**Block-3**

# Meta-Ethics

# BLOCK INTRODUCTION

**Block 3** "Meta-Ethics" comprises with five units. In this block learner will understand the meta-ethics as well as major meta-ethical theories. In this block we will discuss naturalism, non-naturalism, subjectivism, emotivism and prescriptivism.

**Unit 10** "Introduction to Meta-ethics" discusses definition and nature of meta-ethics. This unit also presents the distinction among the various ethics; normative ethics, meta-ethics, applied ethics. This unit elucidates the various kinds of meta-ethical theories.

**Unit 11** "Ethical Naturalism and Non-naturalism" discusses the distinction between naturalism and non-naturalism and also deals with the various kinds of naturalistic and non-naturalistic ethical theories. In this unit learner will also study G E Moore's position on the question, what is moral property?

**Unit 12** "Subjectivism: David Hume" deals with various versions of subjectivism. Learner will also enable to understand the David Hume's version of subjectivism.

**Unit 13** "Emotivism: Charles Stevenson" discusses the presuppositions and arguments of emotivism. The main focus of this unit is on emotivism of Charles Stevenson.

**Unit 14** "Prescriptivism: R M Hare" deals with the meta-ethical view called prescriptivism. This unit discusses the Hare's version of Prescriptivism and significance of prescriptivism in moral philosophy.

# UNIT 10  INTRODUCTION TO META-ETHICS*

**Structure**

## 10.0  OBJECTIVES

In this unit learner will enable to understand,

- the meaning of metaethics,

- its comparison with other branches of ethics like normative ethics and applied ethics

- different types of metaethical theories and their presuppositions, framework etc.

## 10.1.  INTRODUCTION

Ethics is the philosophical study of moral principles. It is the study of what are good and bad ends to pursue in life, and what is right and wrong to do in our everyday life. Its primary aim is to determine how one ought to live and what one ought to do in life. We can also say that it is a systematic study of the concepts, guiding rules and theories that are involved in our right and wrong behaviour. Ethics is broadly divided into three main branches: normative ethics, applied ethics and metaethics. Normative ethics examines standards for rightness and wrongness of actions. Normative ethics is the study of norms, codes of conduct, rules that make actions right or wrong. This may involve articulating the good habits or virtues that we should acquire, the duties that we should follow, or the consequences of our behaviour on others. Applied ethics attempts to apply the ethical theories in particular situations. It involves examining specific controversial issues, such as abortion, infanticide, animal rights, capital punishment, human cloning and so on. While normative ethics and applied ethics focus on what is moral or what one ought to do, metaethics focuses on what morality itself is. Metaethics investigates the ethical principles and where they come from, and

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what they actually mean. Metaethics serves as a foundation for normative and applied ethics.

Let us understand the distinction between applied ethics, normative ethics and metaethics with the help of an analogy of football game. "Here different things associated with football will be equated with different disciplines of ethics. There are the *players*, whom we can think as applied ethicists. Applied ethicists are interested in moral questions regarding particular issues such as whether it is wrong to have an abortion, whether suicide is permissible, whether we have an obligation to donate money, whether human cloning is wrong and so on. Then there is a *referee*, who helps to interpret the rules that players are following. The referee can be thought of as normative ethicist. The normative ethicists are interested in questions regarding underlying principles that guide the applied ethicist. For example, in working out what is right and wrong, should only the consequences matter? What kind of person should we become? Finally, there is the football *analyst* who does not kick a ball or interpret the rules for the players but tries to understand and comment on what is going on in the game itself. This is like the metaethicist, who asks questions about the very practice of ethics. In this way metaethics differs from applied and normative ethics."

This unit will provide a detailed introduction of what metaethics is and the different types of metaethical theories.

## 10.2  DEFINITION

"Metaethics is the attempt to understand the metaphysical, epistemological, semantic, and psychological, presuppositions and commitments of moral thought, talk, and practice." (*Plato Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, entries on Metaethics). Metaethics is an enquiry into the nature and meaning of our moral judgements and actions. The aim of metaethics is to investigate where ethical principles come from, and what they mean. For example, when we say, Honesty is good, then what we want to say, or in other words, what do we mean when we use the term good in a moral judgement. The word Metaethics is coined by joining two words "meta" and "ethics". Here, the word "meta" is often misunderstood as being "beyond" or "after" ethics, on the contrary it means to "think about" or "sit apart from" ethics which means to go into the fundamental of the ethics. It takes a bird's-eye view on the ethical practices as metaethicists go deep into the fundamental questions of morality and try to make sense of what is going on. Thus, one should not think of metaethics as something beyond or distant from ethics instead it is more fundamental and goes even deeper to the basic question of what morality itself is.

Though the word "metaethics" was coined in the twentieth century, the basic philosophical concern regarding the status and foundations of moral language, properties and judgements goes back to the ancient Greek philosophy in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. In Plato's *Euthyphro*, Socrates' defence of the separation of divine commands from moral values is considered a forerunner of modern metaethical debates regarding the secular foundation of moral values. Even in Aristotle's Book one of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, grounding of virtue and happiness in the biological and political nature of human, has also been examined from the perspective of contemporary metaethics. Many Medieval accounts of morality that ground values in religious texts, commands, or emulation

may also be understood as defending certain metaethical positions. In contrast, Immanuel Kant proposed the foundation for ethics that was not based on the religious sectarian differences. Kant's discussions in his *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals* of a universal "moral law" necessitated by reason have been fertile ground for the articulation of many contemporary neo-Kantian defences of moral objectivity. Metaethics as a branch of ethics became prominent in the twentieth century with the writings of G. E. Moore.

Metaethics deals with following questions: Are there moral facts? If there are moral facts, what is their origin? And how do we learn about the moral facts, if there are any? What do exactly people mean when they use the words like "good" and "right"? Where do moral values come from—what is their source and foundation? Are some things morally right or wrong for all people at all times, or does morality instead vary from person to person, context to context, or culture to culture? These are some of the basic questions which are acknowledged in metaethics, which sets a foundation for normative and applied ethics. The central question is the question of whether any moral claims are true, and whether it is rational to commit oneself to acting morally. This question can only be answered by taking a position on the correctness or cogency of people's moral convictions. Metaethics, in dealing with the question of whether ethical sentences express propositions, is divided broadly into two branches which are Ethical Cognitivism and Ethical Non-Cognitivism, which are further divided into many branches.

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**Check Your Progress I**

Note:   a)  Use the space provided for your answer

          b)  Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1.   Differentiate between metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics.

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## 10.3   BRANCHES OF METAETHICS

Metaethical theories can be broadly categorised into two branches: ethical cognitivism and ethical non-cognitivism. In ethical cognitivism, ethical sentences can express beliefs which are truth bearers and therefore they can be regarded as true or false. Whereas in ethical non-cognitivism, in contrast to ethical cognitivism, ethical sentences do not express beliefs.

### 10.3.1  Ethical Cognitivism

Ethical Cognitivism is a metaethical theory according to which (1) moral judgements can express beliefs and (2) they are *truth-apt*, which means the

statements can be described as true or false. Psychological Cognitivism advocates that a moral statement is an utterance of our belief about a moral action. When someone makes claims like "killing someone is wrong" or "Abortion is morally wrong", then he is expressing a belief. These statements, "killing someone is wrong" and "Abortion is morally wrong", can be true or false which is called *truth-apt*. The view that moral statements can be true or false is known as Semantic Cognitivism. According to the Semantic Cognitivists, our moral statements are made true or false based on how accurately they refer to the specific moral aspect of the world. What is it that makes them true or false? Semantic cognitivists view moral language as essentially descriptive in nature. Just like the statement "cat is on the mat" makes a descriptive claim that the cat is sitting on the mat and it is true or false based on whether the cat is actually sitting on the mat or not. This statement expresses a belief about how the world actually is. In the similar way moral statements also make descriptive claims and their truth and falsity is based on the external world or state of affairs. Our moral claims will be true when our descriptions about moral claims correspond (represent; as it is) with the external world or facts or state of affairs, if they do not correspond with the external world, facts or state of affairs, then they will be false. Ethical Cognitivists take the views of psychological cognitivism and semantic cognitivism together, when they claim that moral statements are the expression of truth-apt beliefs and their truth value (truth and falsity) can be determined only on the basis of their correspondence with the facts or external world. Ethical cognitivism includes moral realism, moral subjectivism and error theory.

### 10.3.1.1 Moral Realism

Moral realism holds that the moral statements express a belief and these beliefs are regarded as mind-independent facts of the world. We find two basic premises of moral realism, one is that moral facts exist and second is that the moral facts exist independently of human mind. When we say that moral facts are objective and independent it means that they do not depend on beliefs and attitudes of an individual or on norms of any culture. In believing that "killing someone is wrong" does not make killing wrong, what world makes killing wrong is the presence of actual moral property of wrong (objective and mind-independent) associated with the act of killing. Moral realism is divided into two varieties: ethical naturalism and ethical non-naturalism.

a.  **Ethical Naturalism**

Ethical naturalism holds that there are objective and natural moral properties. They hold that we have empirical knowledge of the moral truths. Naturalism may be defined widely so as to include all reductionist ethical theories which explain the function of ethical terms in terms of natural phenomena, i.e. so as to include hedonists and utilitarian theories, account of 'good', 'ought' and 'right' in terms of satisfaction of desires, as well as propositional and non-cognitivist version of subjectivism and relativism. Advocates of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill define moral goodness in terms of actions that promote greatest amount of (qualitative happiness, especially in Mill's version of Utilitarianism) happiness for the greater number of people. That is why we can say that these philosophers see 'good' as a natural property (i.e., We can measure happiness).

**b. Ethical Non-Naturalism**

In ethical non-naturalism moral properties are entirely different from the natural properties. G.E. Moore is the main contender of non-naturalism. According to Moore moral properties do not exist in the outside world like natural properties and they are fundamentally simple non-natural properties. Here goodness is not a natural property which can be known through the empirical means. Non-naturalists believe that we can know the presence of moral properties (for example goodness) *intuitively* with the help of moral sense present in us. G. E. Moore objects the view that moral properties are natural properties. Moore believes that moral properties are fundamentally simple. He criticizes the view of identifying moral properties with natural properties which he named as the *naturalistic fallacy*. Moore refutes equating of moral properties like 'goodness' with the non-moral properties, whether naturalistic or supernatural.

### 10.3.1.2 Moral Subjectivism

Moral Subjectivism holds that there are no objective moral properties and it is, therefore, a form of moral anti-realism. According to moral subjectivism moral statements are made true of false by the attitudes or conventions of the people. Here moral statements imply attitudes, opinions or feelings of the people. So when one says "euthanasia is wrong and should be impermissible", even though it seems that this statement could be true or false, it is just an expression of dislike or disagreement with euthanasia. It is similar to saying "I don't like euthanasia". In ethical subjectivism there is individual subjectivism and cultural relativism. Individual subjectivism means subjectivism or experience of an individual. While, in cultural relativism, there are many cultures and these many cultures have different values or morals, due to which it is called relative. Ethical subjectivism includes ideal observer theory and divine command theory

**a. Ideal Observer Theory**

The ideal observer theory offers an account of the truth and falsity of moral judgments in terms of the approval or disapproval of an ideal observer. An ideal observer is "a person who makes moral judgments without being influenced by the sort of contaminating biases or prejudices that tend to arise from the occupation of some particular point of view". (Plato Stanford Encyclopedia, entry on Impartiality.) Ideal observer is perfectly rational, impartial, imaginative. The ideal observer observes everything and has an ideal concept about everything. Richard B. Brandt believes that the qualifications to know every ethically relevant fact are not relevant in order to be an ideal observer. He says, "...we can cut the qualification still more. The ideal observer need not really know these [ethically relevant] facts; he merely has to believe them, correctly, and with perfect vividness, to be facts-which of course is to be distinguished from knowing them." (Richard B. Brandt, "The Definition of an "Ideal Observer" Theory in Ethics", 1955) There should be no partiality, it should be neutral and the concepts must be cleared. Adam Smith and David Hume are recognised to have espoused the early versions of the ideal observer theory and Roderick Firth is responsible for the modern version of ideal observer theory.

**b. Divine Command Theory**

Divine command theory holds that morality is dependent upon God. According to this theory moral facts are determined by the commandments of God. Thus, a morally right action is the one which God commands. For divine command theorists, God exists outside time and space. The content of these divine commands varies based on the particular religion. While they all commonly hold the claim that morality and moral obligations ultimately depend on God. This theory has been defended by Thomas Aquinas, Robert Adams, and Philip Quinn.

### 10.3.1.3 Error Theory

Error theory holds a view that ethical statements can be propositions, but that all ethical propositions are false. It means that we are generally in error when we make any moral statement. The prominent proponent of error theory was J. L. Mackie. He advocates that our moral utterances are expressions of those beliefs that have truth-value (Truth-apt belief; belief that can be classified either as true or as false). But he rejects realist position that states that these utterances always correspond with the external world. There is always a possibility of committing mistake or having error in our moral judgement or statement. Without having moral properties, the description of the world in terms of truth-apt beliefs is not possible, so he rejects that these beliefs can be true if these are not linked with any moral properties. Error theory includes moral nihilism and moral scepticism.

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**Check Your Progress II**

Note:    a)    Use the space provided for your answer

b)    Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1.    Define Ethical Cognitivism.

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2.    What are the theories that are included in Ethical Cognitivism? Define briefly.

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## 10.3.2 Ethical Non-Cognitivism

Ethical non-cognitivism is a metaethical view according to which ethical sentences do not express a belief or proposition and thus, cannot be regarded as true or false. According to non-cognitivists, when people utter moral statements they are not expressing a state of mind, say a belief, or cognition. Rather, they are expressing non-cognitive attitudes like desire, attitude or emotion. For example, "killing is wrong" is an expression of disapproval. Non-cognitivists claim that moral claims (approval and disapproval of moral actions) cannot be regarded as true or false.

Psychological Non-Cognitivists state that our moral sentences are not based on beliefs, but they are rather based on feelings, desires, emotions, preferences or attitudes. According to Semantic Non-Cognitivists, when we say "killing is wrong" we do not describe any moral characteristic of the world. We are just expressing our feeling or attitude towards the act of killing. Attitudes and feelings are not truth-apt, as they do not refer to anything in the world, therefore, they cannot be true or false.

Ethical non-cognitivism consists of non-declarative speech act, which means that moral claims can exist without their truth or falsity values. The example of ethical non-cognitive statement (non-declarative speech act) is the utterance like "Don't kill". This utterance "Don't kill" has no truth value; it cannot be true or false.

The theories which are included in ethical non-cognitivism are: emotivism, quasi realism and universal prescriptivism.

### 10.3.2.1 Emotivism

Emotivism is a view that ethical sentences express only emotional expressions of one's own attitudes. A. J. Ayer and C. L. Stevenson were the defenders of emotivism.

> According to Emotivism moral statement that "murder is wrong" is simply an expression of emotion against the act of murdering. It gives formal linguistic voice to what is essentially a negative "boo" to murder. Indeed, Emotivism is referred to as the "boo/ hurrah" metaethical theory; when we claim that something is morally wrong we boo that action and when we claim that something is morally right we hurrah that action. (Mark Dimmock and Andrew Fisher, *Ethics for A-Level*)

A. J. Ayer claims that moral statements have no factual meanings. Moral utterances or statements are not proposition. That is why moral utterances cannot be classified as true or false. He states in "The Emotive Theory of Ethics",

> 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. The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker. If now I generalise my previous statement and say, 'Stealing money is wrong,' I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning – that is, expresses no proposition which can be true or false. It is as if I had written 'Stealing money!!' – where the shape and thickness of the exclamation marks show, by a suitable convention, that a special sort of moral disapproval is the feeling which is being expressed. It is clear that there is nothing said here which can be true or false. ("The Emotive Theory of Ethics", p. 124)

This is how Ayer argued that ethical statements are always related to individuals and they lack truth value. C. L. Stevenson, following Ayer, says that ethical sentences express the speaker's feelings.

### 10.3.2.2 Quasi Realism

Quasi realism is a metaethical view with the claim that ethical utterances are the projection of emotional attitudes or emotions as if emotions are real properties. They do not express propositions. This view is defended by Simon Blackburn. Simon holds that it may be possible that there is no ethical fact in the world that correspond to ethical statements, but linguistically ethical statements behave as if they are factual claims and that is why they can be appropriately regarded as true or false.

### 10.3.2.3 Universal Prescriptivism

Universal Prescriptivism is a metaethical view which holds that ethical sentences work as imperatives and these imperatives are universalised. R. M. Hare is a defender of this theory. He states that moral utterances express more than just emotional approval and disapproval. Moral utterances express subjective prescription. They are prescriptive in nature. When someone utters a moral judgement or statement, he or she wants the other to act in accordance with his or her moral judgement. For example, B claims that "Suicide is morally wrong", it means that B wants others to stop supporting or deciding in favour of suicide. Prescriptivism is an attempt to capture the action-guiding nature of moral judgements or utterances. Moral utterances like "Telling truth is right", means something like "Speak truth." Hare says that moral judgements are universalizable, it means they have objective value.

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**Check Your Progress III**

Note:   a)   Use the space provided for your answer

b)   Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1.   Define Ethical Non-Cognitivism.

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2.   Distinguish between Ethical Cognitivism and Ethical Non-cognitivism.

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## 10.4 LET US SUM UP

It has been shown in the previous sections how metaethics creates a foundation for normative and applied ethics. Metaethics, a branch of ethics, is an enquiry into the nature and meaning of ethical terms and moral foundations. It is broadly divided into two branches: ethical cognitivism and ethical non-cognitivism. They are further divided into different theories. All the theories (including both ethical cognitivism and ethical non-cognitivism) set a foundation for ethics. They try to define basic ethical concepts like "good", "right" etc. They also try to show how we learn about the moral facts. The different metaethical theories have provided different views on the question whether moral statements are considered truth-apt. The theories in normative and applied ethics fall under these metaethical theories. Let us understand different theories and their classification with the help of this graphical representation.
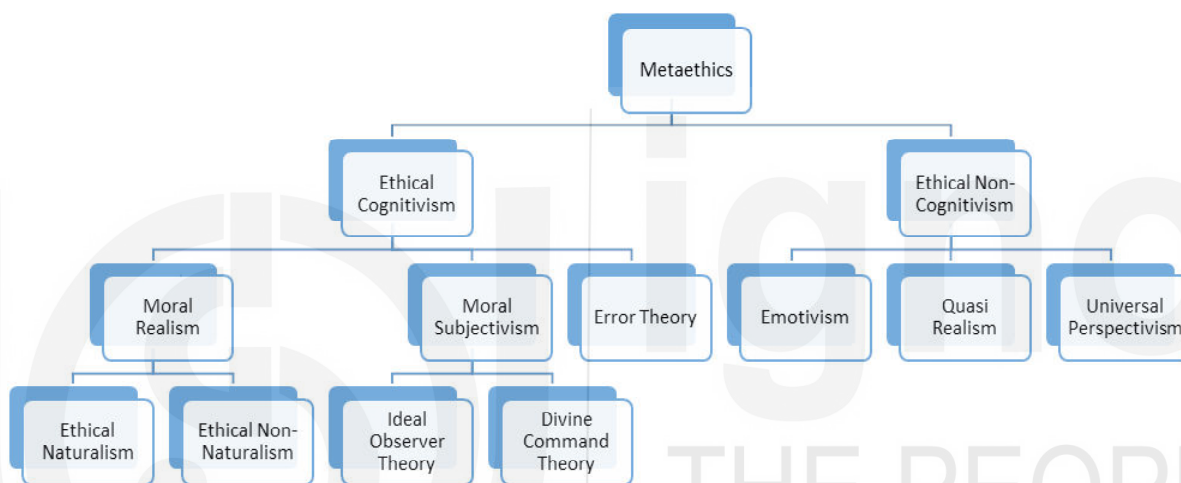


**Graph I: Theories of Metaethics**

## 10.5 KEY WORDS

**Fundamental:** Fundamental here means forming a base or a principle on which something is based. So metaethics is a base on which normative and applied ethics are based.

**Truth-apt:** It means that the statements carry a truth value and can be described as true or false.

**Objective (mind-independent) facts:** To be an objective, mind-independent fact means that facts are not dependent for their existence on the mind, rather, they are present in the outside world. They can be objectively or empirically known.

## 10.6 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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Schroeder, Mark. *Noncognitivism In Ethics*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

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**Online Resources:**

Plato Stanford encyclopedia of Philosophy, entry on "Metaethics".

Plato Stanford encyclopedia of Philosophy, entry on "Impartiality".

## 10.7   ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Answers to Check Your Progress I**

1.  Ethics is broadly divided into three main branches: normative ethics, applied ethics and metaethics. Normative ethics examines standards for rightness and wrongness of actions. It is the study of what makes an action right or wrong. On the other hand, applied ethics attempts to apply the ethical theories in particular situations. It involves examining specific controversial issues, such as abortion, infanticide, animal rights, capital punishment, human cloning and so on. While normative ethics and applied ethics focus on what is moral or what one ought to do, metaethics focuses on what morality itself is. Metaethics serves as a foundation for normative and applied ethics.

**Answers to Check Your Progress II**

1.  Ethical Cognitivism is a metaethical theory according to which (1) moral judgements can express beliefs and (2) they are truth-apt, which means the statements can be described as true or false.

2.  Ethical cognitivism includes moral realism, moral subjectivism and error theory. According to moral realism, moral statements express a belief and these beliefs are regarded as mind-independent facts of the world. It is of two types: ethical naturalism and ethical non-naturalism. Whereas, in moral subjectivism, moral statements are made true of false by the attitudes or conventions of the people. Here ethical sentences imply an attitude, opinions or feelings of the people. Moral subjectivism includes two theories: Ideal Observer theory and Divine Command theory. Lastly, Error theory holds a view that ethical statements can be propositions, but that all ethical propositions are false.

1.  Ethical non-cognitivism is a metaethical view according to which ethical sentences do not express a belief or proposition and thus, cannot be regarded as true or false. According to non-cognitivists, when people utter moral statements they are not expressing a state of mind, say a belief. Rather, they are expressing non-cognitive attitudes like desire or emotion.

2.  According to Ethical cognitivism, moral judgements express truth-apt beliefs. Whereas, ethical non-cognitivism holds that moral judgements do not express belief or proposition and thus, a truth-value cannot be assigned to them.

# UNIT 11  ETHICAL NATURALISM AND NON-NATURALISM*

**Structure**

## 11.0  OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is,

- to explicate the meaning of ethical naturalism and non-naturalism as metaethical theories and also

- to locate an important distinction between them.

- to show how ethical naturalism and non-naturalism deals with metaethical questions like: Are there moral facts? If there are moral facts, what is their origin? And how do we learn about the moral facts, if there are any? What exactly do people mean when they use the words like "good" and "right"?

## 11.1  INTRODUCTION

Moral thinking is a vital aspect of our lives. In our everyday life we face questions like; whether the action is right or wrong, good or bad, whether a character trait is a virtue or vice and what is it that makes an action good or bad, right or wrong. These metaethical puzzles are addressed differently in different metaethical theories. Metaethical theories are broadly categorised into two branches; ethical or moral cognitivism and ethical or moral non-cognitivism. Ethical cognitivism states that ethical sentences can express beliefs which are truth bearers and therefore they can be regarded as true or false, whereas, ethical non-cognitivism states that ethical sentences do not express beliefs.

Ethical Cognitivism claims that ethical language expresses beliefs about how the world is. To believe that violence is wrong is to believe that the sentence or

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utterance 'Violence is wrong' is true. Thus, ethical language aims to describe the world, and so it can be true or false. According to the cognitivists, moral statements or sentences make descriptive claims and their truth-value is based on the external world. Our moral claims or judgements are true when our descriptions (descriptions presented in moral claims or judgements) corresponds ('as it is' presentation of something) the external world (facts presented in the external world) and false when they do not correspond the external world. Ethical cognitivism includes the theories like moral realism, moral subjectivism and error theory.

Moral realism holds that the moral statements express a belief and these beliefs are regarded as mind-independent facts of the world. Moral realism holds that moral properties are real and objective properties that are proper objects of moral evaluation. Moral properties are genuine part of the external world. Moral realism is an attempt show the nature of the relation between moral properties and natural properties. Natural properties are those properties that we can identify through sense experience and scientific enquiry. This has led to two positions: ethical naturalism and ethical non-naturalism.

Ethical naturalism and non-naturalism are the forms of moral realism. Ethical naturalism holds that there are objective and natural moral properties and we can know them empirically. While ethical non-naturalism holds that moral properties are entirely different from the natural properties.

The following sections will discuss ethical naturalism and non-naturalism in detail.

## 11.2 ETHICAL NATURALISM

Ethical naturalists hold that there are natural moral properties and relations. According to them moral properties like goodness, justice, rightness, etc. are natural. Thus, in ethical naturalism ethical sentences express propositions which are made true by the real and objective features of the world. Ethical naturalism holds that moral values and moral obligations fit into the scientifically based, naturalistic view of the world. "It holds, more specifically, (a) that such ethical properties as the goodness of persons, character traits, and other things, and such as the rightness or wrongness of actions, are natural properties of the same general sort as properties investigated by the sciences, and (b) that they are to be investigated in the same general way that we investigate those properties." Moral values, being objective, can be known in the same way as we know the scientific facts. Ethical naturalists believe that moral claims are ultimately about features of the natural world, which is the subject matter of scientific study and therefore, they tend to embrace moral realism which is the view that moral claims are not merely expressive statements but are literally true or false.

Ethical naturalism can be understood by joining the following claims: There are objective, mind-independent moral facts, Moral facts are natural facts; we know moral claims are true in the same way that we know about claims in the natural sciences, and our moral claims are synonymous with certain claims in natural sciences.

John Stuart Mill's version of utilitarianism is often seen as an example of ethical naturalism, which states that an action is morally right to the extent that it tends

to produce maximum happiness and morally wrong to the extent that it fails to produce happiness or tends to produce unhappiness.

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**Check Your Progress I**

Note:    a)    Use the space provided for your answer.

b)    Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1.    Define ethical naturalism.

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# 11.3   ETHICAL NON-NATURALISM

Ethical non-naturalism claims that moral properties and facts are not natural properties and facts. It holds that ethical sentences express propositions which are truth apt and they are made true or false by the real and objective features of the world. According to ethical non-naturalism, moral features of the world cannot be reduced to any set of non-moral features, whereas in ethical naturalism moral features are seen to be reducible 1to non-moral features or to natural features.

G. E. Moore is the main contender of non-naturalism. In his book *Principia Ethica*, G. E. Moore states that moral properties cannot be seen as natural properties. In common parlance (in our day to day affairs), we correlate moral properties (e.g., good) with non-moral (e.g. natural) properties. But that does not mean that moral properties and non-moral properties are identical in nature. Generally we say that 'x is good,' means 'x gives pleasure.' Or 'x is pleasurable'. In this way we equate good and pleasurable. Moore says that good (or any moral properties) cannot be equated with any other properties or translated into any other properties. When we define moral property in the terms natural property or natural properties, we commit 'naturalistic fallacy.' When we try to define a moral property but it could not be defined. So the question remains to be asked here 'What is good (or any moral property)?' Moore refers this situation as `open question argument.'

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**Check Your Progress II**

Note:    a)    Use the space provided for your answer

b)    Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1.    Define Ethical Non-Naturalism.

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## 11.3.1 G. E. Moore on Naturalistic Fallacy

G.E. Moore argues that any attempt to define 'good' (or any other moral property), whether in naturalistic or in non-naturalistic terms, is fallacious. Moore says that any attempt to define 'good' in terms of natural properties is fallacious and he named it as naturalistic fallacy. Good or goodness is a basic property and cannot be analysed. Goodness has no parts. That is why we cannot define goodness in terms parts. Moore states that 'good is good', and it cannot be defined. There are moral facts, like, if X is good then it is a moral fact that it is. Moore says,

> It may be true that all things which are good are also something else, just as it is true that all things which are yellow produce a certain kind of vibration in the light. And it is a fact, that Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are good. But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were simply not "other," but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the "naturalistic fallacy" and of it I shall now endeavour to dispose. (Moore, *Principia Ethica*, section 10.3)

For Moore, Goodness is a simple, indefinable, non-natural property. For instance, Yellow is a simple, natural property. You cannot explain what yellow is to someone who doesn't know what yellow is. Yellow is part of our visual experience of the world. In the words of Moore,

> We may try to define it [yellow], by describing its physical equivalent; we may state what kind of light-vibrations must stimulate the normal eye, in order that we may perceive it. But a moment's reflection is sufficient to show that those light-vibrations are not themselves what we mean by yellow. They are not what we perceive. Indeed, we should never have been able to discover their existence, unless we had first been struck by the patent difference of quality between the different colours. The most we can be entitled to say of those vibrations is that they are what corresponds in space to the yellow which we actually perceive. (Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Section 10.2)

Similarly, we cannot define 'good' or 'goodness'; it can only be shown (in the act of goodness).

## 11.3.2 Open Question Argument

Moore used the open question argument to defend a non-naturalist account of goodness. His argument for the indefinability of 'good' is often called the open-question argument. To argue that a definition of goodness is impossible, he offered the '*open question*' argument. The open question argument maintains that whether goodness is co-instantiated with any natural property or set of natural properties is always a conceptually open question. Suppose someone defines good as happiness. It might be the case that happiness is indeed a good thing. Still, Moore insists that it is a genuine question, the answer to which we must find out, whether good is just the same thing as happiness. If it were a matter of definition – if "good" just meant "happiness" because they are definitionally equivalent, there would be no open question. The matter would be settled by what the words mean. Moore's concern was that if intrinsic value (good) were analysable into any non-moral terms, then good would be wholly assimilated to something non-moral. But good is, what it is, and not any other thing.

Suppose we define good as A. We can fill different contents in A, according to what we take good to be. If "A" is "pleasant and desirable" and we ask "Is what is pleasant and desirable, pleasant and desirable?" we are not asking an open

question. If we ask "Is what is pleasant and desirable also good?" here we are asking an open question. Again, it may be the case that things that are A, are good things, but that does not show that good and A are identical or that "good" and "A" have exactly the same meaning. If goodness is identical with pleasure, then it has no sense to ask 'Is pleasure good?' It is something like asking 'Is pleasure pleasure?' This is not a real question (the answer of this question has to be 'yes'), but 'Is pleasure good?' is a real question. We can answer it as yes or no. That is why goodness or good is not identical with any other property.

Now, someone can ask, is there anything which has the property of goodness? We can say that pleasure is good in this sense. But here it is clear that these are two distinct things (happiness and goodness). For example, you are not identical with your height or weight.

Thus Moore argues that moral values are not identical to natural properties. He holds that moral values depend upon the presence of non-moral properties. Something is good in virtue of its good-making properties. Given that a thing has those particular types of properties, it is necessary that it is a good thing. But good is not reducible to non-moral (or even any other moral properties) properties. It is morally good that a person has certain characteristics, honesty, conscientiousness, beneficence, and fairness. But good is not simply equivalent to those in a way that can be shown by a definition of good. When we try to define 'good' in the terms of, say, 'x', the question that remains is that, 'Is x really good?' Moore calls it 'open question argument.'

### 11.3.3 Intuitionism

Intuitionism is a form of ethical non-naturalism. It addresses the following question, if moral properties are not natural properties, then how do we understand them or know about them? How do we know what is good or what is bad? It holds that we come to know about moral properties through intuition of those properties. But what is this intuition and how we know that our intuition is true? Are we supposed to have some special faculty of moral intuition? Moore leaves these questions open: "when I call such propositions Intuitions, I mean merely to assert that they are incapable of proof; I imply nothing whatever as to the manner or origin of our cognition of them." (*Pricipia Ethica*, preface, Chapter one). He argues that these claims are not true in the sense of analytic truth and they cannot be known empirically. So they must be 'synthetic a priori' (Synthetic; new knowledge, a priori means prior to our knowledge). Moore equates intuitions with 'self-evident' propositions, because the claim of good of being true and false can be explained by taking into account the claim itself.

One can grasp these self-evident claims directly as these depend on the substantiation of their own plausibility. We develop these claims gradually so it cannot be said that everyone can see it right away as true. What is required here is to have a clear and careful understanding of the issue. These moral intuitions are self-evident means that they cannot be known through the faculty of senses. We have self-evident necessary truths like the truths of mathematics; moral intuitions, like necessary truths, are self-evident. So there is no need to make claims to define intuitions as a searching tool that tells us what is good and what is bad. It is not like a supernatural sense, it only describes some of moral judgements as self-evident and synthetic.

**Check Your Progress III**

Note:   a)   Use the space provided for your answer

       b)   Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1.   What is a Naturalistic Fallacy?

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2.   Give G.E. Moore's account on 'goodness'?

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## 11.4   LET US SUM UP

Ethical naturalism and non-naturalism are the forms of moral realism in ethical cognitivism. Ethical naturalism states that moral properties like goodness, justice, rightness, etc. are natural. According to ethical naturalists, moral properties are identical to natural properties. In contrast, ethical non-naturalists state that moral properties are not identical to natural properties.

## 11.5   KEY WORDS

**Fallacy**: Error or misconception. In this unit, it has been used to show that the argument is creating a fallacy by having a misconception of identifying moral properties with natural properties.

**Objective**: That which is present in the world outside and can be known empirically. It is a subject matter of science, as science studies the natural facts present in the world.

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## 11.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Answers to Check Your Progress I**

1.  Ethical Naturalism is a form of moral realism. It holds that there are natural moral properties and relations. In ethical naturalism ethical sentences express propositions which are made true by the objective features of the world, independent of human opinion.

**Answers to Check Your Progress II**

1.  Ethical non-naturalism claims that moral properties and facts are not natural properties and facts. It holds that ethical sentences express propositions which are truth apt and their truth-value is determined by the objective features of the external world. The moral features of the external world cannot be reduced into any non-moral features of the external world.

**Answers to Check Your Progress III**

1.  Naturalistic fallacy is proposed by G.E. Moore against ethical naturalism. Moore called the attempt to define goodness in terms of any natural property as naturalistic fallacy.

2.  G. E. Moore argued that goodness is a simple, indefinable, non-natural property. He compared it to yellow colour. Yellow is a simple property, and we cannot explain what yellow is to someone who doesn't know what yellow is. Similarly, 'goodness' cannot be defined in terms of other (natural) properties. It can only be shown.

# UNIT 12 SUBJECTIVISM: DAVID HUME[*]

**Structure**

## 12.0 OJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is,

- To understand the meaning and presuppositions of subjectivism in the context of ethics

- To explicate the different versions of subjectivism.

- To understand David Hume's version of subjectivism.

## 12.1 INTRODUCTION

Subjectivism is the doctrine, which asserts that knowledge is merely subjective and that there is no external or objective truth corresponding to it. For this doctrine, our mental states or activity is the only unquestionable fact of life. There are two kinds of subjectivism- Metaphysical subjectivism and Ethical Subjectivism. Metaphysical Subjectivism holds that reality is what a subject perceives to be real, and that there is no underlying reality beyond the perceptual knowledge of any subject. According to Ethical subjectivism, we can reduce moral statements to factual statements, those statements may be "about the attitudes of individuals and conventions of a culture or society or group of peoples". This unit will cover a detailed discussion of Ethical subjectivism. When people often wonder about ethical standards, they are mostly concerned about the origin i.e., where do they come from or how are they applicable to people? Are ethical standards come from the world, independent of the individual or they come from the individual himself? Are ethical values objective or subjective? While studying meta-ethics, one might often get confused about the academic divisions that are drawn for any purpose of study. Simply, while studying meta-ethics one must keep in mind that Meta-ethics is not concerned about the origin but about the status of ethical claims. While answering these questions, meta-ethics splits into moral realism (sometimes called as moral objectivism or absolutism or universalism) and moral

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anti-realism (sometimes called as moral non-objectivism or moral relativism). Moral Anti-realism is one kind of meta-ethical theory, which believes that there are no moral facts independent of human minds. Morality is not objective. Ethical judgments or any kind of evaluative judgments are clearly mental states. Ethical standards are dependent on the tastes, feelings, and attitudes of the individual. Moral anti-realism holds that moral properties are mind dependant. This could involve- (1) The denial that moral properties at all exists (2) The acceptance that they do exist but that existence is mind-dependent. The below diagram shall show several versions of moral anti-realism:
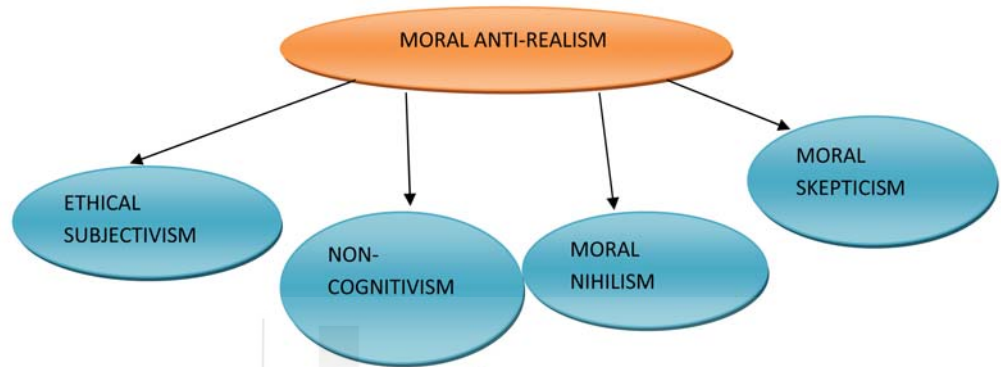


**Fig. 1. This figure shows the different versions of Moral anti-realism.**

Ethical subjectivism is one of the several versions of moral anti-realism that argues that ethical statements are believed to be subjective. Ethical or moral subjectivism allows that moral facts exists but holds that they are in some manner specified and constituted by mental activity. There is nothing good or bad out there in the world, but properties of good and bad are product of our thinking. Broadly, ethical subjectivism is a form of moral relativism. Moral relativism holds that moral beliefs are relative to whatever standards a particular society or individual happens to have accepted. Moral relativism does not believe in any objective moral basis for the value or that it is valued for all times. It rejects the notion that there is one universally valid morality that can be discovered by valid moral reasoning. Moral relativism claims that there are no universally (and objectively) valid standards based on which we can judge any moral action. The validity of moral standards is dependent on- (1) Cultural acceptance (Conventionalism) - According to moral conventionalism, the validity of moral standards depends on the acceptance within a particular cultural group. (2) Personal choice or commitment (Subjectivism) - According to moral subjectivism, the validity of moral standards depends on the acceptance by the individual in action. One should not think that moral subjectivism and moral relativism are same. Both are different in method. For moral subjectivists, an action is morally right or wrong depends on the approval or disapproval of that action by the individual subject. For moral relativists, an action is morally right or wrong depends either on the individual's approval or the culture's approval.

## 12.2  DEFINITION

Ethical subjectivism is a meta-ethical theory which holds that moral standards or truths are dependent upon the opinions and feelings of the utterer making the subjective moral judgments. This theory stands in opposition to Ethical objectivism. Ethical objectivism holds that truth or falsity of moral judgments does not depend upon the beliefs or feelings of any person or groups of person.

For example, Telling lie is morally wrong. Certain acts are objectively right or wrong independent of human opinion. Ethical subjectivism is the view that value consists in or depends importantly on an individual's contingent psychological state. It argues that moral evaluation is dependent upon subjective moral judgment not upon inter-subjective or objective moral judgments. There are no moral facts for any ethical subjectivist, but are attitudes of people towards the actions. One could ask, when can we say a moral judgment is subjective? A moral judgment is subjective if its truth depends on whether or not it conforms to the attitudes, beliefs, and preferences of the utterer. For example, A person named x has a child. While he was at the departmental store, the child picks up a bottle of cold drink and spills it all over the floor. X bends him over his knees and gives him a good swat on his behind. A woman who saw this, interrupts the spanking by yelling at X, hitting your child is horrible. X's response is, "you have no right to tell me what is right or wrong." By, this he means that only X can determine what is right or wrong. Ethical subjectivism asserts that all our moral judgments are relative to whatever choice of moral standards I happen to make. What is morally right for me depends on the standards to which I subscribe. For instance, I might consider abortion is morally permissible depending on the culture I belong. Moreover, you might consider abortion as morally impermissible depending upon your standards. Ethical subjectivism holds that there are no objective (and universal) moral properties. For ethical subjectivist, ethical statements are arbitrary because they do not express unchangeable truths. The truth value of moral statements can be determined only by the attitudes or conventions of the observer. Thus, for a statement to be considered morally right, merely means that the person of interest meets it with approval. It essentially holds that verification and validation in ethics come from the subject itself. Ethical subjectivists are those who maintain that there are no objective moral standards. The subject that holds the viewpoint is the one who determinates that moral standards are not like some other objective criteria like community appeal, or god or anyone outside of subject's views. They do not judge a person's values but the individual's viewpoint will be the basis of their own ethical perspectives. There are no values better than other values because everyone has their right on their opinions or viewpoint. This means that there can be no imposition of values over another. Jean Jacque Rousseau advocated ethical subjectivism. He believes that people are basically good and do the right thing, if not corrupted by the society. He subscribes to what he calls the "law of the heart." The law of the heart maintains that our feelings alone inform us of what is right and wrong and not the abstract principles of society.

An ethical subjectivist would argue that the statement "B was evil" expresses a strong dislike for the sorts of things B did but this does not follow that it is true that B in fact was evil. Another person who disagrees with the statement on purely moral grounds is not making an intellectual error but has a different attitude. There are no objective moral facts. Moral statements are factual statements about the attitude of the speaker on the particular issue. For example, if someone says that 'Non-violence is good', it means that he or she is expressing his or her attitude on this issue. Ethical subjectivism holds that moral statements can be characterized as propositions. Moral statements describe the attitudes of an individual and they do not describe the social or cultural norms or objective or universal truth. All morality is an opinion and beliefs need not be backed by reasons or facts. It believes that our moral opinions are based on feelings and

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nothing more. There is nothing right or wrong objectively. It is a fact that some people are homosexual and some are heterosexual, but it is not the fact that one is good and the other is bad. Someone is morally right or wrong based on how one feels. It endorses the idea that there is no thing or action as right or wrong but everything is just an expression of our feelings. Therefore, we cannot judge another's opinion as being right or wrong since it is merely an opinion of the agent. For instance, using the womb for financial purpose is morally acceptable in my opinion and using the womb for financial purpose is morally unacceptable in my opinion. Both these moral statements boils down to two different opinions considering the context in which it is made, since they are only opinions so neither contest the other.

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**Check Your Progress I**

Note:    a)   Use the space provided for your answer.

           b)   Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1.   What is moral anti-realism? What are the different types of moral anti-realism?

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## 12.3   DIFFERENT TYPES OF ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM

There are four variants of Ethical subjectivism. They are:

1)   **Simple Subjectivism**- Simple subjectivism is a view that ethical statements express sentiments, preferences and feelings of an individual rather than objective or universal fact. Simple subjectivism argues that when individuals make moral statements they are just reflecting their subjective feelings pertaining to the aroused issue. Furthermore, simple subjectivists would contend that what we say regarding morality is just a descriptive expression of our emotions with regard to their issue. According to this viewpoint, there are no facts regarding morality, hence morality is not objective, it lies in the eyes of the beholder. For instance, simple subjectivists would argue that when Alex says that having an extra marital affair is immoral, he is just stating his attitude. He is merely saying that he rejects the idea of extra marital affair. In opposition to that John believes that extra-marital is not moral is just stating his attitude. A Simple subjectivist would not see different viewpoints as disagreeing with one another; rather both parties agree to disagree. Both parties are right with regard to how one feels, thus both statements are true. Simple subjectivism endorses that human beings are infallible because it denies that moral disagreement at all exists.

2) **Individualist Subjectivism-** Protagoras can be seen as the first proponent of individualist subjectivism. Protagoras says that man is the measure of all things. It is effectively a form of Egoism, which maintains that human being ought to pursue what is in his/her self-interest exclusively. Moral statements are descriptions of speaker's attitudes. When I say abortion is wrong I mean nothing more then what I disapprove abortion. Like, X is right/good/ permissible= I approve of X and X is wrong/bad/forbidden= I disapprove of X. The individualist subjectivism is always confused with emotivism. Emotivism is the doctrine that states that moral statements merely express one's attitude. According to individual or orthodox subjectivists, while making moral judgment, there is an expression as well as assertion of our emotions. Emotivists, on the other hand, believe that while making moral judgment we only express our emotions. For emotivists, that is why we cannot assign any truth value to the statement. But individualist subjectivism describes moral statements through one's express beliefs and attitudes.

3) **Ideal Observer Theory-** Ideal observer theory holds that ethical sentences express proposition about the attitudes of a hypothetical ideal observer. In other words, an ideal observer theory states that ethical judgments should be interpreted as statements about what the neutral, rational and (perhaps) fully informed observer would make. This means that X is good because the ideal observer approves X. The main idea of the ideal observer theory is that ethical sentences should be defined after the pattern of the following example- "X is better than Y" means if anyone were in respect of X and Y, fully informed and vividly imaginative, impartial in a calm frame of mind would prefer X to Y. The ideal observer theory offers an account of truth of moral judgments in terms of approval or disapproval of an ideal observer. Roderick Firth was first to answer the question, what does it mean by X is right or X is good? Adam Smith and David Hume were the predecessors of Ideal observer theory. X is good/right/permissible= X is approved by ideal observer. An ideal observer is one who is in the best place to make moral statements. Either he/ she is a good human being, less biased, well informed of relevant details, able to reason well and so. Moral statements would be determined by a specific kind of person. This will help moral facts from becoming arbitrary. It could make this theory Universalist and can enable it to withstand the criticisms levied against other form of ethical subjectivism.

4) **Divine command Theory-** This theory asserts that what is moral is determined by what God commands and that for a person to be moral is to follow his commands. Roughly, it is the view that morality is somehow dependent upon God and that moral obligation consists in obedience to God's commands. It includes the claim that morality is ultimately based on the commands or character of God and that morally right action is one that God commands or requires. The specific content of these divine commands varies according to particular religion and particular views of the divine command theorists. The theory has many defenders such as Thomas Aquinas, Robert Adams, and Philip Quinn. However, this theory has impact on philosophical dealings of concepts by Immanuel Kant, John Lock etc. The theory generally teaches that moral truth does not exist independent of God and that morality is determined by divine commands. Stronger versions of the theory assert that God's command is the only reason that a good action is moral, while weaker variations cast divine command as a vital component within a greater

reason. Divine command theorists believe that there are objective moral standards that are same for everyone and are independent of individual beliefs. These moral standards are true for everyone regardless of whether or not they believe them or know them. These ultimate moral standards exist in command given by God. God commands only good things; he would never command a person to act immorally. God is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving. God commanded those things in order to do what is good for us as humans and his commands are automatically morally right.

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**Check Your Progress II**

Note:   a)   Use the space provided for your answer.

b)   Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1.   What is individual subjectivism?

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2.   What are the possible objections towards the theory of Ethical subjectivism?

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## 12.4   DAVID HUME ON ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM

David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish historian, economist, and philosopher. Hume's examination of controversy regarding the foundations of morality is found principally in two works, *Treatise of Human Nature,* and *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. He took a naturalistic approach to human affairs. Hume rejected the idea that morality and politics could be based on reasoned agreement about human happiness. The ethical theory of Hume is based upon his empiricist theory of mind. He asserts four basic principles in his empiricists theory- (1) Reason alone cannot be a motive to the will, but rather is slave of passions. (2) Moral distinctions are not derived from reason (3) Moral distinctions are derived from moral sentiments; feelings of approval or disapproval by the spectator who contemplate a character trait or action. (4) Some virtues and vices are natural, others like justice are artificial. He thought that human reason could not decide questions about value. There are no rational answers to questions about good, right, wrong etc. So, for example, he thought that debates between Protestants

and Catholics about how people should live cannot be decided by reference to an objective account of human happiness, and cannot not be known through the use of reason. Morality and justice does not require an all-powerful ruler because our emotions occasionally incline us towards the concern of others. Many philosophers believed that reason could train our actions and emotions. However, for Hume, reason reveals only the relationship between objects. It does not reveal what we should do. Reason can be a source of knowledge and can inform us about the causal connection between things, but it cannot be a source of motivation. In simple words, reason could tell us about how the world is but it cannot tell us how the world ought to be. He accepts from Hobbes that motives play a pre-eminent role in determination of virtue but those motives are not self-interested. Humans may be predominantly self-interested, but an accurate review of their behaviour reveals situations where if private interest is separate from public then publicly interested act was the one performed. He observes that our judgments about morality of particular actions and objects depend upon their usefulness. But this usefulness should not be confused with self-interest like, Hobbes. He believes that we care about social usefulness when it is not in our own interest. Usefulness pleases me not because it is useful to me but because it is useful to the society. The chief merit of Hume's thought of moral philosophy is of an emotion, he called 'sympathy,' by which he meant the sentiment that is aroused in us when we see a fellow being suffer. He says that whenever this happens, we are filled with a desire to help because we ourselves are suffering as we watch the grief or pain of the other. He repeated that moral action flows not from reason but from sentiment. Emotion is that property which is within us which seeks happiness and eschews misery. Reason can only analyse a situation and estimate the balance of happiness or unhappiness likely to result from any action we may take, but reason by itself can never induce action. That is why he wrote that Reason is the slave of passion. Hume rejected the efforts of rationalists and voluntarists who gave morality a supranatural foundation. The moral rationalists believe that the moral distinctions are based on transcendental principles, which oblige all rational creatures. Rationalists or objectivists tell us that there is immutable truth: parents are always to be obeyed, siblings must never interact sexually, and incest is immoral. Nevertheless, these principles are constantly violated in nature. Morality is a practical affair, one that involves volitions and actions. Neither abstract rational principles nor reason nor Deity is capable of providing the motivational force that is essential to morality. One of the questions, Hume sets to answer in his moral philosophy is, where does morality lie; where does the foundation of morality lie? He considers that it lies in human nature.

Hume's challenge to ethics begins with an investigation into the relationship between reason and action. Reasons, Hume considers as an ability to determine truth, beliefs, falsehood. It discovers truth such as 2+2=4 and falsehood such as 2+2=5. It also helps in determining relationship between cause and effect. But it cannot motivate an action, questions regarding why we ought to perform a particular action? Reason cannot tell us which actions we ought to act and not act. It can determine that the act of drinking soda lets one to gain weight but it says nothing about the purpose. Reason can tell us how to achieve the goals but this need to be based on human passions or sentiments. Reason alone cannot trigger an action. Hume argues that morality arises from feeling but it is or should be informed by reason. This means that reason may be able to give us information

but an action is ultimately led by passions or feelings. Reason is the tool that assists those passions by determining the facts of one's actions. For instance, Reason can determine that consistent lying leads to an unhappy world but it cannot tell us that we should not tell lies. It is only passions, which motivates us to tell the truth.

Hume said that morality can be found within. When you observe an immoral act, you do not find any right or wrong about the situation when you consider only the objects involved in the act. "Only when you turn your reflection you find a sentiment of disapprobation", then you will find a right or wrong about the situation? Hume said that this was only a feeling or sentiment though. Therefore morality is not something because of our reason, for we could not find the existence of good or bad while examining the situation with our reason. Our reason told us only facts about what happened and how it happened. Morality then must a sentiment or feeling. Hume uses the example of the philosophical view of colors, heat, and other such "qualities." Hume says that modern philosophy considers such things as colors, heat, and sound as simply perceptions and not definite qualities of any object. Colors and heat are objects of our observation, to be sure, but it cannot be said for sure that such things are properties of an object. Take an apple for example, we see red, but red is our perception and is not necessarily an actual quality of the apple. To go even further we cannot even say for fact that an apple exists, and if the apple does not exist than surely red cannot be a quality of it. All we really know is that we perceive an apple and in our perceptions it is red. This does not also imply the existence or qualities of the apple. Hume compares this type of thought to morality. Hume is trying to show that like observations of color and heat, morality is not something that can be found, for us, in an object, but instead morality is something, which only exists within our world and comes from the sentiments in us.

Hume seems to be correct in declaring that morality cannot be judged through the senses. We can only know what is afforded to us by our senses and our senses do not tell us when something is wrong or right. Something only becomes wrong or right when someone applies their feelings about certain actions to what they have seen or heard. The evidence for this is the disparity in people's moral beliefs: what offends one person's moral sentiments does not always offend another. While many people believe, it is morally offensive to commit suicide in any situation, but in many cultures it is more honorable to kill oneself than to admit defeat in a battle. These people did not see suicide in that situation as immoral. Morality is not something that is intrinsic in the objects or the action, since two different people would come to two different conclusions about the action of suicide. Instead, it must be, as Hume says; morality must be within us as a personal sentiment. According to Hume, value cannot be deduced from fact.

## 12.5　LET US SUM UP

Ethical Subjectivism is a met-ethical view, which considers that the truth-value of moral judgments depends upon the approver or utterer. However, one should not confuse this with Emotivism. For the ethical subjectivists, there are no moral facts independent of the individual mind i.e. relating to attitudes, emotions, and

feelings. Ethical subjectivism is of different types- Simple subjectivism, Individual subjectivism, Ideal observer theory, and Divine command theory. David Hume's theory of morality highlights instances of ethical subjectivism as he considers human passion to be the foundation of morality. He, unlike other objectivists, gave the higher position to passion over and above reason. Reason, according to him is only a tool to administer passions but passions are prime motivators of action.

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**Check Your Progress III**

Note:    a)    Use the space provided for your answer.

b)    Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1.    What are the four important basic principles, according to David Hume?

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2.    "Reason is the slave of passions"- what is the meaning of this statement?

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## 12.6  KEYWORDS

**Moral anti-realism**: Moral anti-realism is a position that holds that there are no objective values independent of human attitude, feelings, beliefs, etc.

**Passion**: It is a synonym for emotion, feelings and opposed to reason.

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## 12.7  FURTHER READINGS AND REFERNCES

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# 12.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Answers to check your progress I**

1. Moral anti-realism holds that there are no objective values independent of human attitude, feelings, beliefs, etc. Ethical subjectivism is one among the variants of moral anti-realism.

   There are four types of Moral anti-realism. They are – Ethical subjectivism, non-cognitivism, moral nihilism and moral skepticism.

**Answers to check your progress II**

1. Individualist subjectivism-. It is effectively a form of Egoism, which maintains that human being ought to pursue what is in his/her self-interest exclusively. Moral statements are descriptions of speaker's attitudes. When I say abortion is wrong I mean nothing more then what I disapprove abortion. Like, X is right/good/permissible= I approve of X and X is wrong/bad/forbidden= I disapprove of X.

2. There are two strong objections against ethical subjectivism. They are-

   (a) If moral subjectivism is true then everyone is infallible about moral beliefs. But human beings are not infallible about moral beliefs. We keep changing our minds. At one point of time, I could say that "abortion is morally acceptable" and at the other point of time I could change my mind and believe that "abortion is not morally acceptable."

   (b) If moral subjectivism is true then everyone would be correct in their moral judgments but we could be wrong sometimes. There could be no moral disagreements. In simple words, ethical subjectivism cannot endorse moral disagreements. For instance, if Barb says that Infanticide is sometimes ok then it means that Barb approves infanticide under some circumstances. If Karb says that Infanticide is wrong then it means that she disapproves infanticide under all circumstances. But that Barb approves and Karb disapproves both are true. They do disagree.

**Answers to check your progress III**

1. The ethical theory of Hume is based upon his empiricist theory of mind. He asserts four basic principles in his empiricists theory- (1) Reason alone cannot be a motive to the will, but rather is slave of passions. (2) Moral distinctions are not derived from reason (3) Moral distinctions are derived from moral sentiments; feelings of approval or disapproval by the spectator who contemplate a character trait or action. (4) Some virtues and vices are natural, others like justice are artificial. He thought that human reason could not decide questions about value.

2. "Reason is the slave of passions"- David Hume made this statement in his *Treatise of Human Nature*. He means that passions supply motivational force towards or against different objects. But, reason supplies information about different objects. There is no conflict between reason and passions. It is that passions are overpowering because they set ends and enact plans that reason has made. However, Reason has no power without passions. Reason on its own can never produce any action or cannot give rise to volition. Passion is the original existence and modification of existence. For instance, when one is hungry, he is actually possessed with the passion, and in that emotion he has no more reference to any object.

# UNIT 13  EMOTIVISM: CHARLES STEVENSON*

**Structure**

## 13.0  OBJECTIVES

This unit provides:

- An introductory understanding and significance of emotivism in moral and ethical philosophy.

- Many aspects of emotivism have been explored by philosophers in the history of modern philosophy but this unit focuses Charles Stevenson's version of emotivism.

## 13.1  INTRODUCTION

Emotivism is a meta-ethical theory in moral philosophy, which was developed by the American philosopher Charles Stevenson (1908-1978). He was born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1908. He studied philosophy under G E Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and was most influenced by the latter. From 1933 onwards, and continuing after the war, he developed the emotive theory of ethics at the University of Harvard. Stevenson's contributions were largely in the area of meta-ethics. Post-war debates in the field of ethics were charceterised by 'the linguistic turn' in philosophy, and the increasing emphasis of scientific knowledge on philosophy, especially under the influence of the school of Logical Positivism. Questions such as, do 'scientific facts' play a role in ethical considerations? how far feelings and emotions influence our understanding of morality?, became significant. Therefore, to respond to these and related issues, philosophers developed different ethical theories. Stevenson was one of the philosophers who developed the theory of emotivism against this backdrop, and defended his theory to justify how feelings and non-cognitive attributes constitute our understanding of morality and moral judgments. A J Ayer, a key philosopher in the logical positivist school, in his book *Language, Truth and Logic*, argues that moral judgments are not verifiable i.e. they are neither analytic

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statements nor statements of fact. They are, instead, merely affective and emotional expressions of one's approval or disapproval of some action by a person. This is the view which was eventually more fully developed by Charles Stevenson in his book *Ethics and Language* (1944), and formed the basis of the theory of emotivism. He also discussed this theoryin his articles such as the "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms" (1937) and "Persuasive Definition" (1938).

## 13.2  DEFINITION

The term emotivism essentially refers to a theory about moral judgments, sentences, words and speech acts; it raises questions about the nature of our evaluation of judgments in these fields – primarily, whether our judgments in these domains are factual or not?

Emotivism is a meta-ethical theory which raises questions about the definition of ethical terms like "good". In "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms," Stevenson's concern is to provide a "relevant definition of "good".  He claims that to be an adequate definition it must be a comprehensive definition that allows the term to specify all that needs to be said about it; it must be unambiguous; and it may involve several defined meanings, rather than one, and in this sense all the meanings will be considered relevant to an understanding of the term good (Stevenson: 1937). Stevenson argues to reject the traditional 'interest theories of ethics', which according to him state the ethical problem in terms of whether *it is desired by me* (Hobbes) or whether *it is approved by all peo*ple (Hume)? In rejecting these theories, Stevenson points out that a revised theory must meet three commonsense criteria, which are not met by the 'interest theories. First, that people must be able to sensibly disagree about whether something is good, and this rules out the first form of the interest theories, i.e. desired by me. Second, "goodness" must urge people to act for its sake. A person who recognizes something to be "good" must also be motivated to act in its favor than he otherwise would have, and therefore this rules out the second form of the interest theories, i.e. approved by all. A person may recognize the approval by all for something, and yet may not want to act on it. Third, the "goodness" of anything must not be verifiable solely by use of the scientific method, i.e. ethical questions cannot be reduced to either that of psychology or to an empirical testing of what people want. The question of 'what is goodness' cannot be reduced to a set of scientifically knowable or testable thesis (Stevenson: 1937).

Classical non-cognitivist theories maintain that moral judgments and speech acts function primarily to express and to influence the state of mind or attitudes rather than to describe, report or represent facts. Emotivists, as belonging to the tradition of non-cognitivists also say ethical judgments are not statements of facts. In other words, emotivists deny any moral facts, or moral words like good, bad, wrong, right have any factual moral properties. According to them, moral claims cannot be evaluated on the basis of truth and falsity. The key criterion according to emotivists is that the attitude expressed by a person in terms of moral judgments is not cognitive in nature but that it has a motivational element. Therefore, emotivism claims that moral judgments express emotions, and that these emotions can be approved and disapproved, but cannot be described or analyzed in the manner in which we evaluate statements of fact. However, we have to understand that emotivism is not classic subjectivism.

According to classical subjectivism, while making moral judgment, we assert our emotions along with expressing them i.e. our ethical assertions will always be true (unless we're lying, and that is a different issue altogether)! This position does not allow us to account for moral disagreements, which we encounter all the time, and therefore is inadequate for understanding moral issues. Emotivism on the other hand opines that while making moral judgment, we are merely expressing our emotion or state of mind, and not asserting our emotions. This entails a different understanding of the uses of language (statement making, commanding, exclaiming, etcetera), and does not have to do with the factual assertion of our emotions.

## 13.3 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EMOTIVISM IN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Ethical emotivism is considered one of the major twentieth-century ethical theories that emerged as an alternative to Utilitarian and Kantianism. The non-cognitive attitudes are given more importance in Stevenson's emotivism. Here, non-cognitivism emerged as a form of anti-positivism. The dominance of science and particularly logical positivism in discourse made it very difficult to understand ethical judgments. Since science was dominant it was natural to see everything from scientific framework. Thus, moral judgments, moral sentences, moral words were understood from scientific frameworks and Stevenson and many other philosophers were not convinced that moral judgments, moral statements or moral words should be understood by scientific framework or as statements of fact. Hence Stevenson took this problem seriously and developed meta-ethical theory, i.e. emotivism where he tried to prove that moral statements moral judgments or moral words are not empirical or scientific facts but they can be understood by emotive meaning. There emerged lots of debates on the issue of fact and value and their differentiation. Stevenson drew a parallel between scientific judgment and ethical judgment. When there is a disagreement about a particular scientific judgment, it can be resolved by bringing agreement in beliefs. In the case of ethical judgment, there is a possibility of resolving the disagreement by bringing agreement in one's belief as well as one's attitude. One however can never be sure whether the ethical disagreement will resolve once there is agreement in terms of beliefs and attitudes of people concerned. Thus, emotivism is significant in the history of moral theory and philosophy (Satris: 1987).

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**Check Your Progress I**

Note:  a)  Use the space provided for your answer

        b)  Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1.  What is the significance of emotivism in moral philosophy?

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2. How did emotivism emerge as a meta-ethical theory?

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## 13.4 PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS

The discussion on ethical emotivism started long before Charles Stevenson and it is important to understand its history and background. Initially, the discussion was started by philosophers like G.E Moore and W.D. Ross in their books *Principia Ethica* and *Foundations of Ethics,* respectively. Moore was a moral cognitivist. He held that a moral judgment expresses a belief that can be subject to an assessment of truth or falsity. However, Moore was also a moral realist. He held that moral properties exist and that they make certain moral judgments true, yet these properties are not analyzable in scientific terms or in terms of verifiability. These properties, according to Moore, are non-natural; they are sui generis, simple, and intrinsic, hence indefinable and unanalyzable. Therefore, when we speak of the 'good' (property of a moral statement), it is essentially indefinable. It is an intuitive understanding of the term good. Moore asserts that "good" is indefinable and simple, and can only be known by intuition.

Although Moore initiated the discussion about emotivism, but because of his cognitivistic position, he was criticized by A J Ayer, who redefined emotivism. In *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer offered an alternative account of morality. He argues that moral judgments are neither logical truths nor statements of fact, and therefore do not met the verifiability criterion of meaning. According to Ayer, ethical concepts are pseudo-concepts or nonsense; they do not have any cognitive significance. They are value based judgments instead, merely an emotional expressions of one's approval or disapproval of some action/s or person/s. As expressions of approval or disapproval, they can be neither true nor false, any more than a tone of awe (indicating approval) or a tone of repulsion (indicating disapproval) can be true or false.

This view was fully developed by the American philosopher Charles Stevenson in *Ethics and Language,* and in his other articles. This period in western philosophy is characterized by an emphasized engagement with issues of language and the rise of the analytic method, which also influences discussions in ethics and other allied fields such as aesthetics, religion, etc. Stevenson works with this background, and distinguishes the factual aspect of a sentence from its emotive aspect. He argues that the significance of a moral judgment lies in its emotive impact. However, Stevenson differs from Ayer in pointing out that a moral judgment does not just express an agent's approval or disapproval of something, but also encourages others to share in that belief, which is the basis of meaningful ethical conflict or difference. This is the reason why people argue about their moral views, and not just agree to disagree about them. Thus the main thesis of Stevenson's emotivism is also based on the foundational problem that emerges with the distinction of fact and value, where issues of language use are divided

between the descriptive/scientific/factual use of language versus an emotive/ordinary/ value based use. Problems of ethics and morality function within the non-cognitive or value based domain of language, in distinction from a cognitive or factual domain.

In order to understand these problems three things need to be known in the context of emotivism. First, emotivists explain the fact that people are typically motivated to behave in accordance with their moral judgments. Emotivists identify moral judgments with feelings or attitudes. Cognitivists have some difficulties in explaining this motivational connection because they identify moral judgments with beliefs. Second, emotivism explains moral judgments which are based on non-naturalistic grounds. Third, emotivists explain the moral on the basis of empirical; that is, why moral characteristics differ in some non-moral or empirical respect.

However Stevenson tried to resolve the entire problem by understanding "good" in ethics. The discussion starts from the question, if X is good then how does one know that is good? What is the method or way which helps us to know that X is good? According to him, the word "good" has often been defined in terms of approval. However, it is not possible to get an appropriate understanding of good through this criterion, and it often leads to the conclusion, in philosophical debates, that good is indefinable. But according to emotivists, the best ethical understanding of good is a purely emotive use. For them, whether actions or things are good or not, can only be accessed through the categories of emotive approval or disapproval. This stance often leads to relativistic assessment of ethical values. For example, if someone kills a person because s/he has approved of the act. It is difficult to justify what is good, because someone else can justify that particular approved action itself to be wrong/bad. Further, an individual or group may approve some actions in one context, whereas some other individual or group may not approve the same action in another context. Hence the problem of relativistic moral evaluation of actions persists.

Stevenson discusses this problem in his book *Ethics and Language*. "Stevenson is exclusively concerned with the project of indicating a coherent and stable concept of meaning that will stand to emotive and other kinds of meaning as genus to species, and will be essentially tied to psychological or pragmatic aspects of language. No empirical claims are made; it is a matter of organizing what is already known." (Satris: 1987, p. 80) Stevenson argues that there is confusion in these theses in terms of fact and value, and he reiterates the distinction between different uses of language – cognitive versus non-cognitive uses. According to him moral judgments are based on values (non-cognitive use of language) rather than facts (cognitive use of language). Therefore, emotivism emphasizes the value-based use of ethical language and its significance for moral philosophy. Stevenson's argument is that an adequate account of goodness cannot be purely descriptive or fact based, since "ethical statements" or "ethical judgments" are made to influence others, and not to describe or give an account of a factual state of affairs. The problem arises for emotivism when there is some element of description in ethical judgments, but this is by no means that all judgments include descriptive content. Emotivists, on the other hand, argue that the major function of moral judgments is not to indicate facts, but to influence beliefs and actions. Instead of giving a factual account of people's interests or beliefs, they are meant to change or intensify them. The question that arises of course is how does an

ethical sentence acquire its power of influencing people—what is the basis of its influence? Stevenson thinks that this power that moral judgments have to influence others comes from the "dynamic" use of words, which allow us the ability to express our feelings (interjections/exclamations), to create moods (poetry), or to incite people to certain actions or attitudes (oratory). The key distinction that Stevenson makes here is between the concepts of use and meaning: Meaning, according to him, cannot change with dynamic usage. For Stevenson, "meaning" is to be identified with those psychological connotations or the senses that a word's utterance has a tendency to be connected with. The tendency must exist for all who speak the language; it must be persistent; and must be realizable more or less independently of determinate circumstances attending the word's utterance, i.e. the meaning of the word must be objective, and may not be admitted to change with context. He argues that there is one kind of meaning that has an intimate relation to dynamic usage of language. This kind of meaning is emotive meaning.

> The emotive meaning of a word is a tendency of a word, arising through the history of its usage, to produce (result from) affective responses in people. It is the immediate aura of feeling which hovers about a word. Such tendencies to produce affective responses cling to words very tenaciously. It would be difficult, for instance, to express merriment by using the interjection "alas." Because of the persistence of such affective tendencies (among other reasons) it becomes feasible to classify them as "meanings." (Stevenson, p. 23)

Emotive meaning "assists" the dynamic purpose of a moral judgment. Good, in general, has a pleasing emotive meaning, which allows it to be fitted to suggest favorable interest for a judgment. Hence, 'this is good' implies the meaning to be something akin to 'I do like this; do so as well'. In the case of the moral usage of "good", the ethical sentence differs from a command in as much as it enables one to make changes in a much more subtle way. The ethical or moral emotive meaning of "good" is not the same as the non-moral emotive meaning of "good" i.e. the moral emotive meaning of good is concerned with a stronger sense of approval, which also urges one to action. It is not only about the approval of the hearer and speaker. In the case of moral approval of something, a person experiences a sense of satisfaction or contentment when their judgment is acted upon; however, when it is not acted upon they experience indignation. Thus, the moral emotive meaning of "good", for Stevenson, is approximately "I morally approve of this; do so as well."

With this account in mind, Stevenson proceeds to show how his definition of "good" accounts for the possibility of sensible moral disagreement, which was not possible in the case of simple subjectivism. Stevenson first distinguishes between "disagreement in belief" and "disagreement in attitude", to account for disagreement in moral interest, where "interest" is understood broadly to include moral approval. Stevenson sees all disagreement in ethics to always be a disagreement in interest.

> It is disagreement in interest which takes place in ethics. When C says 'This is good,' and D says 'No, it's bad,' we have a case of suggestion and counter-suggestion. Each one is trying to redirect the other's interest. There obviously need be no domineering, since each may be willing to give ear to the other's influence; but each is trying to move the other none the less. It is in this sense that they disagree. (Stevenson, p. 27)

Stevenson further argues that when two people disagree over an ethical matter they may not be able to resolve the disagreement through an assessment of the empirical considerations of the issue even if we assume that they each apply the empirical method exhaustively, consistently, and without error. Here he provides an example of an ethical disagreement that exists even though the two parties agree on all of the facts. For instance, A is of a sympathetic nature, and B isn't. They are arguing about whether a government spending on a public project would be good or not. Suppose that they discovered all the factual consequences of the government spending. It is still possible for A and B to disagree with one another on the moral position they take on the spending. The basis of their disagreement in interest is not because of limited factual knowledge, but simply from A's characteristic of being a sympathetic person or likewise B's characteristic of being cold. Or again, suppose, in the above argument, if we take the specific considerations of the two individuals involved – that A is poor and unemployed, and that B is rich. Here again, we can see that the disagreement may not occur due to different empirical facts. It would be due to their different social positions, together with their own specific self-interest. Both will mutually try to influence one another's beliefs, based on their approval or disapproval of the government spending. Both of them agree on the facts; however, do not agree in their attitude about the issue. Hence, science cannot resolve this disagreement. It is a disagreement in attitude and not a disagreement in belief. Their beliefs are the same, informed by the empirical facts; however, their attitudes are different towards the facts of the issue, which accounts for their disagreement. Importantly, Stevenson does not conclude that in the case of such moral disagreement there is no way to arrive at moral agreement, that is, agreement of moral approval. There is indeed a way. According to him, it is simply that this way is not a rational way—it is the way of non-rational persuasion.

> When ethical disagreement is not rooted in disagreement in belief, is there any method by which it may be settled? If one means by "method" a rational method, then there is no method. But in any case there is a "way." Let's consider the above example, again, where disagreement was due to A's sympathy and B's coldness. Must they end up by saying, well it's just a matter of our having different temperaments? Not necessarily. A, for instance, may try to change the temperament of his opponent. He may pour out his enthusiasms in such a moving way—present the sufferings of the poor with such appeal—that he will lead his opponent to see life through different eyes. He may build up, by the contagion of his feelings, an influence which will modify B's temperament, and create in him sympathy for the poor which didn't previously exist. This is often the only way to obtain ethical agreement, if there is any way at all. It is persuasive, not empirical or rational; but i.e. no reason for neglecting it. (Stevenson, p. 19)

However in spite of Stevenson's logical conclusion for ethical emotivism, there are many philosophers who criticized this thesis later on such as Alasdair MacIntyre. Emotivism is charged with being unable to accommodate the important role of rational argument in moral discourse and dispute. Although, it emphasizes on how through moral discourses it influences other's behaviour. Sometimes scholars say emotivism is not a new theory but it's an extended version of non-cognitivism, and therefore there is nothing special to say. And sometimes it can also be possible to allege that it's a different version of subjectivism. In one sense of the term *subjectivist,* the emotivists could firmly reject this charge. Yet, this reply fails to confront the real misgivings behind the charge of subjectivism i.e. the concern that there are no possible standards of right and wrong other than one's own subjective feelings. In this sense, the emotivists were indeed

subjectivists. But this issue has also been contested by philosophers who argue for objective emotivism.

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**Check Your Progress II**

Note:  a)  Use the space provided for your answer

   b)  Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1.  Highlight the main points of Stevenson's emotivism?

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## 13.5  LET US SUM UP

The theory of Charles Stevenson on emotivism has a strong logical basis. The crux of the argument of emotivism is about understanding the moral term "good". Therefore, in his theory of emotivism, Stevenson developed different criteria to define good. The basis of this discussion was the debates between the cognitive and non-cognitive understanding of moral judgments.

## 13.6  KEY WORDS

**Judgment:** the ability to make good decisions about what should be done.

**Meaning:** the idea that is represented by a word, phrase etc. In other words the idea that a person wants to express by using words, signs etc. but in moral philosophy philosophers understood this more as a subjective sense than objective.

**Fact:** something that truly exists and that has actual existence out there in the world.

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## 13.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Answers to Check Your Progress I**

1. Emotivism emerged as an alternative moral ethical theory to utilitarianism and Kantian ethics. In the era of scientific dominance, where science was playing a key role to decide whether a moral judgement is acceptable or not, Emotivism tried to focus on the distinction between fact and value, and challenged that the problem of moral judgment cannot be resolved by the method of agreement or disagreement on the facts.

2. Emotivism emerged as a meta-ethical theory in order to resolve some fundamentals problems in moral philosophy. Defining the moral terms like good is one of the examples. In doing this it dealt with the debates of is-ought, fact-value problem in moral philosophy.

**Answers to Check Your Progress II**

1. Some of the main points of Stevenson's emotivism are,

   a. The significance of moral judgement lies in its emotive impact,

   b. Ethical matter cannot be resolved through the assessment of the empirical considerations of the issue,

   c. Ethical disagreement is a disagreement in attitude, not disagreement in belief.

   d. Ethical disagreement can be resolved through non-rational persuasion.

# UNIT 14 PRESCRIPTIVISM: R. M. HARE[*]

**Structure**

## 14.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is,

* To explain Hare's moral/ethical position about prescriptivism.

* To provide an explanation about the role of prescriptivism in moral and ethical philosophy in general and the basic questions about the moral/ethical in particular.

## 14.1 INTRODUCTION

We can trace the seeds of prescriptivism in the philosophy of Socrates, Aristotle, Hume, Kant and Mill, but the main proponent of this meta-ethical theory was philosopher Richard Mervyn Hare (1919-2002). Through the analysis of moral discourse, Hare justified the preferences for utilitarianism. Hare served Royal Artillery in the Second World War and he was seized as a prisoner by Japan. This experience of second world war influenced Hare's life and philosophy, particularly his view that moral philosophy is obligatory in nature and helps people to be a moral being (King: 2004).

In moral philosophy, philosophers give their opinion/thought about moral problems and moral judgments and in this way everyone has their freedom to give their opinions. But according to Hare, the problem with this line of thought is that there is a lack of concern for others and rational thought is not put to use while formulating moral judgements. Hence the forementioned philosophers are considered as subjectivist or emotivists. But Hare says there is another set of philosophers who emphasize on the rationality. In other words, in answering moral questions like is or ought to be a rational activity. Therefore to understand moral questions, problems or issues one requires rationality. Thus in this case

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you don't only think about yourself but you have to think about others also in your mind. These sets of philosophers are called descriptivist and sometimes naturalists as well. According to naturalists, moral judgments correspond to objective natural facts and can therefore be described.

Hare has taken these two opposite thoughts very seriously and tried to give a new direction and solution to moral questions. Dealing with these two problems as a result he developed an alternative moral theory called prescriptivism (Hare: 1965). According to Hare, moral judgments should be understood in terms of its normative and prescriptive meaning or element rather than its descriptive meaning or element.

R. M. Hare illustrated and developed Prescriptivism in his writings, mainly, *the Language of morals* (1952), *Moral Thinking* (1981), *Freedom and Reason* (1965). Hare claims that any moral term or predicate (Such as good, bad, right, wrong, etc.) can be understood on the basis of two principles, one is prescriptivity and another is universalizability. A moral judgement (Generally, Moral judgement is a sentence or statement predicated by moral term.) is universal and prescriptive in nature. If any sentence having a moral term that cannot be universalized and prescribed, it means that it cannot be used as a moral judgement. We can put this in a different manner that if we want our moral judgement to be translated in a moral action, then our moral judgement should have the potential to universalize and prescribe. Hare argues that if we combine the concept of universalizability and prescriptivity, we get preference utilitarianism. Preference utilitarianism states that the consequence of our action should be the maximization of satisfaction of people's preferences. In *Freedom and Reason* he took two positions such as prescriptivism argument and the utilitarian argument. These points will be discussed below in details. In the book, chapter six, he has outlined about his basic position with reference to a situation in which the interests of the two persons are only involved. In chapter seven in the same book, he argued about the utilitarian argument and covered cases in which the interests of more than two parties involved.

## 14.2 DEFINITION

Prescriptivism claims that a moral statement has an element of meaning which makes moral statements prescriptive in nature. In other words, prescriptivism is a thesis that tells us, when moral terms used to make moral judgements; it is a logical inference that they used to make a universal prescription. Moral statements have two elements one is descriptive and second is prescriptive. A prescription means to tell someone to do something, to prescribe, in such a manner that one can dispose that prescription into action. When we prescribe a course of action it commits us to agree to an imperative to ourselves and to others that an action is done. When we make a sincere agreement then it may be said that one is positively willing to the action being acted on. The prescriptions that rest on universals principles are called universal prescriptions. Universal prescribing not only tells someone to do something but it also advice to do something, we can imply the existence of reasons by advice these reasons are expressible universal principles. Universal prescription tells to perform an action because it consists of some characteristics, so in prescribing that action, all actions having those characteristics are prescribed. If we take "ought" as an

example, in the statement of the form, "P ought to do A" to give a moral judgement, then it takes the principle, "anyone in C ought to do A" as a presupposition, so P's doing A would count as an instance of doing A in C. Thus, according to this principle, "if you are in C, you ought to do A and if I am in C then I ought to do A". The implication of this later statement would be "Do A in C" and "Let me do A in C". If we agree on this it further implies that one is inclined that this act is to be done by oneself and the others. Thus, when moral judgements are given by ought-statements, an advice is used to be given by means of these statements how we ourselves and others are to act and these dvices are based on general principles that the act is to be done by oneself and others. (Dahl: 1987).

Descriptive element of moral statements varies from culture to culture and person to person. This element is person-time-space-specific. On the other hand, prescriptive element of moral statements is constant in nature. That is why prescriptivism makes a ground for moral disagreement and moral judgement.

Hare's version of prescriptivism holds that moral judgments prescribe rather than merely describe or express feelings. He further argues that moral prescriptions differ from non-moral one in the manner that the former is characterised by universalizability. One who judges an action to be morally good must be ready to judge any relevantly similar action as morally good. This idea of universalizability may be influenced by Kant. Hare thinks that prescriptivism is best captured in the ways moral judgments guide action by avoiding moral relativism and providing a basis for the rational justification of moral claims. Indeed, he argued that the only rational moral view is a kind of utilitarianism. Thus he brought together two major thoughts of moral theory i.e. the Kantian tradition (captured by his notion of universalizability) and utilitarianism. He brought to all of his work deep insights, a lucid and elegant prose, and a commitment to the importance of ethics and rational inquiry.

## 14.3 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRESCRIPTIVISM IN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Hare's prescriptivism is very important as it has helped people to understand moral judgments from universal and rational point of view. He has developed prescriptivism because it applies to larger audiences or public. Certainly prescriptivism deals with bigger ethical problems such as whether moral judgments are to be drawn on the basis of rationality or individual choices or opinions. Hare has also dealt with the question of 'is' and 'ought to be'. He did not follow the traditional ethical theories, rather he was critical of all the existing theories of that time. That is why we see he was critical of emotivism, descriptivism, utilitarianism and deontological theory of Kant. Hare was a philosopher engaged with all the existing moral theories and did not find answers for certain questions. That is why he derived some of the principles from those existing theories and developed prescriptivism. For example, in his writings he supported some elements of emotivism but he disagreed with many other elements. Hare claims that moral statements/judgements do not describe anything and do not express attitude of the individuals. For him, Moral judgements are imperative in nature.

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**Check Your Progress I**

Note:  a)  Use the space provided for your answer

   b)  Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1.  What is the significance of prescriptivism in moral philosophy?

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2.  Why do call prescriptivism a meta-ethical theory?

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## 14.4 PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS

Hare is one of the most prolific writers on ethics since Moore. He was influenced by many philosophers such as Hume, Kant, Moore, Russell. Hume influenced him on fact and value distinction; Moore and Russell influenced his thinking of how philosophy is all about an investigation of concepts; and from Kant he draw the idea of universality and reason in moral practices. He was also influenced by utilitarianism. In other words, broadly his ethical theory prescriptivism is developed out of critical engagements and disagreements with three philosophical thoughts namely emotivism, Kantian ethics (Deontology of Kant) and utilitarianism. We find that in his book *The Language of Morals* he makes a distinction between prescriptive and descriptive meaning and understanding from rational point of view. Prescriptive meaning is defined in relation to imperatives.

> A statement is prescriptive if it entails, if necessary in conjunction with purely factual statements, at least one imperative; and to assent to an imperative is to prescribe action. Descriptive meaning is defined in relation to truth-conditions i.e. a statement is descriptive to the extent that factual conditions for its correct application define its meaning (Hare: 1952).

But later in his book *Freedom and Reason* (1965) he clarifies his position on various issues and revised his thesis. Benn (2002) puts Hare's revised position as:

1.  Hare accepts that moral predicates (e.g. good, bad, right, etc.) have a descriptive meaning,

2.  This descriptive meaning is secondary to them (Moral predicate),

3.  Primary meaning of Moral predicates is non-descriptive in nature, which is prescriptive meaning,

4.  Hare accepts the distinction between fact and values,

5.  We cannot make any logical inference about moral judgements from descriptive (factual) characteristics of the world.

However, all these above discussed aspects made his ethical theory very rational, practical and applicable for everybody. Hence, Hare was not only concerned about moral issues intellectually but also took moral conduct and practices seriously. This could have happened due to his experience during Second World War mentioned earlier. This relation of theory to practice gives Hare's work strength and an added dimension. One of the most important things in Hare's moral philosophy is the dimension of reason and rationality. Your moral practices are guided or judged by certain reason, truth and arguments and therefore it is prescriptive as well. This might be the reason Hare emphasized universality with prescriptivism. For him moral judgments are not only universal but prescriptive. Moral judgments are universalizable". Universalizability is a characteristic of descriptive sentence according to Hare, which, one can apply to predicates in the exact manner or relevantly as well. (Coles: 1963).

The rationality in morality can be easily understood when we understand the two features of Hare's moral judgment, namely prescriptivity and universalizability.

If you want to decide what you ought (moral judgement) to do or what you can prescribe to yourself in a situation, and at the same time we want to universalize this action (ought). In this given scenario, you choose an action to perform, but you realize that when you universalize this action, suppose this action gives birth a prescription which is unacceptable to you. In that case, you cannot universalize the proposed action, it means the prescription yielded from this action cannot become an "ought".

A general moral principle consists of two features: Prescriptivity and universalizability, these two features are the main foundation of Hare's theory. Universal terms are different from singular terms (such as "Socrates"). But "maxims" can be universal and not singular or particular, as maxims do not refer to individuals, they can be regarded as universal and not specific, what differentiates in identifying an extensive class of agent is the degree (More specificity is involved in "Always give the true evidence" than "Always tell the truth" and more generality than "Always give true evidence on oath"). His paper "Universalizability" (1954) stressed one's personal responsibility in making decisions that are also decisions of principle. The next important development came in a second book, *Freedom and Reason* (1965), in which the formal features of prescriptivity and universalizability generate a "Golden principle" as a form of argument. Here in order to articulate this golden principle in the context of universalizability and prescriptivity, one needs to understand one example which Hare (1965) himself has given in his writings.

*A* owes money to *B*, and *B* owes money to *C*, and it is the law that creditors may exact their debts by putting their debtors into prison. *B* asks himself, 'Can I say that I ought to take this measure against *A* in order to make him pay?' He is no doubt inclined to do

this, or wants to do it. Therefore, if there were no question of universalizing his prescriptions, he would assent readily to the singular prescription 'Let me put *A* into prison'. But when he seeks to turn this prescription into a moral judgment, and say, 'I ought to put *A* into prison because he will not pay me what he owes', he reflects that this would involve accepting the principle 'Anyone who is in my position ought to put his debtor into prison if he does not pay'. But then he reflects that *C* is in the same position of unpaid creditor with regard to himself B and that the cases are otherwise identical; and that if anyone in this position ought to put his debtors into prison, then so ought *C* to put him B into prison. And to accept the moral prescription '*C* ought to put me into prison' would commit him (since, as we have seen, he must be using the word "ought" prescriptively) to accepting the singular prescription 'Let *C* put me into prison'; and this he is not ready to accept. But if he is not, then neither can he accept the original judgment that he *B* ought to put *A* into prison for debt. Notice that the whole of this argument would break down if ought were not being used both universalizably *and prescriptively*; for if it were not being used prescriptively, the step from *C* ought to put me into prison to Let *C* put me into prison would not be valid.

This above mentioned example is to understand moral judgment on the basis of universalizability, prescriptivity and utilitarian principle. Hare adopted the utilitarian method because it involves rationality into its moral consideration. In order to understand the utilitarian aspect and universal principle this statement or example is very helpful because in first case it does not clarify about others involvement in your act where as in second case it involves. This helps one to understand the golden principle aspect which is mentioned in the above example. Hare makes a logical relation between universal prescriptivism and utilitarianism (preference utilitarianism). If someone wants that his or her preferences should be counted in the moral judgement done by others, than he or she should count other's preferences into consideration to make his or her own moral judgement. The implication of this view is that moral deliberator should take all preferences into consideration when he makes a moral judgement as if these preferences are his/her own. Here, Hare does not entirely rejects emotivism. He says that prescription is the central element of ethical language. He opposes descriptivism, which is a theory that states that moral predicates (such as, good, bad, right, ought, etc.) are the description of moral features of reality.

He argues that prescriptive language has a logical structure and it follows rational frameworks of reasoning. For instance, there could be imperative inference, just as there could be factual inference. Moral prescriptions entail imperatives. But moral prescriptions are more than that; they are not only imperative in nature, but are also universalizable. For example, to say, "You ought not to kill animals" is to say "do not kill animals."

Piers Benn in his article "R M Hare" highlights the importance of intention or will in universal prescription. In the words of Benn,

> The prescriptivity of moral judgments also led Hare to an eccentrically stretched position on weakness of will. If one sincerely addresses an "ought" judgment to oneself (e.g. 'I ought to give regularly to charity'), it follows from Hare's theory that one intends to act on it. If the intention is absent (what most people call weakness of will) then it follows either that no universal prescription was ever made, or that it was psychologically impossible to act on it. Philosophers with a less inexhaustible theoretical determination would conclude that since weakness of will (*akrasia*) plainly is real, then any theory that entails its denial must be wrong.

**Check Your Progress II**

Note:    a)    Use the space provided for your answer

        b)    Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1.    What role do rationality, and utilitarianism play in Hare's prescriptivism?

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## 14.5   LET US SUM UP

Prescriptivism is a meta-ethical theory, because it deals with fundamental questions in moral philosophy like whether moral judgments should to be understood on the basis of rationality or individual choices or opinions; the question of 'is' and 'ought' in moral philosophy. Hare's moral philosophy is grounded on three features or principles such as universalizability, prescriptivity and the utilitarian principle.

## 14.6   KEY WORDS

**15   Rationality:** the belief or principle that actions and opinions should be based on reason rather than on emotion or personal opinions.

**Universalism:** it is a theoretical doctrine and philosophical concept which means some ideas have universal application or applicability.

**Utilitarianism:** a philosophical and ethical theory which has the belief that a morally good action is one that helps the greatest number people or brings happiness to greatest number of people.

## 14.7    FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## 14.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Answers to Check Your Progress I**

1. Hare's prescriptivism is very important in the sense it has helped philosophers to understand moral judgments from universal and rational point of view. He has developed prescriptivism because it applies to larger audiences or public. Certainly prescriptivism is dealing with bigger ethical problems like whether moral judgments are to be drawn on the basis of rationality or individual choices or opinions. Hare has also dealt with the question of is and ought to be. The most important point is he did not follow the traditional ethical theories as it is rather he was critical of all the existing theories of that time.

2. Prescriptivism is a meta-ethical theory because it deals with bigger ethical problems such as whether moral judgments are to be drawn on the basis of rationality or individual choices or opinions. Hare has also dealt with the question of is and ought to be.

**Answers to Check Your Progress II**

The rationality in morality can be easily understandable when we understand the two features of Hare's moral philosophy. These two features of moral reasoning are, basically, prescriptivity and universalizability. Hare talks about an action on the basis of universal principle and prescriptivity, he is keeping in mind that it should be applicable to everybody and in every circumstance. So here one is always concern about "others". Hence, this inclusivity aspect about others in Hare's moral philosophy involved rationality and preferences utilitarianism as well.