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THE MEANING OF GOOD IN MORAL SENSE

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Abstract

Amongst the sentences – ‘The car is good.’ and ‘Rambabu is good.’; though the term ‘good’ is used, the second one is moral. The point is, what is there in the second sentence that is why it is moral. In fact, the term good has not any fixed meaning rather it has more than one meaning especially from the perspective of morality. This paper is an attempt to clarify the moral meaning of good on the basis of different meta ethical theories.

Keywords: Good, Moral, Meaning, Naturalism, Intuitionism, Prescriptivism

One of the most important and basic issues in Meta-ethics is to find out the meaning of good in moral sense. Following Hume, as the fact and value are different, or there is a gap between these two, it is legitimate to ask whether value terms could be defined in lieu of natural terms. Specifically, whether the term good could be substituted with happiness or pleasure. The issue may be represented in other way also. When people argue for good, whether they are they disagreed in belief, or they are disagreed in attitude. If the first alternative is taken into consideration, then there should be one and only one type of ethics which is known as normative ethics. Because, ‘Naturalistic theorists, for instance, identify an ethical judgment with some sort of scientific statement, and so make normative ethics a branch



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of science.¹ On the other hand, if the second alternative is considered then we are to go for Ethical Non-cognitivism which includes Ethical Emotivism, Ethical Supernaturalism, Ethical Prescriptivism and so on. The analysis, whether these two types of ethics are essential in Metaethics or not; or, amongst these which type of ethics is better and so on are not the chief aim of this paper, rather the purpose of this paper is to explore this issue by considering the following schools of thought naturalism, intuitionism, emotivism, prescriptivism, the view of P. T. Geach & Stephen Toulmen, descriptivism and ethical realism.

According to the 'Naturalism', value properties are natural properties. They maintain that the value terms can be translated into factual or non-valuation words. For example, when it is said that, 'Ram acted wrongly.' it can be translated as 'Ram acted against the ideals of behavior adopted by his family or culture.' Even if the different Naturalistic philosophers believe in different definitions of the moral value predicate i.e. good, they are unified in this consideration that the moral value terms can, without loss, be understood in terms of factual predicates. They also opined that problems concerned with are factual problems whose solution depends on empirical evidence and research.

The simple idea behind Naturalism is that if we understand what value words means, then we can determine how to go about the justification of them. For example, if the term 'good' means 'that which is desired by the majority in a culture' we can show that something is good by showing that it is in fact desired in a culture. Thus, if someone says that 'freedom of press is good' the claim can be justified by the majority in the culture in question. Following Hudson, Naturalism may be represented as, 'Can moral judgments be replaced, without loss or change of meaning, by any statements of nonmoral fact? We shall see why some philosophers, ethical naturalists as they may be called, have thought

¹ Charles L. Stevenson: Facts and Values Studies in Ethical Analysis, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963, P–2



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that the answer is yes; while others— intuitionists, emotivists, prescriptivists— have thought that the answer is no.’²

Naturalism may be divided as subjective or objective. Some subjective Naturalistic philosophers hold that ‘right’ can be defined in terms of personal approvals of the individuals who utter statement about which is right and some of them proposed that what is good.³ But some of them hold that good or right is to be understood exclusively in terms of what is accepted in a society’s code. For example, Bentham has tried to define ‘evil’ by saying that ‘causing pain or displeasure’ or, by the influence of Darwin, when some of them have tried to suggest that ‘right’ means ‘confirming to the course of human evolution’. Although there may be different opinion concerning the justification of moral value among the subjective or objective view, but they are common in this matter that the presence of value property can be ascertain by empirical test and hence that justification in morals is factual in character.

Moore at first attacks the naturalistic method of defining a value predicate such as ‘good’. A definition, for Moore, is an analysis of that which a word stands for, and he has an almost chemical conception of ‘analysis’, to analyze, is to break it down in to its component parts. In his own language, ‘The most important sense of 'definition' is that in which a definition states what are the parts which invariably compose a certain whole; and in this sense 'good' has no definition because it is simple and has no parts. It is one of those innumerable objects of thought which are themselves incapable of definition, because they are the ultimate terms by reference to which whatever is capable of definition must

² Hudson, W.D.: Modern Moral Philosophy, Macmillan, New York, 1983, P – 11

³ A second mode of classification is that which, assuming values to be functions of interest, divides them in accordance with the several modalities of interest or the different relations which objects may sustain thereto: Such a classification has been virtually provided in the present work. – Perry, R.B.: general theory of Value, Its Meaning Masic Principles Construed in terms of Interest, Cambridge, 1950, P – 693



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be defined.’⁴ From this point of view, if the definition of ‘good’ is given, then we have to analyze it, that is to say, we have to break it down in to its component parts. But we cannot break ‘good’ or value predicates into factual units without losing their sense. The ethical-naturalists hold that they could discover ‘good’ i.e. the value property in the domain of factual property without losing its meaning. But this is impossible and commits ‘Naturalistic Fallacy.’

Again, if it is possible to define ‘good’ with the help of natural property, then value word could be substituted without alternation of meaning for the word or words that define it; but this substitution cannot be made, according to Moore, without committing a mistake. If the definition of ‘good’ would be possible, then it would be impossible to alter the meaning of a sentence by substituting the defining words. It is here; Moore’s well-known Open Question Test is applied. If ‘good’ simply means ‘desired’, he holds, we could never raise the question ‘Is it good? Anything is desired’. This query would be like asking ‘Is that which is desired, desired?’ Moore’s contention is that for anything whatever is desired, one can always ask meaning fully, ‘But is it good? ‘Thus, it is quite natural to say, ‘This is desired, but is it good?’ If this open question holds of all natural properties whatsoever, Moore argues then naturalism must be false.

According to Moore, the definition of ‘good’ is impossible. Actually, ‘good’ is a unique property. When we say that something is good, we are ascribing this property to it. We cannot, however, define ‘good’ through other terms in the dictionary: we can only say that ‘good’ refers to goodness, which is ultimate, unobservable, un-testable and un-analyzable property. As ‘good’ is nothing but a simple notion, so it is indefinable. Moore says, 'Therefore, there is no intrinsic difficulty in the contention that ‘good’ denotes a simple and indefinable quality.’⁵

But one may simply raise questions against Moore’s thesis that ‘good is nothing but a simple notion. It is not legitimate, to say that ‘good’ is a simple

⁴ Moore, G.E.: *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1903, P-61

⁵ Moore, G.E.: *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1903, P-62



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notion, because it is known intuitively, from the standpoint of Moore. Here, Moore's argument is based on common sense. So, Moore's discussion about good as a simple notion is based on his personal inspection, there is no good reason behind it.

Another argument, against Moore, is that he is concerned with stipulative or lexical definition. A stipulative definition is one which indicates how someone proposed to use a term. A lexical definition on the other hand, indicates how inconvenient usage of a term is described. These definitions deal with verbal linguistic matter, but ethics is concerned with real definition. So, Moore's objection against naturalism does not stand.

Emotivism, on the other hand, holds that moral utterances are like ejaculations. What Ayer says, 'Ethical argument is not formal demonstration. And not in a scientific sense either. For then the good ness or badness of the situation, the rightness or wrong ness of the action, would have to be something apart from the situation, something independently verifiable, for which the facts adduced as the reasons for the moral judgement were evidence.'⁶ They display our emotion. They are not cognizable, so, they are not justifiable. When we say, 'One ought to help his neighbors', we express our feelings of approval or disapproval, but such judgments are not true or false. The emotive theory is not always stated strictly in terms of emotion, for some Emotivists believe that moral language express ambitions, will, commitments, or personal decisions.

But Emotivism is rejected on the ground that if emotions and personal attitudes are the source of moral values, then it is doubtful if reason has any role to play in moral inquiry and justification and moral value judgments are not protected from arbitrariness.

R. M. Hare is chiefly responsible for bring out the essential features of a value judgment. The difference between a value judgment and a factual judgment

⁶ Ayer, A.J.: *Philosophical Essays*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 1972, pp.236-237



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is that a factual statement is simply descriptive and on the other hand, a statement of value is prescriptive. Naturalism is defective and there is some truth in the concept of the 'Naturalistic Fallacy', nevertheless, value has a factual ground. In spite of the fact that value has a factual foundation, value cannot be identified with fact for in that case it would not have the prescriptive force which is it actually has. Hare finds faults with "Intuitionism" also on the same ground. A value judgment cannot record or express our emotion or attitude because that again would not explain the prescriptive force. Moreover, there is no denying the fact that we reason or argue in support of the moral judgments we make. This is another reason why Hare imagines a factual basis of value judgments.

It is true that in case of determining what is good, a prescriptive force always play an important role. But the basis of prescription is grounded on choices. If someone is asked about his/her choices to by an antique chair, he/she would seldom give an answer, because as a lover of antique articles he/she would never disclose the secret formula of purchasing the antique chair.

Incandescently, we may refer to the thesis of P. T. Geach who has made an attempt to give an analysis of the meaning of the term good. In his opinion, the term good is an adjective, as distinguished from the class of predicative adjective. The statement 'X is a big flea.' illustrates Geach's notion of attributive adjective. The statement is not equivalent to 'X is big.' and 'X is a flea.' On the other hand, the statement 'X is a red book.' is equivalent to the statements— 'X is red.' and 'X is a book.' Because red is a predicative adjective. Good, being an attributive adjective, it is found that the construction of the meaning of 'good' is, here, supposed to refer to a thing or a fact? It is here precisely that Naturalism appears to be correct to a certain extent.

Stephen Toulmin in his book *An Examination of place of reason in Ethics* holds that 'an evaluative inference' a kind of inference which is peculiar to ethical arguments by which we pass from factual reasons to an ethical conclusion. Toulmin points out that there is no single method through which the validity of



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an argument is determined. The character of the logical demand changes along with the change in the field. Arguments are employed in such diverse field as mathematics, physics, art and ethics. So, there is no point in developing universal reason. The suggestion is that we must know the character of ethical field, before we deliberate upon the kind of reason to be employed. For example, we distinguish between valid and invalid moves in chess. There are rules for determining such validity. But such rules will not be applicable to a game of Cricket. Toulmin's contention is that the rule determining the validity of reasoning in ethics is also different. One must know the peculiarity of ethics before he pronounces upon the merit of ethical reasoning.

Descriptivism is, on the other hand, there is no significant difference between a moral value and a fact. They say that these two are logically connected to each other and it can be shown through the conceptual analysis of the term which is used to make the judgments.

But conceptual analysis is possible only when we presuppose how the moral values are used in a culture or in a language. These presuppositions will not be accepted. Again, it is very difficult to reject the distinction between fact and value which is made by David Hume and others.

Peter Railton in his book *Moral Realism* argues that morality is Real and Instrumental Reason helps to justify the moral values. According to him, the connection between value and fact is a causal connection i.e. means ends connection. In science, we empirically observe this connection. In ethics, this connection could be speculated through the help of Instrumental Reason.

The attempt of Peter Railton is really a special kind of attempt. But it is doubt full whether such a reason i.e. Instrumental Reason really exist or not.



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Again, it is also doubtful to up hold that morality is real as same as Natural objects are real.

From the above discussion, it is clear that there is no fixed theory which is necessary and sufficient to solve the issue. Each theory is partly correct, but still we have been searching for a new theory.