt to define good by any natural property must commit *naturalistic fallacy*. So Moore claims that ethical naturalists, such as, Bentham, Mill, Spencer and Green commit naturalistic fallacy by defining moral terms with natural terms.

4. Conclusions

The philosophy behind definist fallacy is Butler's remark that everything is similar to itself and no two things are similar to each other. This logic for the Indefinability of a term with reference to another term seems to us convincing. We believe that good cannot be defined in term of pleasure or desire or any term whatsoever. We conclude that ethical terms cannot be defined by non-ethical terms. Thus, moral naturalists' attempt at such a definition inevitably leads to Moor's naturalistic fallacy. Therefore, these attempts at definition are invalid.

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