



## ‘Ethical statements are not the same as non-ethical statements.’ Evaluate this statement

Ethical naturalism is empiricist in orientation and argues that ethical propositions are no more than statements of fact that can be justified by appeal to the natural world, therefore ethical statements are not ‘beyond’ non-ethical statements. Although there are different ways to interpret ethical statements they all relate to what is actually real and objective. For instance, Mill sees ethical statements as, really, statements about pleasure or pain. For Bradley, it is all about realising the concrete universal and through self-realisation finding one’s duty. These different ways at least agree that ethical and non-ethical statements are the same. Evolutionary ethics argues that it is all to do with how we assess and adapt biologically, psychologically and socially just like Charles Darwin’s drunken monkey. If we know that fire is hot then we do not touch the flame; how is this any different from deciding how to live ethically when we know that violence causes pain and so avoid it?

We may feel, deeply, that a moral sentiment is ‘real’, absolute and provable like any claim about the ‘objective world’; for example, it is directly related to actions that we can work out a sense of justice in society. Indeed, this viewpoint reflects not only Naturalism but also moral viewpoints based on religion and revelation. For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan in Christianity teaches through clear actions that it is good to help someone in need or who is suffering. There is nothing metaphysical about that, and therefore ethical statements are the same as non-ethical statements.

However, there are clear challenges to Naturalism. Moore argued that contrary to ethical Naturalism, ethical statements are ‘a priori’ matters of truth just as with mathematics and can be identified through use of one’s intuition. In this sense ethical propositions are very different to non-ethical propositions. Firstly, Hume’s ‘is-ought problem’ can be used to show that Naturalism is wrong – you cannot derive a value from a fact. Therefore, ethical statements are not the same as non-ethical statements. Secondly, the ethical



term 'good' is indefinable because it is a simple notion like the word yellow but it is also self-evident; non-ethical statements are not self-evident and so not the same as ethical statements. Thirdly, the term good always raises an open-ended question when we attempt to define its meaning with reference to a natural or non-ethical property.

All these arguments present ethical propositions and language as very different to non-ethical statements.

It could be argued that ethical language is value laden in a different way to non-ethical language. For example, the statement 'this is a good door' is not an ethical statement and yet uses the word good. The judgment made may be down to its specific purpose, such as opening easily, looking good, retaining heat in a house or to its durability.

However, when we make the statement, 'this is a good person', the goodness element is not entirely about 'purpose' if we did have one, but is more about the person's moral qualities. It is something very different and so linguistically, ethical statements are very different to non-ethical statements.

## 'Ethical statements are objective.' Evaluate this statement

Ethical Naturalism in some sense promotes the views that ethical propositions are objective because they can be evidenced through empirical means. So, for example, Mill (Utilitarianism) and Bradley (*My Station and Its Duties*) felt that their respective ideals such as happiness and duty were perfectly objective.

However, this may not be the case at all. Even David Hume recognises the fact that ethical statements were value statements and meant something very different from empirical 'facts'. Hume was the first philosopher to suggest that they do not have meaning but are just expressions of emotions or approval and disapproval. If this is accepted as the case then empiricism cannot accept the claims to objectivity of an Ethical Naturalism as proposed by Mill (Utilitarianism) and Bradley (*My Station and Its Duties*). In fact, values suggest personal views and personal views differ. This makes



ethical statements more subjective. Mackie suggested this when he argued: 'In short, this argument from relativity has some force simply because the actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values.'

This line of argument asks that if morality were objective why are there so many arguments about morality throughout the world? Indeed, the very fact that this course considers Divine Command Theory, Virtue Theory, Ethical Egoism, Naturalism, Intuitionism and Emotivism presents a fundamental challenge to the claim that ethical statements are objective due to the great variety and difference in how ethical statements are explained. How does a person distinguish between something actually being right and it merely seeming right to that person? It still may be concluded by that person that their view is right, but someone like Moore or Prichard who appeal to duty and intuition can only respond in a moral argument by saying, 'I know I am right' when there is a disagreement over an ethical issue or a challenge to their ethical theories.

One strength of Naturalism is that it makes morality objective and this has the strength of raising morality above personal opinion. Through Naturalism you can arrive at absolutes (such as murder is wrong) and this matches a common sense view of ethics. We have seen this work in Natural law Theory and the Roman Catholic Church amongst others accept this view. Indeed, Naturalism entails scientific testing of degrees of morality, for example as we have seen through the application of Utilitarianism to the needs of society. This approach also reflects a modern world view that we need to test statements (scientific, empirical approach) and not just accept blindly a claim to objective knowledge, especially when it has been pointed out that such knowledge is to do with 'feelings'.

Despite this, one could argue that, and identify that there are common elements of morality that span across the globe, through culture, language and geography. This is a demonstration, not only that a particular Naturalistic ethical theory is founded in



objectivity, but that morality in general is as well.

There are some important issues to consider here. What do we mean by 'objective'? Do we mean that ethical statements are consistent and are applied consistently? Do we mean they are 'a priori' objective as with mathematical formulae? Is objectivity just an abstract concept that has no real appropriation for the real world? Do we mean they are beyond question or challenge? Or, do we mean that they mean the same for all and can be recognised and followed by all? Is objectively perceived by all? To each question we may get a different answer as to whether or not ethical statements are objective.

There is also the question as to whether ethical statements can really be objective if there are so many theories, or that one theory develops from another, for example, Bradley's claim that through the dialectical methodology we can arrive at an ultimate answer

In general, although not always, the concept of objectivity is associated with the meta-physical and deontological systems, that are 'a priori', conceptual whereas ethical systems that are more empirically based do recognise some form of subjectivity.