

Modern Moral Philosophy and its Problems

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Abstract

In this brief paper we undertake a reflection on the apparent failure of modern moral philosophical theories to provide any adequate guidance in moral decision-making. Anscombe, for example, contends that moral philosophy will never advance until there is an adequate moral psychology. MacIntyre laments that moral philosophers have not been clear about what their central questions are. This leads us to consider whether we need normative moral theories at all, leading to a discussion of the viability of intuitionism as a guide to moral actions, and if one of the central moral questions is about the nature of the good, whether it is as unanalysable as G.E. Moore proposed. We conclude that its unanalysability opens the door for a theological answer to the nature of the good. Finally, concluding that the nature of the good is not the expression of human passions, but is external to human beings, we provide a short classification of moral theories according to whether they are realist or anti-realist, cognitivist or non-cognitivist.

Keywords: good, moral realism, cognitivism, meta-ethics.

Introduction

Both Anscombe and MacIntyre in their different ways are critical of modern moral philosophy. Anscombe argues that it is not profitable to do moral philosophy because we do not have an adequate moral psychology. She also thinks that conceptions of moral obligation and moral duty should also be scrapped because they are remnants of a conception of ethics which has been long abandoned. She has little time for the English moral philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth century, contending that the differences between them are slight and unimportant. She adds that most of the moral philosophers, from Aristotle, Hume, Kant to Mill, had large faults and could not therefore be taken to be very

illuminating on the problems of moral philosophy.⁶⁶ MacIntyre, writing just a few years later, concurs with Anscombe's position, stating that moral philosophers have failed to answer the moral questions which they set themselves because they have failed to be clear about the questions themselves. In particular, he says they have failed to distinguish between "What actions ought we to perform?" and "What kinds of things ought to exist for their own sake?" The answer to the first question, MacIntyre proposes, is that we should perform those actions which will bring about more good than alternative actions. This answer, he observes, raises the question of what we mean by "good", a question which G. E. Moore answered by claiming that "good" is unanalysable.⁶⁷ If this is the case, then to say we should perform those actions which will bring about more good than others provides no answer to the question of what actions we ought to perform because we have no means of deriving a consensus about what we could possibly mean by "more good", since we don't have consensus about what we mean by "good" since it is analysable. From a metaethical perspective, without some conception of what is meant by the "good", our normative moral theories will be provide little guidance in helping us decide what actions we ought to perform. Arguably, for various other reasons, this is the situation in which modern ethical theories find themselves, rejected in favour of intuitionism and emotivism, in which moral decision-making is determined by the aphorism, "If it feels good do it."

In this paper we want to briefly examine firstly whether we really need ethical theories to decide how to act in moral situations, secondly, to consider different approaches to moral theorizing and to consider, thirdly, whether there is a plausible conception of "good" available to us. In relation to the first question, we will argue that intuitionism about the nature of moral good leads to emotivism and relativism, and so is too weak to provide moral direction. In response to the second question, we show that moral theories can be helpfully classified into moral realist and cognitivist moral theories, and moral anti-realist and non-cognitivist theories. Finally we propose that Moore is right to say that the "good" is unanalysable because the good is identifiable with God, a conclusion which is unlikely to satisfy most moral philosophers, since it

⁶⁶ G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1-2.

⁶⁷ Alisdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1966), 249.

transcends the boundaries of moral philosophy by stepping into theology.

The best known normative ethical theories and arguably the most discussed both in ethics classes in higher education and amongst moral philosophers are Natural Law Theory (NLT), Virtue Ethics, Kantian Ethics (deontology) and Consequentialism (utilitarianism). They have all been subjected to criticism and modifications over time in response to those criticisms. New Natural Law Theory, for example, as developed by John Finnis, argues that its formulation is not dependent on belief in God as the origin of the Law.⁶⁸ Similarly, virtue ethics does not depend on recognizing that the ultimate end of the pursuit of virtue is God.⁶⁹ Kantianism too has attempted to develop a better understanding of what Kant meant by the building of the kingdom of ends.⁷⁰ Consequentialism, and its more modern variant, utilitarianism, has been the most widely used theory in recent times.⁷¹ All of these theories are teleological theories because moral actions are taken to be directed towards some end. All of them, for various reasons, have been found wanting, particularly in providing guidance in difficult moral cases. In addition, given that most people are not familiar with normative ethical theories mentioned, they are unavailable for assisting moral decision-making. Though there are other ethical theories, and in what follows we will make some brief mention of these in the context of a discussion of the classification of moral theories, it does not appear that people use these either.

Do we need ethical theories to help us decide how to act morally?

Given that it is unlikely that the vast majority of people have studied any moral theories, the puzzle is how they make moral decisions, since ignorance of moral theory does not preclude them from making moral judgements or engaging in moral actions. Experience tells us that it is evident that people do make moral judgments and engage in moral actions, since it is impossible to live

⁶⁸ John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 2nd Ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶⁹ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁷⁰ Christine Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁷¹ R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd Ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

in society without doing so. The ability to do so does not seem to be the result of parents teaching their children anything about moral theories, though they will almost certainly have introduced them to moral principles. For example, “Don’t steal your brother’s cake, don’t hit your sister, don’t tell lies and do as you are told.” Lack of knowledge of moral theories is not an obstacle to moral decision-making. It is possible to hold that we do not need ethical theories to help us decide how we should act morally because we all have a moral compass that will enable us to decide what is the right thing to do in a particular situation. The idea of conscience, for example, stems from the conviction that human beings have at least a rudimentary conception of right and wrong. Thomas Aquinas, for example, acknowledges the significance of *synderesis*, the existence of conscience, as the starting point for morality, but argues that our conscience can err, if we remain ignorant of the natural law. This means we need a well-formed conscience for good moral decision-making.⁷² After all, it is quite possible that someone’s conscience is corrupted so that he does what is evil. Our conscience has to be schooled about what is virtuous and good. If we hold the view that we have a moral compass that is invariably right, then we are *intuitionist* about moral actions. That is, somehow we know what the right thing to do is. Standardly, intuitionists hold that moral principles are self-evident and non-natural, that is, not reducible to physico-chemical processes of some kind. Though there is a kernel of truth in intuitionism and it has regained popularity in recent decades, it leaves a large number of questions unanswered. For instance, even if we believe that there are self-evident moral principles, how do we know that our intuitions about a particular action are right? That is, how do we justify our intuitions about how to proceed in a particular situation? Moral principles are general principles, but it may not be enough to say to someone, “Don’t steal”, when he is faced with feeding his starving family. St. Basil famously says that not sharing what you have in abundance with the poor is robbing them of what is rightfully theirs, so it seems that if the poor man takes from the rich man to feed his family he is not stealing, only taking what is rightfully his.

Basil says: “Why are you rich while another is poor, unless it be that you may have the merit of a good stewardship, and he the reward of patience? It is the hungry man’s bread that you withhold, the naked man’s cloak that you have stored away, the shoe of the

⁷² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica I-II*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Bros., [Republished 1981], Westmoreland, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1948): Q. 79, Art. 13, Q. 19.

barefoot that you have left to rot, the money of the needy that you have buried underground: and so you injure as many as you might help.”⁷³

During the Covid pandemic with many small businesses ruined or faced with ruin and unable to pay their debts, let alone able to support their families and dependents, who could blame them if they turned to stealing to keep body and soul together. Aquinas comments that it is one thing to have general moral principles, quite another to be able to apply them in particular cases.⁷⁴ This leads us to think about the reasons for acting in a particular way and not another. Anscombe reminds us that Aristotle distinguished between intellectual and moral virtues, raising the question whether someone who fails to think something through and so fails to do something is morally blameworthy.⁷⁵ While she does not provide an example, there are plenty to draw on. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, a government official is charged with deciding when to lockdown a city when an outbreak of the virus occurs but makes a wrong judgment about the timing of the lockdown, advising it too late with the result that the virus spreads. Despite basing her decision on the best available information, she failed to interpret it correctly. The moral question is whether she is morally blameworthy because she did not think it through properly, a failure of intellectual understanding, or did not consult a sufficient number of medical experts who could have helped her reach a better decision. Another example is of government officials who fail to adequately implement hotel quarantine by not thinking through the required checks and balances with the result that many more people die of the virus than would otherwise have. Intuitions about what is morally right are not invariably correct and must be supplemented by an adequate understanding of particular situation.

Intuitionism

There are two kinds of intuitionism: (i) internalist intuitionism and (ii) externalist intuitionism. According to internalists, our intuitions arise in our minds and hence, intuitions about the nature of moral principles are given as self-evident principles in our minds. Moral principles are mind dependent. One

⁷³ St. Basil, *The Complete Works of St. Basil*, trans. Philip Schaff (Seattle: Amazon, 2016), xii, 18, Kindle.

⁷⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica I-II*, Q.95, Art. 2.

⁷⁵ Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 2.

explanation for this is to argue that moral principles are explicable in terms of moral psychology. Arguably, something like this is behind Anscombe's proposal that there is no point doing moral philosophy until an adequate philosophy of psychology has been developed.⁷⁶ A naturalistic conception of human psychology results in its reduction to physical activities in the brain, so that moral principles are explained in terms of particular kinds of brain activities that have evolved as some kind of survival mechanism. Evolutionary ethics argues that moral principles are the product of the evolution of social beings such as ourselves and not the result of a moral sensibility bestowed on human beings by an all-loving God.⁷⁷ Externalists hold that intuitions arise through the unconscious absorption of the moral principles of the social milieu in which an individual is raised. Hence, moral principles are not internally inscribed in the minds of individuals through some evolutionary process or through an endowment of the soul but are learned through interactions with other members of the community to which individuals belong. A similar naturalistic evolutionary story can be told in relation to how societies come to have the kinds of moral principles that they have. In this case, however, the explanation of how moral principles have developed is in terms of an evolutionary social psychology rather than psychology of the individual person.

While naturalistic, evolutionary psychological explanations for the development of moral principles may be attractive, they do not address the fundamental question of how we come to regard some actions as morally good and right. It is no explanation to state that moral principles, such as "Don't steal", "don't commit adultery", "don't murder" have evolutionary advantages because they minimize social conflict with a community thus ensuring its survival and that this is synonymous with what is good and right. This is because it is not self-evident that these are synonymous. That is, it remains a value judgment that what has evolutionary advantages is morally good and right. Some environmentalists have questioned this by arguing that human beings are a pestilence on the natural world and it would be better off without them. If so, then the very things which confer evolutionary advantages on human beings are bad for the planet, rather than good and so it would be morally right if human beings became extinct. The point is not that

⁷⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁷⁷ Anthony Flew, *Evolutionary Ethics* (London: MacMillan, 1967).

Scott M James, *An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

the radical environmentalists are right, rather that the argument that evolutionary advantages which ensure the survival of the species are synonymous with what is good is false. It is false because evolutionary advantages that contribute to the survival of the species are only good if it is already assumed that survival of the species is a good. It is not self-evidently so and any intuition that it is good needs explication.

A critique of intuitionism is provided by Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic*, based on his positivist account of language and meaning. Only those sentences could be said to have meaning are those which are empirically verifiable or can be connected to such sentences. This leads him to adopt an emotivist account of moral statements in which they express an individual's likes or dislikes about particular kinds of moral actions. The problem is that this leads immediately into a relativistic morass, since there is no conception of a moral law to appeal to that everyone is bound by. Ayer's reduction of moral statements to expressions of feelings about certain states of affairs while providing a critique of intuitionism leaves us worse off since it reduces moral actions to a matter of taste and provides no explanation why we regard some actions as evil.

Ayer proposes that there are four kinds of ethical propositions: (i) propositions which express definitions of ethical terms; (ii) propositions which describe moral experience and their causes; (iii) propositions expressing moral imperatives; and (iv) propositions expressing actual moral judgements. Ayer thinks that moral philosophy is generally only concerned with the first kind of propositions, while the second kind fall into moral psychology. Exhortations to act in certain kinds of ways, Ayer does not think belong to moral philosophy at all, since they are statements of commands. This is because typically commands are not statements about states of affairs in the world that can be true or false but are directions to action. Thus, "Do not steal!" is much like "Manchester United!", where we are exhorting our team to greater heights of competitive play on the field.⁷⁸ He does not think the last kinds of propositions belong among ethical propositions, because judgments about moral propositions are expressions of what someone feels about a certain action. Since someone else can feel something different, a judgement that it is wrong to steal, for instance, can be neither true or false. Since it can be neither true nor false, such a statement is factually meaningless since it does not correspond to

⁷⁸ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 110.

any empirically verifiable feature of the world.⁷⁹ Ayer holding that moral propositions have no connections to the real world of human affairs but are just expressions of desires that individuals act upon. In getting rid of intuitions, he also throws out our moral compass.

If moral philosophy is unable or unwilling to assist us in deciding what actions are morally right or morally wrong, then the criticisms of Anscombe and MacIntyre are apt. Once we allow that moral propositions are not prescriptive about what constitutes morally good action, then they reduce to merely descriptions of what human beings do. That most human beings regard certain actions as morally wrong is explained empirically by theorizing that most human beings have been socialized through hegemonic power structures in society to hold particular moral principles. Once these power structures are interrogated and overthrown, they can be replaced by a new moral order. The problem, however, is that if the original moral power structure is not based on objective moral principles, then neither can be the new moral order. We simply replace one moral set of moral principles with another.

Ayer's analysis of moral statements, which are statements of value, was concerned with whether they could be reduced to empirical propositions. He did not have anything much to say about the analysis of what we mean "good" or "right", or whether one can be reduced to the other. Along with Moore, however, in an attack on utilitarianism and certain kinds of subjectivism, he held that "X is good" is not synonymous with "X is pleasant."⁸⁰ He distinguished between those sentences which express normative or prescriptive ethical propositions and sentences which express descriptive ethical propositions. "X is wrong" could mean that it is a normative principle that "X is wrong" or it could mean that in a particular society, "X is wrong" is empirically the case, that is, a particular society hold that it is wrong. If we assume that there are normative ethical principles, argued Ayer, we are accepting the existence of a class of propositions which cannot be verified by empirical means and must arise from some mysterious form of intuition. The difficulty, says Ayer, is that different individuals may have different intuitions about what is morally good. If this is so, there does not appear to be any way to adjudicate between these positions.⁸¹ Ayer proposed that moral propositions are a form of expressivism, that is, expressing a particular emotional stance about a moral judgment. That is, like Hume, Ayer thinks that moral evaluations

⁷⁹ Ibid., 111-112.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 107.

⁸¹ Ibid., 108-109.

are nothing more than expressions of approval or disapproval of certain actions. A moral statement is an expression of individual subjective feelings about a particular action. As we have remarked, this seems to be the position that the modern world has reached: with no moral law to guide it, only evanescent feelings remain. This is an unsatisfactory result, which forces us to look again at how the objectivity of moral principles might be secured. This leads us back to a consideration of what we mean by “good” and “right”.

Good and right

The relationship between “good” and “right” requires explication, since the two are not synonymous, though it seems to follow that what is morally good is also morally right to do. Here we will concentrate on the “good”. What we mean by good occupied the pre-Socratics, who connected it happiness, proposing a variety of ways in which happiness could be understood. Thus, the Stoics saw it as indifference to both pain and pleasure, while the Epicureans held that it was to be found in pleasure, understood as harmonious living. Socrates, as Plato relates, held that the good, which is happiness, was to be found in virtue. Aristotle, who discusses the nature of the good in *Nichomachean Ethics*, proposes that the good was to be found in the excellences of things. Hence, a good knife was one which performed its function of cutting things well, a good musician was one who played his musical instruments well and entertained his listeners.⁸² Good, according to Aristotle was connected to *eudemonia*, happiness in the broadest sense, and for Augustine, as well as for Aquinas, the ultimate good for human beings is to be with God. As Augustine says, “*You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.*”⁸³ *Pursuit of the good, however, is not a single-minded self-centred concern by individuals for their own happiness alone, since, as social beings, our well-being depends on our relationships with others. Individuals cannot exercise the virtues, displaying courage, temperance, justice and practical wisdom except in concert with others. Classical theories of ethics concentrated on the nature of the good, whereas more modern theories, such as deontology, have focused on our responsibilities and obligations to others and hence on what is right to do. Right, however, is not divorced from the good,*

⁸² Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

⁸³ Augustine, *The Confessions and Enchiridion*, trans. Albert Cook Outler (Louisville, Kentucky: The Westminster Press, 1956): Book 1, Ch. 1.

since doing what is right is related to doing what is just, and the just person is a good person. To do what is morally good is to do what is morally right. Hence it is reasonable to connect what is morally right with what is morally good.

The question of what is meant by “good” has been a central question for meta-ethics, as we have stated, since the pre-Socratics. G.E. Moore took up the question in his *Principia Ethica*, originally published in 1903. Moore’s central thesis was that ethical terms were non-natural, that is, they were not amenable to empirical study. Thus, he denied that the “good” could be reduced to “pleasure” or “desire”. The good was not a psychological property. Moore’s argument came to be known as the Open Question Argument.⁸⁴ What is interesting is that Moore assumes, against the anti-realists of his time, such as C.L. Stevenson, Herbert Spencer and T.H. Green, that there are moral facts, which is to say that it is true that some moral actions are good and some are evil, independently of what anyone might think of them.

Assuming that what is good is also what is right, Moore’s Open Question Argument refutes all claims that “goodness” is analytically or *a priori* equivalent to a term ascribing natural features to acts. Moore concludes that “good” and, we would add, “right” are unanalysable. Moore says that good is undefinable.⁸⁵ One form of the argument is the following: (i) An act has a property which is causally responsible for the tendency of acts towards, say, social stability; (ii) It is not goodness, since it is an open question whether such acts are good; (iii) Therefore goodness cannot be *a priori* equivalent to this property. Unanalysability of the good can be seen, according Moore, by considering whether when we think that something is good because it satisfies our desires we can still ask whether what satisfies our desires really is good. For instance, suppose we desire to obtain our degree – it seems obvious that since we desire the achievement of this goal that we regard it as good. Hence, directing our energies in its achievement is good. The problem that Moore identifies is not that satisfaction of our desires could not be held to be synonymous with good, but rather that it is not analytically the case that satisfaction of our desires is equivalent to what is good. For instance, in proposition 1) Satisfaction of our desires is good, good is not synonymous with “satisfaction of our desires”, as the tautology, 2) Satisfaction of our desires is satisfaction of our desires, is not informative. Claiming

⁸⁴ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 54-55.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

that something is good requires a further explanation. Proposition 1) is not an empty statement, since the satisfaction of some desires may not be good but evil. Describing something as good ascribes a substantive property to the subject of a sentence. We have to provide an argument, and this will depend on more than our feeling that accomplishing a particular goal is good, since it really has to be good independently of our feelings about it. Good cannot just reduce to being what an individual thinks is good, since if something is good it is good whatever any individual may think and so is universally good. Good for Moore is neither a natural property nor a metaphysical property. While Moore considers the good is unanalysable, it is possible to propose that good underwrites all of creation and is immanent within it, but this does not solve how the satisfaction of particular desires should be linked to what is good or that satisfaction of some desires is evil.

Nevertheless, the thought that good underwrites all of creation suggests that a substantive conception of the good can be elaborated if it is recognised that the good, the source of everything, is the Creator, the source of all being. Good is unanalysable because it is the infinite and mysterious God Himself who has willed the universe to be. What God has willed to be takes a particular form, as Genesis says, God moved over the darkness, and created heaven and earth (*Genesis* 1.1). One solution is to propose that the good is something which is not just unanalysable but refers to transcendent properties inherent in the nature of created beings and in the moral actions of human beings that are morally good. Throughout *Genesis* chapter 1 the author repeats that God saw what he had created and it was good. What is good is what God has made, and as, Aquinas notes, the source of moral law is the eternal law that governs all of God's creation.⁸⁶ The moral law is not the invention of human beings, but is external, since it is an expression of the Divine order that the Creator has willed for the good of his creation. To live well human beings need to live according to what has been ordained as fulfilling of human nature. This is also Aristotle's insight, that what is good for human beings is to live in accord with their natures, that is, according to the moral law. Morally good actions will be those actions which can be variously described as virtuous, dutiful and upholding basic human goods that enable human beings to realise their fulfilment, which is to return to their Creator. A theological understanding of what is good adds to a substantive conception of the good.

⁸⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, Q.93, Art. 3.

Another approach to explicating the good is to deny there is any property corresponding to the good, and argue that morally good actions are those which express the preferences of agents. Hume, perhaps the originator of expressivism, held that moral statements express the particular sentiments an individual has towards certain kinds of actions. Hence, since someone dislikes theft, she expresses a negative sentiment towards it. Similarly, someone who reacts negatively to the torture of innocent children, expresses disgust and loathing to such torture and hence, regards it as morally wrong. Hume observes that most human beings have similar sentiments about various actions, and hence, it is not surprising that a majority of people hold certain moral actions as morally wrong. In more recent times, governments, corporations and businesses have ruled that unvaccinated people are prohibited from entering shopping centres, restaurants, sporting events and other public areas. While many support such measures, there are those who regard such discrimination as morally wrong. Popular and majority sentiment which supports discrimination against the unvaccinated is not necessarily morally good or right and hence does not settle the question of what is meant by the good. As we have seen, in discussing Ayer's rejection of intuitionism, that this leads to a quagmire of relativism, even if a consensus about moral propositions can be achieved.

Meta-ethical Theories and Moral Propositions

What we mean by "good" is one of the central pre-occupations of meta-ethics. The dividing line between approaches to what "good" means falls between those who think that there are moral facts and those who do not. Intuitionists, both internalists and externalists can be divided between those who think that there are moral facts inscribed in the human mind and those who believe that there are no moral facts independent of human beings rather that moral propositions are human constructs. Our discussion began with the question whether intuition was sufficient in moral decision-making and it soon became apparent that it was not enough. Not only could intuition not provide sufficient guidance in difficult moral situations, but it also could not provide an adequate account of what we meant by "good". Emerging from a consideration of these meta-ethical theories is the realisation that the normative ethical theories which we commonly hold divide along axes established by our consideration of the question of how we ought to act. Intuitionists fall into two camps, those who are moral realists, who think there are moral facts and those who are moral anti-

realists, who do not. This provides one axis. A second axis is provided by those who think moral facts can be known and those who do not – that is, cognitivists and non-cognitivists.

Most moral realists will also be cognitivists, since they think that it can be demonstrated that some moral statements are actually true. In the same way, a statement in the moral sphere, such as, “Lying is wrong,” points to an objective feature of the world and can be established by pointing to a feature of the world. Anti-realist cognitivists would hold statements in the moral sphere can be about what is true or false, but this is not about features of the world, but about the moral domain that human beings have constructed. If there is a moral fact about the world, it will be so because human beings have created it as a means of constructing relationships with one another and regulating them. They can, however, be cognitivist, since they can accept that within the construction of morality there can be moral statements which are true or false, but that these are not about the world, but about a socially fabricated subjective human construct.

The anti-realist non-cognitivist like the anti-realist cognitivist believes that morality is a socially fabricated construct, but denies that there are any statements that are made within that construct which are either true or false. At best, in this case, moral statements will be conventions, agreed to by human beings. Hume argues that morality is an expression of likes and dislikes, and because human beings are very similar to one another, it is not surprising that they will have the same likes and dislikes. What disgusts one person is very likely to disgust another and what one person likes is very probably going to be something that is liked by another. Morality in this case largely reduces to a matter of taste.⁸⁷

There are many different meta-ethical theories and they will fit the four classifications that we have outlined to different degrees, as there is always some argument about whether a theory is cognitivist or non-cognitivist, as well the extent to which it is realist or anti-realist. We briefly discuss some examples of theories which fall within each of the classifications, bearing in mind that there are variations amongst all of them. Debates between different proponents of various meta-ethical theories have dominated discussion of moral philosophy for centuries and anti-realists have some justification in their claim that the lack of agreement about the basic concepts of morality point to its lack of reality and that it is really about desires and preferences.

⁸⁷ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

Moral theories which fall in the moral realist and cognitivist category will have their foundation in some form of naturalism which claims that there are certain features of what it is to be a human being that dictate that our ways of acting towards them. Natural Law theory, for instance, is a moral realist and cognitivist theory, since it claims that there is a distinct human nature and that by examining the features of human experience, it is possible to determine what is good for human beings. What is good for human beings is not a matter for conjecture, but is an objective feature of the natural world. The truth of statements such as “Killing of innocent human beings is wrong” can be established by reference to the basic human goods, one of which is the good of life. Another theory which falls in this category is Virtue Ethics, which also claims that it is possible to specify in what the good for human beings consists. For the virtue ethicist, human flourishing or human fulfillment is obtained through the practice of virtue. What is good is what leads to virtue and virtue, in turn, leads to the ultimate end of human beings which is happiness.

In the moral realist and non-cognitivist category are those moral realists who agree that there some moral statements which are true or false, but as a matter of fact, it is not possible to establish which are true or false. It would seem to follow that we also deny the third condition, namely that there are ordinary means to establish the truth or falsity of moral statements. Error theorists, such as J.L. Mackie hold that it is the case that some moral statements are true or false, but as a matter of fact it is not possible to establish these as such.⁸⁸ What is means is that though there is agreement that there are moral statements which are true or false, there is no agreement about which statements are. Consequentialism, for example, holds, in its simplest form, that an action is good if on balance it is better to act in one way rather than another. Put another way, an act is good if it leads to the greater good for the greater number. Here we can agree that some statements can be true or false, but which ones are true can never be determined ahead of assessing a particular situation.

In the anti-realist and cognitivist category the claim is that our moral theories are a human construction and so do not appeal to an independent metaphysical reality. Anti-realism is generally taken to imply a form of idealism, which to say that whatever it is that we know about the world is mind-dependent. In its classical formulation, idealism claims that all that we can know about the

⁸⁸ J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1977).

world is our perception of it and more strongly, that the world just is perception. Moral anti-realism, therefore, holds that moral theory is constructed from our experiences which shape our accounts of what is morally right and morally good, independently of an objective reality. That is, what is morally right and good will depend in some way on normative judgments about how rational agents will act in certain circumstances. Kantian ethics is usually thought to fall into the anti-realist and cognitivist camp, though it is true that some Kantians defend a realist interpretation of Kantian ethics. Arguably, Kant can be defended as an anti-realist because he holds that we cannot know the *noumenon*, the thing-in-itself, only the phenomenon, how it acts on us, though it is to be acknowledged that this far from a decisive argument in relation to Kantian ethics.⁸⁹

In the fourth category, the anti-realist and anti-cognitivist quadrant, theories deny that there are any moral statements which are true or false, from which it also follows that they deny that we are capable of knowing any moral statements which are true or false. It also follows that there are no means for establishing the truth or falsity of moral statements. Theories which fall into this category will be various subjectivist theories, including expressivism, emotivism and intuitivism. Expressivism, for example, claims that moral statements are expressions of particular preferences. Moral statements are descriptions of what moral agents hold about particular actions and situations without holding that what is described refers to an objective state of affairs. Thus, if we claim that torture of children is wrong, this is because we are expressing a particular attitude towards torture of children. We do not like it or are disgusted by it. On the other hand, if we say that we like bondage and sado-masochism, we are expressing our liking for it and hence it is not morally wrong, but morally right. A moral theory which falls into this category denies that there is an objective moral realm.

Conclusion

As is apparent, there is a great diversity of views about the nature of the good, about what is morally right or wrong and whether the truth or falsity of moral judgments can be established. Informing these questions are differing conceptions of human nature, the relationships between persons and of the ultimate end of human beings. Different understandings of these will, to a great

⁸⁹ I. Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary McGregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

extent, determine our moral commitments. From the diversity of meta-ethical theories emerge a number of normative ethical theories that assume that concepts such as the good, positive and negative freedom, moral rightness and wrongness are understood. Where most normative ethical theories agree is the need for the principles of moral decision-making to be universal. That is, the moral principles that guide our decision-making need to be able to be applied consistently and rationally in a variety of contexts and circumstances. This does not mean that there will not be differences of opinion among people about what is thought to be morally right, even when they apply the same set of normative moral principles to the same case. Differences will be the result of different perspectives of the state of affairs on which a moral judgment is going to be made and the variety of assessments possible that can be made of a particular situation.

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