

THE ETHICAL CONTENT OF METAETHICS

The Ethical Content of Metaethics

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CONTENTS: This thesis is a critical examination of the claim that metaethics is ethically neutral and that it has no ethical content. Broadly speaking, I have dealt with each of the three different categories of metaethical theory - naturalist, non-naturalist and non-cognitivist. Chapter I is an outline of the differences between ethics and metaethics and a discussion of the relation between the two in the case of a non-naturalist metaethical theory (i.e. that of G.E. Moore in Principia Ethica.) Chapter II is an examination of the various possible interpretations of the claim of ethical neutrality in an attempt to see what is being claimed and how the claim can be best formulated. Chapter III is first an explanation of the non-neutrality of Naturalistic metaethical theories and secondly a critique of the fundamental presupposition (i.e. that all naturalistic theories are false) of those who claim neutrality. Chapter IV is a discussion of further problems of and prospects for the construction of a neutral metaethic. These problems which burden even the non-cognitivist, while perhaps not insurmountable, indicate that any truly neutral metaethic will be so only at the cost of being irrelevant to ethics.

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Contents

I	Contemporary Moral Philosophy	P.1
	1. Ethics and Metaethics	
	2. G. E. Moore	
II	The Ethical Neutrality of Metaethics	P.27
	1. Interpretations	
	2. Ethical Neutrality	
III.	Naturalism	P.48
	1. Naturalism and Ethical Neutrality	
	2. A Critique of Naturalism	
	3. The Value Content of Facts	
IV.	The Problems of Ethical Neutrality	P.70

# I

## CONTEMPORARY MORAL PHILOSOPHY

### 1. Ethics and Metaethics

There are two broad areas of concern in contemporary moral philosophy - ethics and metaethics.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, moral philosophers have dealt with questions characteristic of both areas. The distinction between the two has been made only recently. It is contended by some moral philosophers (Ayer, Hare and Stevenson among others) that the importance in the distinction lies in the ethical neutrality of metaethics. Metaethics is thought to be neutral in that a particular metaethical view neither incorporates any particular moral judgements nor 'commits one' to accepting or rejecting any particular ethical view. Given this neutrality, metaethics escapes the problems of cognitive significance and justification of particular ethical judgements or positions. Consequently, by careful observance of this distinction, it will be possible to get a much clearer picture of the claims which moral philosophers have actually been making. First, however, the claim of metaethical neutrality - being rather vague as it stands - warrants a more critical examination.

This will involve working out a proper formulation of

the claim and an examination of various representative meta-ethical views to see if they actually are 'neutral'. Along these lines I will deal with at least one view from each of two major categories of 'cognitive' metaethical theory: naturalist and non-naturalist. I will discuss also the possibility of the ethical neutrality of what are loosely termed non-cognitive metaethical theories. Accordingly, the important question underlying this examination is whether or not any of these views can or need be neutral. This latter question will be of particular interest to a discussion of the methods of adjudicating among metaethical theories. In addition this discussion will be significant in the event that metaethical theories are not ethically neutral (autonomous), for I believe it can be shown that certain ethical views will then follow from general epistemological, semantic, or ontological considerations.

To discuss the relation between ethics and metaethics is to presuppose that the two are distinguishable in some relevant ways. First, then, it is necessary to characterize these two approaches to moral philosophy. In ethics one is directly engaged in moral discourse.<sup>2</sup> It is a general systematic attempt to set forth an actual moral code, to provide us with a set of principles through which we can ascertain our obligations and make evaluations. Traditionally this has involved giving a set of rules or principles to which we can appeal when we make moral judgements. W.D. Ross's

prima facie duties or Mill's principle of utility are examples of such.<sup>3</sup> In addition, one finds an account of moral value (extrinsic and intrinsic) and its relation to the rules or principles. For example in the case of Mill's theory, that which has value is that which produces pleasure. Usually there is an account of both moral value and moral obligation although one may be seen as derivative from the other (e.g. Moore's view that 'right' is defined in terms of 'good'.) In addition to various guidelines or standards for making judgements, there is an account of the justification of these judgements. To offer a justification is to offer acceptable reasons in support of a judgement. Justification is often an appeal to the very principles and values considered in the process of making any particular judgement. Once again taking Ross's view, suppose we ask someone why he acted in a certain way. He might respond "Because it was my duty" or "It was the right thing to do". And, when pressed, he might respond that after considering the relative weight of the various prima facie duties involved, he believed that his actual duty was to act as he did. Other ethical justifications are references to general principles and facts which establish their relevance. In telling someone that he ought to act in accordance with a promise he had made, we might indicate that one is, in general, obligated to keep one's promises, and that this rule is, in fact, relevant because a promise was in fact made, and there are no mitigating



circumstances. A further justification of the principle - that one ought to keep one's promises - might include reference to the ultimate purpose in human life, or the will of a deity or a way of life. In brief, a person doing ethics would propose or outline: 1) a moral code (i.e. general principles of obligation and evaluation and definitions of key terms), 2) rules for the use of that code, 3) an account of justification within the code, and 4) actual moral judgments in accordance with the code. It might be argued that offering 'definitions of terms' and 'rules for the use of a code' are more the activities of the moral philosopher doing metaethics, yet it is difficult to imagine presenting an ethical view without them. Suffice it to say for the moment that the problems of placing these activities may throw doubt upon the clearness of the distinction between ethics and metaethics. This remains to be seen.

Metaethics is often seen as an attempt to talk about moral (or ethical) discourse and moral practice without 'committing' oneself to an actual set of moral principles or norms. In this sense metaethics is allegedly neutral. Ayer, among others, has argued for this position maintaining that an emotivist metaethic does not entail any particular set of moral judgements.<sup>4</sup> William Blackstone elaborates on the claim of metaethical neutrality while essentially agreeing with Ayer.<sup>5</sup> It is my contention that they are both mistaken.

I will eventually explain why, but first more need be said about the sorts of questions which characterize metaethics. These questions deal with meaning, justification, truth, and method (cf. Paul Taylor's discussion of metaethics in The Moral Judgement.) There are questions about the meaning of ethical terms and the 'statements' in which they occur. This has usually involved giving rules for the correct use of moral terms and expressions. It also involves the classification of moral judgements (i.e. as imperatives or indicatives or perhaps as cognitive or non-cognitive.) This classification will in turn have implications for the 'truth' of moral propositions. Can they be true or false at all? If they can, how do we go about ascertaining their truth or falsity? Is this the same sort of truth characteristic of other types of propositions? There is the further problem of distinguishing between the moral and the non-moral (actions, experiences, statements, views, words etc.) In fact some answers to the questions of the meaning of ethical terms have rendered this distinction vacuous in so far as moral language has been reduced to some other sort of language.

After all if the right course of action is solely the most prudent, then the moral decision (of what we ought to do) is merely a prudential one. We could then eliminate the term 'right' if we so chose. Obviously any discussion of the meaning of ethical terms has gone hand in hand with

general theories of meaning (and meaningfulness). The logical positivist's criterion of meaningfulness - "verifiability in principle" - when extended by Ayer to "ethical utterances", led him to conclude that such utterances were non-cognitive expressions of emotion. The equation of meaning with use has led to analyses of 'good' such as Nowell-Smith's.

The questions of method pertain to the logic of moral reasoning. Are terms such as 'valid' and 'invalid' appropriate to moral reasoning? Is there a special 'valuational logic'? Are valid inferences in moral discourse like those in mathematics or science? What is the role of reason in moral discourse? Does it have one at all?

Finally there are (metaethical) questions about (ethical) justifications. First, can moral judgements be justified at all? Secondly, what sorts of reasons or evidence can be appropriately offered in support of moral judgements? Much of the weight of both questions is thrown back once again to the theories of meaning. Thirdly, can a general characterization be given of the way in which people support and defend their moral convictions? Closely related is the question of whether or not moral disagreements are rationally resolvable.

In addition, there are meta-metaethical questions - that is questions about metaethical theories themselves. I have indicated some already. To reiterate, what is the

relation between ethical and metaethical theories? What is the subject matter of metaethical theories? Is it solely our own set of moral beliefs or is it any set of putatively moral beliefs (attitudes, judgements etc.)? Thus what 'facts' must a metaethical theory depend upon or account for?

Lastly, and the answer to this question will depend in part upon the answers to previous ones, how do we decide when a metaethical theory is adequate or inadequate? This raises a possible additional purpose for metaethical theories - that of evaluating ethical theories - 'possible' because at the moment this claim could be seen as 'unmetaethical' because it would vitiate one sense of the claim of metaethical neutrality.

## 2. G. E. Moore

### The Subject Matter of Ethics

In the case of non-naturalist metaethical theories the distinction between ethics and metaethics becomes blurred and the claim of neutrality cannot be maintained. To illustrate this, I will discuss G.E. Moore's approach to moral philosophy in Principia Ethica. I am particularly interested in the ways in which his ethical views follow from his metaethical views. Moore does not explicitly distinguish between ethics and metaethics. However, it is possible to work in this distinction with others which he makes. Moore also raises certain other issues which are of special importance

in a discussion of metaethics. Among these are his arguments against Naturalistic and Metaphysical Ethics (i.e. his reformulation of Hume's is/ought dichotomy.) I hope to show that the claim of the (logical) independence of ethics and metaethics must presuppose this distinction.

Moore is primarily concerned with correct ethical reasoning. Generally, this involves understanding the meaning of key ethical terms (i.e. good, right, ought, etc.) and consequently, knowing what sort of evidence (if any) is relevant to the support of our moral judgements.<sup>6</sup> Further it is essential that we have the right questions 'before our minds', specifically "What is good in itself?" and "What is good as means?" Moore holds that this latter question is equivalent to "What ought I to do?" Sorting out these questions will help us to avoid confusion in our attempts to make correct ethical judgements. Moore's approach to ethics can be termed non-deontological (or perhaps teleological), for he takes questions of intrinsic value to be most fundamental.<sup>7</sup> We can ascertain obligations or principles of conduct only if we can reach some agreement about what sorts of things have intrinsic value (i.e. are good). Reaching agreement on this issue is an ethical problem. We might for example ask whether or not a particular action is good or, more generally, whether or not actions of a certain type are usually good. Moore in discussing the "Science of Ethics" excludes these two types of question (unique and general) from consideration.

Since moral philosophers are not concerned with answering particular questions and thus making particular judgements, Moore concludes that it is not their business to give personal advice or exhortation.<sup>7</sup> But this is not to say that moral philosophy is neutral with respect to these judgements. Metaethics "must contain reasons and principles for deciding on the truth of all of them."<sup>8</sup>

In contrast with the questions about what sorts of things (classes of actions etc.) are good is the metaethical question "What does good mean?" or "How is good to be defined?" I will discuss Moore's treatment of this question in the next section, but first I will say something about another metaethical problem which he discusses - that of distinguishing between the moral and the non-moral. The province of ethics (or 'the moral') can be defined as what is common and peculiar to all judgements using such terms as virtue, vice, duty, right, ought, good and bad. Moore points out that, traditionally, all of these terms have been taken to have some reference to conduct. For ethics, however, not just any conduct is of interest, but primarily good conduct. We all have a fairly clear idea what conduct is, while 'good' needs much clarification.<sup>9</sup> Ethics must be defined "by reference to a particular object of thought" - that object denoted by 'good'. "The words which are commonly taken as signs of ethical judgements all do so refer to it and they are expressions of ethical judgements solely because they do so refer."<sup>10</sup>

This reference to 'good' (the property of goodness or intrinsic value) is either direct or indirect. Judgements of intrinsic value refer directly whereas judgements of instrumental value refer indirectly. The latter, in which for example, 'right' is often used, are judgements as to what is good as means - thus conducive to what has intrinsic value. Moore has, in effect, classified an unusually wide range of value judgements as moral. He explicitly includes aesthetic judgements and presumably includes what would ordinarily be called non-moral uses of good. It is tempting to say that Moore failed to take into account the difference between the moral and non-moral uses of good, but to establish this would necessitate defending another theory of meaning against Moore's and coming up with another definition of 'moral' or 'ethical'. I will point out some of the difficulties inherent in this latter task in chapter III. However, Moore's views on the province of ethics have some bizarre implications for ethics. Our moral deliberations could become rather complex in that we might have to weigh an incredible number of possibilities before acting. Moreover, how do 'aesthetic' considerations fit into moral deliberation? How would one decide whether to continue contemplating Rembrandt's Night Watch or to keep a promise to meet someone? Is all intrinsic value relevant to conduct? Ought we to contemplate beautiful things? Do these questions give rise to moral dilemmas? Moore would probably answer by saying that one simply thinks

11

carefully about the organic wholes, of which these goods form a part and all will be resolved. In the final analysis Moore's distinction between the ethical and non-ethical is presented in very general and consequently vague terms. Ethical terms refer to non-natural properties as opposed to natural properties or a supranatural (metaphysical) reality. All ethical terms and only ethical terms can be defined by reference to good. I doubt that Moore attempted to give an exhaustive list of such terms. He took it for granted that we all knew what they were.

#### The Naturalistic Fallacy

12

What then does good mean? This is not a question about the good, but rather about the adjective 'good'. In answering this question Moore makes several assumptions. The first is that good is an adjective that denotes a certain property. If we are to attribute this property (goodness) correctly to certain things, we must know something about it, both what it is and what it is not. Secondly, to define a word is to give its meaning. This is not to say, however, that an indefinable word is meaningless. Thirdly, to say something about a property-word is to say something about the 'object for which it stands'. There are more assumptions but these will do for the moment.

There are, according to Moore, three sorts of definition. Taking Moore's example when we define 'horse':



- (1)...we may mean merely: "when I say 'horse', you are to understand that I am talking about a hoofed quadruped of the genus equus." (or)
- (2) We may mean as Webster ought to mean: when most English people say horse, "they mean a hoofed quadruped of the genus equus" (or)
- (3) We may, when we define horse, mean something much more important. We may mean that a certain object, which all of us know, is composed in a certain manner: That it has four legs, a heart, a liver, etc, etc, all of them arranged in definite relations to one another. 13

The first kind of definition is an "arbitrary verbal definition" while the second is a "verbal definition proper". Good is susceptible to either. However good is not definable in the third and most important sense of definition. This sort of definition is only possible for complex wholes - wholes composed of parts. Good is not complex, thus one cannot define it by enumerating its various parts. Moore sets out first to convince us that simple, indefinable qualities must exist and then that good is such a quality. These qualities, "objects of thought", are the "ultimate terms of reference" of our definitions and in their uniqueness make it possible for us to distinguish among things susceptible to definition. The implication is that definition consists in analysis, ultimately, into simple qualities. It would make no sense to deny that these qualities exist since we can come up with these definitions and differentiate among complex wholes on the basis of these simple qualities. <sup>14</sup> Next, Moore must show that these qualities are in fact indefinable. He proceeds to argue that 'yellow' is indefinable and thus really

a simple quality (i.e. not susceptible to analysis.) There is an implication by analogy that all truly simple qualities will, upon careful inspection of their meanings, prove to be indefinable. His argument that yellow is simple rests upon two assumptions. To reiterate: first, the only important sense of definition is analysis, and secondly a definition must give the meaning of the word.

Moore claims that the fact that all things which are yellow produce certain "vibrations in the light" has led people to define yellow accordingly. However, this is not what we mean by 'yellow'. Yellow is rather the certain property which we perceive. This perception is unanalysable in terms of other perceptions. What is 'meant' by yellow is some "object of thought" which resembles the actual colour which we perceive. (Incidentally, this property can, according to Moore, exist independently of its exemplification.) It is 'fallacious' to define yellow in terms of some other co-extensive property of yellow objects. But this cannot be right. Only arguments are fallacious not definitions. Anyway, a more general argument is necessary to show that a 'fallacy' is being committed in any attempted definition of a simple quality.

Moore claims that most moral philosophers have committed this same 'fallacy' by identifying good (in attempted definitions) with some other property also possessed by those things

which are good. Take for example the statement "Pleasure is good". Moore assumes here that if this statement is being offered as a definition, then it is an assertion of an identity of an object of thought with itself (what is 'meant' by pleasure.) The statement "Pleasure is good" would reduce to "Pleasure is pleasure" which being tautological is insignificant. "Pleasure is good" can only be significant if it is assumed we are using the "is" of predication.

As this argument stands, it is rather glib and as it is critical to Moore's alleged refutation of Naturalism, I will attempt to make it more explicit. There are at least six assumptions implicit in this argument:

1. If x means y then x is substitutable for y in all contexts. And any statement in which x is substituted for y will be equivalent to the one in which it is not.
2. Where P and G are simple qualities; if "P is G" is a definition then it is an identity statement.
3. To say that P is identical with G is to say that 'P' and 'G' have the same meaning - refer to the same object of thought.
4. Truisms such as P is P are insignificant.
5. A significant statement cannot be equivalent to an insignificant one.
6. "Pleasure is good" is significant.

Either A. "Pleasure is good" is a definition in which case it is equivalent to "Pleasure is pleasure" which is insignificant, or B. "Pleasure is good" is a predicative statement and is not equivalent to "Pleasure is pleasure". How do we know that "Pleasure is good" is significant? Moore is not

explicit on this point, but he gives some indication:

"...there is no meaning in saying that pleasure is good unless good is something different from pleasure." 15

I think it is safe to infer that "meaning" here just means significance. Words denote objects of thought and if "Pleasure is good" is to be significant then "pleasure" and "good" must refer to different objects of thought. It is not clear that this is a very compelling argument against naturalism. If "Pleasure is good" is a definition (as a Naturalist would assert) then "pleasure" and "good" refer (within the context of Moore's ontology) to the same object of thought. In saying that "Pleasure is good" is significant Moore is merely saying that "pleasure" and "good" refer to separate objects of thought. And so, leaving aside the word significant (since that would be to beg the question) to settle the issue between the Naturalist and Moore all we need do is decide whether "good" and "pleasure" refer to the same or separate "object(s) of thought". The prospect of Moore and Bentham reaching agreement on this issue would have been grim.

To offer a definition of good such as "Pleasure is good" is to commit the Naturalistic Fallacy. This 'fallacy' is a subclass of a broader type of fallacy. It is only naturalistic when one attempts to define "good" (a non-natural quality) in terms of a natural quality such as pleasure.<sup>16</sup> The real 'fallacy' involved is the attempt to define a simple

indefinable quality. One form of this fallacy is to identify one simple quality with another. The same fallacy is committed when one attempts a definition of pleasure (another simple quality) or when one attempts a definition of good in, for example, 'metaphysical' terms.<sup>17</sup>

Still, Moore must show "that good denotes something simple and indefinable".<sup>18</sup> To establish this he sets up a dilemma. Either good is simple or it is complex or it is meaningless. The latter two alternatives "may be dismissed by a simple appeal to the facts".<sup>19</sup> There is a test by means of which we can convince ourselves that good is not a complex whole capable of analysis. "Whatever definition be offered, it may be always asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good."<sup>20</sup> Suppose then that good is a complex whole capable of analysis (definition). If good is defined as "what we desire to desire" and if we ask "Is that thing good?" we can be taken to mean "Do we desire to desire A?" Now, we can ask intelligibly "Is it good to desire to desire A?" Momentarily, it appears that Moore is reformulating the same argument which he used to reject the possibility of defining one simple quality in terms of another.<sup>21</sup> However, he does not go that way. He asserts instead that it is just obvious that the "object of thought" referred to by "good" and that referred to by "what we desire to desire" are not the same. Moreover anyone can easily convince him-

self that the predicate of this proposition - "good" - is positively different from the notion of desiring to desire which enters into its subject."<sup>22</sup> Moore maintains that we can reject any definition (analysis) of good because we can always ask significantly "But is it (the object) good?" Once again we consider attentively what is actually "before our minds" in deciding whether or not the question is significant. Presumably if the question is insignificant (i.e. if we keep coming up with one object and its parts) we then have a definition. Thus the question "But is a horse a hoofed quadruped of the genus equus?" is insignificant. Are we just saying "But is a horse a horse?" Suffice it to say that Moore's arguments both that good is unanalysable (not complex) and that good is not identical with any other simple quality, depend upon our being aware of a certain unique notion or object of thought. Moore had no doubt that most of us are aware:

Everyone does in fact understand the question 'Is this good?' When he thinks of it, his state of mind is different from what it would be were he<sup>23</sup> asked, 'Is this pleasant or desired or approved?'

Given Moore's optimism about our moral intuitions, one wonders why he wrote a book primarily about the question "What is good?" Of course there are a lot of 'false' theories floating around which might confuse us. Still, the fact that moral philosophers have contended that good does mean desired

or approved or pleasant renders Moore's appeal suspect. If the Naturalist arrives at his conclusion by arguing that because good and (e.g.) pleasure are co-extensive, they therefore mean the same thing, he is indeed making a grave error. But there is some question as to whether or not this is what the Naturalist is doing and even if it is what he is doing, it does not refute his position. As has been noted by Foeglin<sup>24</sup> the naturalistic fallacy argument is at most only a rejection of one way of establishing a naturalist thesis. A Naturalist might well argue that since good means pleasure, then of course, goodness is co-extensive with pleasurable-ness in the way that any property is co-extensive with itself.

There are additional problems with Moore's views on the indefinability of good. If we accept the analogy with yellow, or one version of the open question argument, or the argument from significance (a slight variation of the open question argument) then we can conclude that good is indefinable in what Moore calls the most important sense of definition (analysis). There is another sort of 'definition' which Moore implicitly allows or at least considers worth arguing against. This is the sort of 'definition' in which a relation of identity is asserted to exist between two simple properties (e.g. goodness and pleasurable-ness). But it appears that Moore has misunderstood what is being claimed when a Naturalist offers "pleasure is good" as a definition. There is not a relation between two simple qualities but rather there is only

one quality with two 'labels'. Moore sees nothing wrong with this latter sort of definition and in fact offers one himself when he points out that "good" and "intrinsic value" refer to the same object of thought.

### Right Conduct

Having uncluttered our minds of fallacious definitions of good we can now get on to questions of conduct. Once again the most general questions about the right courses of action are metaethical ones about the meaning of 'right'. Given that right has a certain meaning, Moore can give an outline of how we are to go about ascertaining our obligations and, to a certain extent, a general characterisation of these obligations (e.g. whether or not they are absolute etc.) These metaethical views will have a direct bearing upon any statement of particular ethical duties or obligations.

Moore gives a utilitarian explication of right, while not of course, committing himself to any of their (Bentham's, Mill's) naturalistic definitions of good.

In short to assert that a certain line of conduct is, at a given time, absolutely right or obligatory is to assert, that more good or less evil will exist in the world, if it be adopted than anything else be done instead. 25

It follows from this definition that there is only one absolute duty or principle of obligation - to produce the greatest



balance of good over evil possible. This becomes clearer upon analysis of the process of deliberation about what we ought to do. In such deliberations there are two sorts of judgements. First there are causal judgements predicting the possibility and probability of certain courses of action and their results. Secondly there are judgements of the intrinsic value of the likely effects of these different courses of action. In addition it is necessary to compare the intrinsic values of these different possible effects. Given the predictive nature of the former judgements we can never be absolutely certain that certain effects will result from a certain action. Certain classes of actions are apt to have different results in varying circumstances. We can not therefore be sure that any particular type of action (e.g. keeping promises) is invariably right. Our deliberations are further complicated by the fact that we must make very discriminating judgements of the comparative value of the "organic wholes" realized by our actions. Rules of conduct can only be general in nature not universal, and they may well change over long periods of time. Moore oddly argues that since we cannot be sure of all the effects of our actions, we should never break such rules whose "general utility" has "been proved".<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, judgements of instrumental value are, if true, only generally so, whereas judgements of intrinsic value are, if true, universally so. From this metaethical analysis of moral decisions it is possible to

understand how actual judgements of obligation could be supported or justified. We at least know what sorts of reasons can be considered relevant. First, in a given situation, certain actions are possible. Secondly, within the range of possibilities a certain action will probably have certain effects. And thirdly, these effects have more intrinsic value than those of any other possible course of action. The first two sorts of consideration are matters of fact and there is general agreement as to how a dispute involving them would be resolved. Problems arise when one attempts to justify or support considerations of the third sort. How do we know what has intrinsic value and to what degree? How do we go about ascertaining what is good in itself? So far Moore has only argued to rid us of any false (metaethical) presuppositions about the meaning of good and to make it clear what sorts of questions we should be considering in making moral decisions. His objective is to show us what sorts of ethical judgements allow for evidence and what kind of evidence can be offered. Judgements of intrinsic value do not allow for supporting evidence. Or, at least we are restricted to a particular sort of evidence - that revealed by intuition.<sup>27</sup> This is a direct result of Moore's arguments against naturalistic and metaphysical ethics. What could he say if he were asked how he knew that one effect had more intrinsic value than another? He would reply that it is self-evident. To say this "means properly that the proposition so called, is

evident or true, by itself alone, that it is not an inference from some proposition other than itself."<sup>28</sup> Further, it is to say that "there is no reason why the proposition itself must be true."<sup>29</sup> Self-evidence only explains our holding a proposition to be true. That the proposition "pleasure is the only good" is untrue is self-evident (is "based upon my intuition of its falsehood"). "It is untrue because it is untrue and there is no other reason."<sup>30</sup>

While we can offer no reasons in support of a judgement of intrinsic value, there are certain precepts for making them correctly. Explaining the method or way of going about making correct judgements involves discussing Moore's principle of organic relations (or wholes). The principal possessors of intrinsic value are organic wholes. An example of such a whole is the admiring contemplation of a beautiful object. This whole has two parts: the admiring contemplation and the beautiful object. With this whole, as with all others, the intrinsic value of the whole is not equal to the sum of the intrinsic values of its parts. These two parts in isolation have no intrinsic value while together they have a great deal. The part is necessary for the existence of the whole, but not in the same way that certain means (e.g. the painter) were 'necessary' for the whole's existence. Moore implicitly takes the whole as that which has certain parts in certain relations to one another. Take away one of the parts and that whole no longer exists. Now the whole might

have existed independently of the specific causal circumstances which brought it about and thus the means are not necessarily parts of the whole. This consideration is of particular importance for ethics, much confusion having resulted from the false assumption that means to a certain end (whole) were in fact part of the whole and therefore possessed intrinsic value. The practice of keeping promises may be a means to mutual trust and co-operation and contribute to the general welfare. Yet, the keeping of a promise in isolation from all of its effects has no intrinsic value. One step in deciding what things are good in themselves is, therefore, not to confuse them with things which are only good as means. Another will be not to assume that the value of some organic whole is equal to the sum of the values of its parts. Failure to recognize this has led to serious errors in judgement of intrinsic value. Again, take the case of the admiring contemplation of a beautiful object. The assumption might be made that since the admiring contemplation had by itself no intrinsic value, that the entire value of the whole was possessed by the beautiful object alone. Moore points out that the beautiful object isolated from admiring contemplation may have no intrinsic value at all. This is another of Moore's guidelines for making correct judgements.

For this reason as well as to avoid confusion between means and end, it is absolutely essential to consider each distinguishable quality, in isolation, in order to decide what value it possesses.

It is now possible to return to the question of justification of judgements of intrinsic value. At the level of metaethical justification,<sup>52</sup> Moore has tried to show that no structure of reality or state of affairs rationally (in the sense of giving reasons) compels us to make any particular judgement of intrinsic value. This is because good is a non-natural property. In saying that something is good or has intrinsic value, we are asserting that it has a non-natural property. Any attempt to support such a judgement is bound to run into difficulties since the presence of a non-natural property is not easily determined. We do not have the recourse to sense perception which we do in the case of 'yellow' or some other natural property. In fact our cognizance of this property must rather be through some sort of intuition; we have no other final appeal. When considering the principal question of ethics "What is good in itself" we should keep in mind the principle of organic wholes, employ the method of isolation, and carefully separate ends and means. Beyond that we are left with the "sober judgement of reflective persons". The obvious question is; "Suppose such persons disagree even after following Moore's advice?"

#### Analysis and Moral Judgement

There are a variety of reasons why Moore's metaethical views are not neutral with respect to his ethical views. Moore is the first to admit this and would probably ask why

anyone would bother to do metaethics if this were not the case. Still, it is worth noting, for several reasons, why Moore's position is not neutral. First, the reasons why his position is not neutral may possibly be generalized to cover all non-naturalist (but cognitivist theories). Secondly, some of these reasons may also be applicable to naturalist theories. Thirdly, this task can be seen as a part of a broader attempt to show that it is unrealistic if not impossible to construct a relevant and neutral metaethic of any sort (i.e. whether naturalist, non-naturalist, or non-cognitivist). Why then is Moore's theory not ethically neutral? First, his account of the meaning of good and, in particular, his polemic against naturalism drastically limit the sorts of reasons which we can offer in support of our ethical judgements. In so far as we are rational and will either accept or reject certain ethical judgements on the basis of relevant evidence, a theory which proposes criteria of relevance is unlikely to be ethically neutral. It is no small claim to say that ethical judgements (at least those of intrinsic value) are a species of non-natural cognitions (or perhaps intuitions) and that they can only be self-evident. Because of this reliance upon intuition Moore cannot allow or incorporate any ethical views which might differ from his own. This precludes the possibility of taking into account differing ethical viewpoints in one's metaethical enquiries.

Moore's analysis of the meaning of right in utilitarian

terms can also be seen as non-neutral. Moore readily grants that it follows from his analysis that there is only one absolute duty, to produce the greatest amount of good over evil possible. Clearly this is a moral principle and the status of other moral rules is determined by it. Promises, for example, have no intrinsic value apart from that of their consequences.

In brief, Moore, as a result of his metaethical analyses of 'good' and 'right', gives us specific guidelines for making and defending ethical judgements. We are told what reasons are or are not relevant to different sorts of judgements (i.e. of intrinsic or extrinsic value). In addition, we are told whether or not particular rules are or are not binding upon the individual. In the light of these considerations it cannot be plausibly held that Moore's metaethical and ethical views are (logically) independent of one another.

## II

### THE ETHICAL NEUTRALITY OF METAETHICS

#### 1. Interpretations

The claim that metaethics is ethically neutral has been made by Ayer, Stevenson, Frankena and Hare among others. The preponderance of non-cognitivists might seem to indicate that the claim of ethical neutrality is a tenet of only one meta-ethical view (i.e. non-cognitivism). In addition it might be held that to argue against ethical neutrality is really to argue against con-cognitivist theories in general, and that this might be better done in other ways. It is probably true that the claim of ethical neutrality is one which neither a non-naturalist (e.g. Moore) nor a naturalist (e.g. Mill or Foot) would be likely to make. It is also true that certain arguments against non-cognitivism and for naturalism are also, in effect, arguments against the ethical neutrality of meta-ethics. However, there remain considerations<sup>2</sup> which throw doubt on the possibility of a neutral metaethic (non-cognitivist or otherwise) but which leave the non-cognitivist position intact, intact with possibly one exception, the non-cognitivist can no longer claim that he, unlike other moral philosophers (i.e. the naturalist and non-naturalist) has



maintained an appropriate detachment from actual moral judgements. If a strict neutrality is not possible or the price is too high, then moral philosophers might be led to a re-examination of the relation between ethics and metaethics.

Still, there remains the task of showing that meta-ethical theories are not ethically neutral. The expression "ethically neutral" is rather vague and can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Ayer says in his article "On the Analysis of Moral Judgements": "All moral theories, intuitionist, naturalistic, objectivist, emotive and the rest, in so far as they are philosophical theories are neutral as regards actual conduct".<sup>3</sup> Now this can be taken as saying that if any of these theories are not neutral as regards actual conduct they are not philosophical. Yet, in the light of other remarks he makes in this context, his thesis is stronger than this.

With respect to his version of the approval theory, he says:

The theory is entirely on the level of analysis, it is an attempt to show what people are doing when they make moral judgements; it is not a set of suggestions as to what moral judgements they are to make.  
4

In his book, Freedom and Reason, Hare makes similar claims about the relation between metaethics ('ethics') and ethics ('morals'):

Ethical theory, which determines the meanings and functions of the moral words and thus the rules of the moral 'game', provides only a clarification of

the conceptual framework within which moral reasoning takes place, it is therefore in the required sense neutral as between different moral opinions. 5

And later he claims:

One cannot deduce moral judgements of substance from statements about the uses of words or about the logical relations between concepts.

Even from these brief statements, it is clear that there are a variety of possible interpretations of ethical neutrality. Metaethics is neutral with respect to conduct; it is not a set of moral suggestions; it is only about the form or conceptual framework of moral reasoning; it is not a set of first principles from which moral judgements can be deduced.

For the purpose of sorting out the significant senses of metaethical neutrality, I will discuss six interpretations which have been suggested by William Blackstone in his article "Are Metaethical Theories Normatively (in my terminology 'Ethically') Neutral?"<sup>6</sup> By discussing these six questions, I think it will be possible to cover the wide range of claims which have been made. (Incidentally, I will amend Blackstone's terminology in favor of my own and construe certain of the questions he poses more broadly than he does.) The six questions are as follows:

- 1) Do metaethical theories affect one's moral life?
- 2) Do one's ethical beliefs logically entail

- one's metaethical theory?
- 3) Do metaethical theories entail certain ethical statements or moral claims?
  - 4) Do metaethical theories logically entail certain accounts of moral justification?
  - 5) Are metaethical theories set forth as descriptively true or as prescriptions of ways moral language ought to be used and interpreted?
  - 6) Does metaethical analysis have an ethical function?

In discussing these interpretations, I will attempt to indicate which questions are most fundamental or significant and why.

### (1) Do Metaethical Theories Affect One's Moral Life?

This question can be seen, in part, as asking whether any alterations in our beliefs and opinions as to what we are doing, when we are engaged in moral discourse, will change our judgements. An answer to this question will depend partly upon what we believe are the conditions under which a person can be said to have a moral belief.<sup>7</sup> If these conditions include that a person must have a certain attitude or feeling, then it is debatable whether certain philosophical views (e.g. those stemming from epistemology or theory of meaning) will cause us to change deeply felt moral views. Alternatively, if having a moral belief does not involve having a certain attitude then our moral beliefs are (in so far as we are rational) apt to change. Taking a metaethical theory seriously, may well alter or reinforce our way of defending

or even making moral judgements. If moral discourse is seen as primarily informing others of objectively present characteristics of certain actions, then appeal to certain cognitive processes will be appropriate. For example, if we are hedonistic utilitarians, saying that a certain action is right would be supported by reference to the probability of that action's leading to the greatest balance of pleasure over pain. On the other hand, if one assumes that the primary purpose of moral discourse is to influence persons (rather than inform them) then any assertion which tends to influence the listener in the desired way is an appropriate 'reason in support of' that judgement. And in the case of Ayer's early version of emotivism (in Language, Truth and Logic) the idea of giving reasons in support of a moral judgement (i.e. an expression of emotion) borders on being unintelligible.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, epistemic beliefs about moral principles may affect our moral discourse. From a rationalist point of view moral principles or rules might be seen as deduced from self-evident propositions about the basic structure of our moral life on a traditional analogy with mathematical axioms and their relation to the 'world'. Either Ayer's or the rationalist's analyses of moral discourse might change our (usually implicit) views about what we are doing in moral discussion and thus possibly affect our moral life. The answer then, to the first question is a tentative yes - tentative because it can also be

construed as a question about conduct. And to answer that would require coming up with a theory of action including an account of what considerations change one's actions. For example, what sorts of effects do epistemological beliefs actually have upon our behavior? Suppose that one accepts a naturalistic theory of ethics; would one then change one's moral judgements when confronted with an indisputable set of facts, an appropriate definition, and a conclusion deduced from them? In one respect, Blackstone's question is a psychological one - what are the determining factors in human behavior? I do not believe this question is immediately relevant to the question of ethical neutrality. This can be seen if we examine Ayer's claim that metaethics is neutral with respect to actual conduct. Implicit in this claim is the assumption that if a person has a certain moral belief, he will act in accordance with it (given appropriate circumstances), or else he will feel guilt or remorse. Hare makes this claim explicitly in holding that a person cannot sincerely accept a moral judgement unless he has a disposition to act in accordance with it. In both cases, if a person comes to hold or alter a certain moral belief, his conduct will be affected. So the issue can be limited to a discussion of the effect of metaethical views upon our judgements and beliefs.

In another and more fundamental respect, the question (of the effect of metaethics on one's moral life) is a question

about the relation between the subject matter of a meta-ethical theory and the theory itself. If metaethical theories take as data the 'facts' of one's moral life and if they affect one's moral life (i.e. that data) then they could end up being self-confirming. In discussing moral discourse, moral philosophers have often classified moral argument or discussion as pertaining to one sort of linguistic 'activity' or another, such as informing or prescribing. It could happen that a rational moral agent upon reading The Language of Morals would change his ways of engaging in moral discussion such that they conformed to Hare's account. Briefly, widespread acceptance of a theory might make it a more accurate description of what people are doing when they engage in moral discourse.

(2) Do One's Ethical Beliefs Logically Entail One's Metaethical Theory?

9

Logically entail is perhaps a little strong here. This question appears to assume a strong logical relation between either uses of words or what we mean by words and what one would assert certain words mean in a metaethical theory. Suffice it to say either course is very problematic. Blackstone's contention is that, historically, moral philosophers have tended to define ethical terms as they are used within their own moral discourse. He illustrates this by citing Bentham's definitions of "right" and "ought" as

conformable to the principle of utility and his further stipulation that any other uses of the words are meaningless. This is disturbing because Bentham appears to be settling some rather substantial moral issues by fiat (for one - that between a deontologist and a utilitarian). Thus there is the arbitrary elimination of the moral beliefs of others (take Nietzsche and Kant). This sort of prejudgement is not, however, (according to Blackstone) unavoidable.

A metaethic of this morally neutral type would be a result of an analysis of the features and functions of discourse in which terms and statements function in a normative regulative sense concerning human conduct.

10

Blackstone cites Ayer's discussion of (meta)ethics in Language, Truth and Logic as an example of where this has successfully been done. Ayer has not eliminated any particular uses of moral terms in his discussion of their lack of meaning. On the other hand, some contemporary characterizations of moral discourse, such as that in which there is an abstraction from self-interest would, according to Blackstone, be non-neutral. The problem is to come up with the meanings of terms and statements used in any putatively 'moral' context. This becomes rather difficult when we attempt to define "moral".<sup>11</sup> Blackstone assumes that a particular metaethical position (as to the meaning of a certain term) is somehow distilled from a variety of uses. To

restrict ourselves to certain uses (in describing only them as 'moral') might well prejudice our own position. Our metaethical theory would begin to look like a biased rationalization of our own beliefs.

Still one wonders if a neutral metaethic is as easily undertaken as Blackstone (or Ayer) would have us believe. He indicated that one could talk about 'moral' discourse in an impartial way by looking at all statements "which function in a normative regulative sense concerning human conduct". Yet there may be statements which are moral judgements which are not so related to human conduct. Moore, for example, held that questions of conduct were secondary in ethics, dependent upon an answer to a prior question "What is good in itself?" It would appear that if we are to be impartial, it is insufficient to deal merely with normative discourse (i.e. discourse about what we ought to do). We must also take into account evaluative language (i.e. about what is good) and particularly that language concerning intrinsic value. Technically stated we must include both axiological and deontic judgements. It has been held that making a value judgement is a prescriptive sort of behavior and that all value judgements are really normative ones. I will discuss one attempt to make this reduction in Chapter III, section 2.

In addition, there is the formidable problem of deciding which value and normative judgements to include or exclude.



In the absence of an adequate (impartial?) means for distinguishing between moral and non-moral value and normative judgments we cannot even assert that a demand for consistency is non-moral.

Still Ayer's claim that metaethics is ethically neutral might seem plausible, at least in the case of his own theory. I intend to show that both Ayer and Blackstone make this claim on the basis of an overly simplified view of ethics. Ethics is not simply a decalogue. Determining whether or not Ayer's analysis is ethically neutral involves more than saying that it does not commit us to saying "Adultery is wrong". I hope this will become clearer in the course of a discussion of Blackstone's third and fourth questions.

- (3) Do Metaethical Theories Logically Entail  
 Certain Ethical Statements or Moral Claims?  
 and  
 (4) Do Metaethical Theories Logically Entail  
 Certain Accounts of Moral Justification?

Blackstone's answer to question 4 is yes, and in the light of that answer, which is, I believe, correct, I want to show that his answer to question 3 is misleading. I have pointed out that ethics involves the use of moral language (in a wide variety of contexts) as opposed to talk about moral language. This use often includes the resolution of disagreements or working out of problems which requires in turn the adduction of relevant reasons in support of various positions,

i.e. justification. Anonymous X arguing that the institution of capital punishment is immoral might refer to certain sociological and psychological studies (indicating that capital punishment is not a deterrent) in support of his argument. Anonymous Y who originally thought that capital punishment was right, might upon learning about the studies change his opinion and argue that capital punishment was indeed wrong. In so far as both persons consider certain kinds of reasons relevant to a resolution of the dispute, they may have certain metaethical presuppositions. Given that both consider the rightness and wrongness of actions (or institutions) to be determinable by reference to the consequences of those actions, they can be said to be utilitarians. Now take a third person anonymous Z, a deontologist, who believes that capital punishment is justified not because it is a deterrent (which it is not anyway), but because a person who commits a murder forfeits his right to life and deserves the punishment. Anonymous Z is uninterested in consequences (since 'right' does not mean conducive to the greatest balance of good over evil) and considers the various studies irrelevant to the moral evaluation of capital punishment. This is a situation where persons with different metaethical presuppositions were committed to different moral judgements, given a set of circumstances (judged relevant by one and irrelevant by another). It is not the case that because someone is a deontologist he is

therefore committed to capital punishment, but it is true that given a particular state of affairs, his ethical position will (given his metaethical presuppositions) differ from a utilitarian's. It may be true that a given metaethical position does not 'logically entail' a particular judgement, but in so far as it is determinant of our respective criteria of relevance, it is certainly not neutral. Incidentally a negative answer to question 3 might also be taken to indicate that there are no ethical value judgements implicit in any metaethical theories. In the case of Hare's theory there is at least one such covert judgement. I will elaborate on this in Chapter IV.

What is strange about Blackstone's position is that he agrees that metaethical views affect justification but disagrees that metaethical theories "entail certain (normative) ethical statements or moral claims". According to how the expressions "ethical statements" and "moral claims" are interpreted his thesis is either false or trivial. If "ethical statements" include first order justifications then in the light of the above discussion his thesis is false. Blackstone might reply "But saying my answer is false is presupposing your definition of ethics". This is true. However his question 3 is then misleading. The question is supposed to be an interpretation of the question "Are metaethical theories ethically neutral?" Yet his question is only about the relation of metaethics to one aspect of ethics.

I suppose that it is of some interest to know that we are not logically committed to certain actual judgements (euthanasia is wrong, war is right, etc.) by most metaethical theories. But what is of significant interest is that, given certain metaethical views, engaging in moral deliberations necessarily involves using certain patterns of reasoning, and subscribing to certain criteria of relevance. If the process of making and defending moral judgements is a rational activity, then abiding by a certain metaethical view is of no small consequence.

An illustration is in order here. Suppose G.E. Moore (an ideal utilitarian) and Jeremy Bentham (a hedonistic utilitarian) and R.M. Hare (a prescriptivist) are discussing the rightness or wrongness of the institution of capital punishment. Moore would claim that there are certain intuited 'facts' about the intrinsic value of various aspects of the institution which are relevant to the discussion. Bentham would claim that the relevant facts have to do with the pleasure and pain resulting from the institution (or its absence). Hare would claim that while the facts which Bentham mentions may be relevant, they are far from sufficient to compel (rationally) assent to a judgement such as "capital punishment is wrong".<sup>12</sup> For there are in addition certain formal requirements to which genuine value judgements must conform. For someone to assent to a value judgement (according

to Hare), he must be willing both to universalize and prescribe it. Thus there is an additional volitional element implicit in value judgements. Were Bentham trying to convince Hare and Moore that capital punishment is wrong, he would claim, after presenting his evidence, that they must either accept the judgement as correct, refute the evidence, or admit refusing to engage in a rational moral dispute. Hare would claim that it is Bentham who does not really understand what he is doing when he makes a moral judgement and that his evidence is by no means sufficient. Moore would deny the relevance of Bentham's evidence altogether and point out to Hare that judgements of intrinsic value are a matter of direct intuition and not dependent upon a willingness to prescribe or universalize. The point here is that Moore, Bentham and Hare are trying to resolve a moral dispute. Because of their differing views as to what constitutes a moral judgement, they disagree on the 'facts' which are relevant or sufficient to warrant assent to a particular judgement. They might well agree that capital punishment is wrong, but it is significant that this agreement would be for different reasons. And since the reasons (or sorts of reasons) are different, their judgements could also differ depending upon contingent circumstances.

(5) Are Metaethical Theories Set Forth As Descriptively True Theories Or As Prescriptions Of The Way Moral Language Ought To Be Used And Interpreted?

Historically, metaethical theories have been set forth in either or both of these ways. Bentham gives the meaning of right and ought and claims that any uses which do not conform to that meaning are not merely unconventional but meaningless. He further asserts:

By the natural constitution of the human frame on most occasions of their lives men in general embrace this principle, without thinking of it; if not for the ordering of their own actions, yet for the trying of their own actions as well as those of other men. 13

Bentham's thesis is set forth as descriptively true. However, it is also set forth prescriptively. He is suggesting<sup>14</sup> 1) that we accept his theory 2) that we rid ourselves of our prejudices and inconsistencies and 3) acknowledge the principle of utility as being conformity with our "natural constitution"; in other words, explicitly embrace it. Mill also 'sets forth' a utilitarian theory in both of these ways though his approach is slightly different. First he attempts to show that utilitarianism is an adequate account of what people actually do when they make moral judgements and generally engage in moral discourse. He then suggests adoption of this view (or at least education of others in accordance with it), but not (to reiterate) because it is the only possible account of our moral discourse and therefore the only rational (non-prejudicial) alternative given our 'rational constitutions'.

If the impugners of the utilitarian morality represented it to their own minds in this its true character, I know not what recommendation possessed by any other morality they could possibly affirm to be wanting to it; what more beautiful or more exalted developments of human nature any other ethical system can be supposed to foster, or what springs of action, not accessible to the utilitarian, such systems rely on for giving effect to their mandates. 15

I contend that all recent metaethical theories which claim to be descriptively true, are also prescriptive in either Mill's or Bentham's way. Bentham's would roughly be: this is what we really mean and are really doing and it would be irrational not to act accordingly. Mill's would roughly be: this approach to ethics will be consonant with our ideals, account for our ordinary moral judgements, help us make difficult judgements and be in accordance with our usual motivations. Defending this contention is, however, beyond my present purposes. The question of whether or not certain theories are 'set forth' (thought by those who propose them) as being descriptively true (thus neutral) alone, is certainly less significant in the present context than the question as to whether they are in fact neutral.

In discussing this question Blackstone levels several criticisms against the emotivists. He claims that the emotivists' contention that they are giving a correct analysis of what moral concepts really mean is not descriptive but really prescriptive. "His metaethic, requiring that we view

moral language as emotive, is based upon a norm which states what should be accepted as cognitively meaningful."<sup>16</sup>

Blackstone has gone from the 'normative' of normative (ethical) principles to norms (or values) in general which might also include criteria of consistency, simplicity and adequacy. The emotivists' claim is rather that, as rational intelligent persons, we should admit what is, in fact, the case (given their view) - only certain sorts of linguistic expressions are cognitively meaningful. It is unlikely that any theory in the natural sciences or elsewhere can claim value neutrality and still retain its explanatory character. The very construction of theories presupposes adherence to certain values. A theory must be relatively simple, consistent, and adhere to the 'facts'. Further it must offer us a way of testing it and thus perhaps a way of choosing between it and competing theories. A distinction between ethical value and value in general must be assumed if the claim of metaethical neutrality is to be taken seriously.<sup>17</sup> Whether or not this distinction can be made (neutrally?) is still another question.

John Wilcox makes several observations about Blackstone's position, which are worth noting.

Nor does that disagreement (of emotivism with our ordinary second order beliefs about ethics which are implicit in our ordinary ethical language) make emotivism 'prescriptive' except in the sense in which every scientific theory is prescriptive; for every theory recommends itself for our consideration and belief and



there still remains the distinction between (all) theories which recommend themselves and those (normative) theories which recommend the objects which they are about. 18

There are two questions about this last distinction. First, is it all that clear and secondly, if it is and if metaethical theories do recommend the objects they are about, then are moral philosophers doing more than giving mere rationalizations for our preferences and prejudices?

#### (6) Does Metaethical Analysis Have An Ethical Function?

This question has been discussed by Paul Taylor in an article entitled "The Normative Function of Metaethics". Taylor maintains that all moral agents have certain metaethical presuppositions about what they are doing when they engage in moral discourse. He concluded that virtually any metaethical theory will alter these views and thus at least affect our methods of making moral judgements, if not the content. So even if a descriptively true account can be given, it will still affect our discourse via a change in our metaethical presuppositions. A problem arises when we try to decide when a metaethical theory is descriptively true. Taylor claims that certain criticisms of the emotive theory (e.g. that it is not faithful to ordinary language) are based upon the failure to distinguish (1) ordinary moral discourse, (2) ordinary (metaethical) presuppositions about this discourse and (3) metaethical theories about this discourse. Taylor

maintains that the purported discrepancy between ordinary usage and emotivism is really between the latter two and that emotivism may be descriptively true.

The two sets of beliefs, one the implicit assumptions of common sense and the other, the explicit statements of the emotive theory disagree in what are essentially matters of fact regarding the use of moral language in moral deliberation, in justifying moral judgements and in settling moral disputes. 19

There is a difficulty here. The ordinary metaethical presuppositions about moral discourse do affect moral discourse and Taylor has granted this. Such discourse is not easily separated from its presuppositions as Taylor would have us believe. Imbedded in pre-philosophical moral discourse are presuppositions about what we are doing: about what sorts of 'objects' we are referring to, about what sorts of considerations are relevant to a dispute, and whether or not moral judgements are grounded in an external locus of truth. All we can do is to start with actual judgements (as separate from either deliberations or justifications since these may reflect the 'false' presuppositions) and with the help of theories of meaning and meaningfulness attempt to show how moral discourse should be if it is to be in accord with these theories. Yet even here there is a problem since certain judgements in certain contexts would be different if the metaethical presuppositions were different. (Incidentally

the above 'should' is one of intellectual respectability not of moral worth.)

## 2. Ethical Neutrality

In discussing Blackstone's article I have attempted to indicate some of the confusions which have accompanied the claim of ethical neutrality of metaethics. Probably the most salient of these stems from an overly simplified view of ethics. If ethics is taken instead as a complex set of linguistic activities or practices, then the claim of metaethical neutrality, (let alone the distinction between ethics and metaethics) falters.

Three of the six interpretations are not of continuing relevance to the present discussion. In the case of the question about the relation of metaethics to the moral life (or actual conduct) an answer will follow from the other more relevant questions. The question as to how metaethical theories are 'set forth' is less important than whether or not they are, in fact, neutral. An answer to the question about the ethical function of metaethics will be important but only after the issue of neutrality has been discussed. If neutrality is possible then answering this question will give us an idea of the confines within which a moral philosophy must operate. Alternatively if a strict neutrality is not possible, a view about the ethical function of metaethics may provide a basis for choosing among metaethical theories. But this

remains to be seen. The relevant questions are therefore about 1) the influence of ethical beliefs upon metaethical theories, 2) the influence of metaethical views upon ethical ones, and 3) the influence of metaethical views upon ethical justification. Given my characterization of ethics "3" can be considered under the rubric of "2". In order to answer the first question when considering any particular metaethical theory we must ask ourselves whether or not all relevant data have been taken into consideration and whether or not the metaethical theory contains implicitly or explicitly any substantive moral principles or moral (value) judgements. We can answer the second question by asking whether or not the theory entails or suggests certain moral judgements or entails certain exclusive accounts of justification - exclusive in that only certain considerations are acceptable as relevant in the resolution of certain moral disputes. Of course, the important issue here is not the neutrality or non-neutrality of any particular metaethical theory, but rather whether any metaethical theory can be neutral. I will discuss some difficulties in constructing a neutral metaethical theory in chapter IV. But first, I must say some things about a fundamental presupposition of those who claim that metaethics is properly neutral.

### III

#### NATURALISM

##### 1. Naturalism and Ethical Neutrality

It has been argued that ethical neutrality is what gives metaethics its intellectual respectability. The goal of ethics is no longer a combination of practical knowledge about what we ought to do and theoretical knowledge about what is the case, but instead theoretical knowledge alone. The discipline becomes respectable because the philosopher is impartial and disinterested, standing outside of any particular moral code or ethic. His task can be characterized as a systematic study of the facts of moral discourse, behaviour and experience. His goal is the truth.<sup>1</sup> The truth, being about what is the case rather than what ought to be the case, is value free and thus neutral with respect to the wants, hopes, and desires of human beings. The facts of moral experience must be different from those with which G.E. Moore thought he was dealing. It is no longer a fact that the aesthetic enjoyment of a painting is good, only that it is believed to be good or called good by some. There is also question whether or not this is a 'moral' fact at all. The moral philosopher will have to be careful how he deals with justification. He can give a descriptive account of how

people do in fact 'justify' their moral beliefs or judgements. He may find that within or among different social groups or cultures there are strong similarities or strong differences in the way in which persons support their moral judgements. He must be careful not to pass judgement (apart from purely logical assessment) upon any of the various methods of justification (by, for example, calling them adequate or inadequate). Presumably his methods of constructing and testing his theories must parallel those employed in the natural sciences, since it is within these disciplines that our paradigms of knowledge lie. Metaethical theories must be neutral with respect to their subject matter. If this goal is to be attainable, naturalist moral theories must be rejected en masse and naturalism as a metaethical view must be dismissed. For the naturalist (e.g. Mill, Hobbes) moral judgements can be justified by reference to facts about human psychology. While it may be possible for a would be naturalist to approach moral philosophy in a neutral manner, it is not possible for him to end up with a morally neutral theory. For it is his claim that moral judgements (or propositions) can be inferred from certain facts about human beings and their various situations. This is not to say that his enquiry has been loaded from the start or that his views follow from a parochial collection of 'moral facts'. In this sense a naturalist can claim to have been as neutral as anyone can. However this leaves the

problem of the consequences of such theories for ethics. The naturalist's account of what goes on in moral discourse (what certain words mean or how their use can be explicated) entails a certain account of justification. If one particular sort of justification (e.g. in which there is a reference to human wants and needs) is seen as the only possible justification, metaethical neutrality is not possible. Underlying the claim that metaethics is normatively neutral is the requirement that no metaethical theory commits us to one particular account of justification. If a neutral metaethical theory is to be possible, all naturalist theories must be assumed to be false. It might be said that all naturalistic theories are false in that they involve one form or another of Moore's naturalistic fallacy. I hope to have shown that Moore did not do a very convincing job in his alleged refutation of naturalism. The naturalistic fallacy amounts to little more than defining what Moore intuitively claims to be indefinable. Moore argued that good, the key term in moral discourse, was not definable in natural (empirical) terms. It has been subsequently contended that Moore was right but for the wrong reasons.<sup>2</sup> Occasionally some philosophers such as Hare have attempted to resuscitate certain of his arguments, but enough has been said about those arguments. Recent views resembling Moore's are in more general terms of the dichotomy between evaluative language and descriptive or fact-stating language, or between normative and factual discourse, or between attitudes

and beliefs. I will first discuss R.M. Hare's reformulation of this distinction to show that he has not accomplished what he has set out to do. I will then go on to show that the value-fact distinction can be seriously questioned in two sorts of ways. First there is the approach which Philippa Foot takes which attempts to show that facts as well as values can lead to evaluative conclusions and influence conduct. Secondly, there are general considerations about facts which would seem to indicate that they are not as independent of human desires and purposes as is often assumed.

## 2. A Critique of Naturalism

R.M. Hare, in his book The Language of Morals, delivers a further polemic against naturalism. Hare expands upon some of Moore's arguments and then supplements them with the more general thesis that prescriptive language cannot be reduced to descriptive language. In classifying both imperatives and value judgements as subclasses of prescriptive language Hare is opposing Stevenson's view that the primary function of moral judgements is to influence others. Hare contends that moral judgements are closely related to imperatives. Imperatives are a response by a rational agent to the question "What shall I do?" This latter question is not a request for influence (which need not be rational), but for advice. In virtue of their relation to imperatives all moral judgements function to guide conduct. The attempt by



either Stevenson or Hare to reduce all of moral discourse in all of its complexities to one linguistic function (or speech act) is, I believe, futile. It is difficult to see how all moral judgements are (logically) related to conduct, but more of this later. Hare maintains that all genuine moral judgements entail imperatives.<sup>3</sup> It is important to see how he arrives at this conclusion since it is essential to his arguments against naturalism. He begins with an analysis of the relation between imperative and indicative sentences. An imperative sentence is an answer to the question "What shall I do?" The answer tells someone "What to do". An indicative sentence is an answer to the question "What is the case?" Its answer tells someone "This is the case". Hare discusses and rejects various attempts to reduce imperatives to indicatives (about for example the feelings of the speaker). Although this reduction cannot be made, Hare proceeds to show that the logic of imperatives is basically the same as the logic of indicatives. One problem which arises in comparing the logic of imperatives or indicatives is deciding what mood the conclusion must or can be in (given that the premises may be in the same or different moods). Hare lists two rules which "seem to govern the matter".

1. No indicative conclusion can validly be drawn from a set of premises, which cannot be drawn from the indicatives among them alone.

2. No imperative conclusion can be validly drawn from a set of premises which does not contain at least one imperative. 4

Hare defends the second rule on the grounds that all deductive arguments are analytic. The conclusion of a deductive argument contains only what is either implicitly or explicitly 'in' the premises. Of course, definitions may be used to bring out what is implicit in the premises. The claim that indicative premises alone cannot entail imperative conclusions becomes significant for ethics when supplemented by Hare's contention that all value judgements entail imperatives.

Consequently, Hare's position can be restated in reference to value language. The uses which we make of value language render it untranslatable into descriptive or fact-stating language. When we call a certain red wine a good wine, we imply that we have certain reasons for so calling it or that it has certain good-making characteristics. We may, for example, say that it is fullbodied, dry, and clear. We are also commending it. To commend something is to guide choices "either now or in the future".<sup>5</sup> Let us assume for the moment that we have empirical tests for determining the fullbodiedness, clearness, and dryness of any wine. If "good" were a purely descriptive term (i.e. it entailed and was entailed by that object's having certain characteristics); then, to say that this red wine is good would be (only) to

say that it is fullbodied, clear, and dry. However, in saying that it is fullbodied, clear, and dry we are not commending it, nor are we (Hare contends) capable of commending it.

Value terms have a special function in language, that of commending; and so they plainly cannot be defined in terms of other words which themselves do not perform this function; for if this is done, we are deprived of a means of performing the function. 6

Hare has maintained that while there is some connection between the good-making characteristics of a certain object and the term good which we apply to it, it is not one of logical entailment. Thus we can say without contradicting ourselves, that this wine is fullbodied, clear, and dry (etc.), but it is not a good wine. The reason for this is that even though these characteristics may be standards by which wine is usually judged, to say "It is good" is to say, in addition, "I commend it". We can perform this additional 'speech act' because aside from its descriptive meaning, "good" has an evaluative meaning. It is this latter meaning of "good" which remains constant when we apply good to different classes of objects possessing entirely different good-making characteristics. Since the relation between good-making characteristics and good is not one of logical entailment we can commend virtually any action (or object etc.) provided we assent to the command "Let me do X".<sup>7</sup> To assent to an imperative is

to resolve to act in a certain way given appropriate circumstances. Given the relative importance of the evaluative as opposed to the descriptive meaning of the term good, the consequences for moral arguments are rather startling. First, it would appear that a person could use any sort of evidence in support of an evaluative statement.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, given what might be "usually considered sufficient" evidence a person can continue intelligibly (rationally) to refuse to accept or assent to an evaluative statement. Hare denies that the first of these consequences follows from his position and thus some explanation as to why it, in fact, does, is in order.<sup>9</sup> I suspect that he must either admit these consequences or give up the rigid dichotomy between evaluative and descriptive meaning. Both questions deal with the nature of the relation of factual evidence to an evaluative conclusion. In The Language of Morals, Hare distinguishes between the (evaluative) meaning of good and its criteria of application, which of course, vary according to the object so called. A difficulty arises when we look for some explicit analysis of the relation between the criteria or descriptive meaning of the term good. Hare has noted elsewhere that our willingness to choose an object (and thus commend it) is not a sufficient reason for calling it good.<sup>10</sup> Presumably some other conditions must be fulfilled by the object (or person or action etc.) Hare has also noted that these conditions do constitute reasons

for accepting a particular judgement, but they most definitely cannot entail an evaluative judgement. As Hare understands it, moral arguments take the form of practical syllogisms with the major premise containing a prescriptive statement. Take the following argument:

I ought not to eat what will kill me.  
This toadstool will kill me.  
I ought not to eat this toadstool.

What makes the minor premise relevant to the conclusion is the major premise. Since I might not assert the major premise I can always refuse to admit the relevance of the minor premise, and thus I am not compelled to accept the conclusion. Or if the major premise was not included I could refuse to admit that any other premise was relevant. It is only in virtue of an explicit commitment to appropriate standards that there is a connection between good-making characteristics and good. Further anyone can 'intelligibly' withhold this commitment. There is still some question as to the status of these reasons in a moral argument. Hare wants to put them to work, yet he strips them (in a series of fiat about the meaning of 'good') of any strength. It seems that anyone can reject these reasons and still claim that he is rationally engaging in a moral argument.

In a series of articles directed against Hare, Philippa Foot has presented a competing view of what constitutes good and sufficient reasons in a moral argument. Foot has also

attempted to explain away the extra element of commendation necessarily present (given Hare's view) in any value judgement.

In her article "Moral Beliefs", she argues that it makes no sense to speak of the evaluative meaning (or commendatory force) of good "without fixing the object to which it is supposed to be attached".<sup>11</sup> Hare's discussion of evaluative meaning implies that "good" has what Foot calls an external relation to its object. This is to say that good can be applied meaningfully to any object whatever. Foot maintains that while the relation between good-making characteristics and good may not be one of rigid entailment, this is not to say (in effect) that there is no connection at all. There are, in fact, limitations upon the objects (or actions) to which, good can meaningfully be applied. This is because good has an internal relation to its object. Because of this relation, the fact that an object or action possesses a certain property can at least constitute a 'reason' for calling that object good. Given this relation there are limitations upon the sorts of things which we can "commend" and as a result, value judgements are rendered "vulnerable" to facts. The rules governing the use of the term "dangerous" can be used to explain the notion of internal relation. Calling something dangerous is similar to calling something good in that we generally provide evidence to back up what we say and

(in conformity to Hare's analysis) we are performing a certain action-guiding function - namely "warning" - analogous to commending. Now if Hare's analysis is correct we can warn someone (by using the term dangerous) about anything provided we assent to the imperative "One ought to avoid X". However, according to Foot, there are certain requirements governing the use of the term "dangerous" to warn. One must think something threateningly injurious (Foot goes to great lengths to explain that the concept injury need not be evaluative), and the object must in fact be capable of causing serious injury. Thus it makes no sense to warn against something which is harmless. We cannot call any object dangerous, only those which we believe can cause serious injury. This is to say that there is an internal relation between "dangerous" and the range of objects to which we can intelligibly apply it. Thinking something dangerous like thinking something good (given Hare's view) incorporates a certain attitude or disposition to act in a certain way with respect to the object. Foot maintains that the attitude in both cases can be seen as incorporating certain beliefs. As such, these attitudes (which are seen by Hare as playing a fundamental role in moral disagreement) are not entirely beyond the pale of rational criticism. The meaning of the word (e.g. "action") to which good is applied will indicate the criteria of its application and these criteria are the sorts of things which we cannot arbitrarily accept or reject. In a moral context,

someone may be called good in virtue of his fulfilling a certain role (e.g. father). There is incidentally no additional reference to a choice or standard. Whatever standard is applied, is, as it were dragged along with the description. Presumably in the case of "man", to describe something as a man is to put ourselves in a position where the criteria of a good man will be clear if we just ask ourselves what role a man plays. While Foot does not actually say this, I believe her explication of good will lead her this way. Unfortunately, we may be very clear as to the role a man must play if he is to be called a good man. But the standards of goodness may not be as readily available as for example, they are in the case of a knife. We might be forced to choose among a variety of incompatible characteristics which can be considered good making. There is, thus, ample room for disagreement, although it may not be irresolvable in so far as these final choices can conceivably be made rationally, on the basis of certain human wants and needs. Hare has argued that the context of these wants and needs is in no way restricted (i.e. by the concepts of "want" and "need") and that his analysis is still intact. He further argues that even if the criteria of application (of good) are logically connected to certain terms we could always forego the use of those terms.

Given Hare's reply, it would appear Foot's point is a limited one which leaves Hare's position essentially intact. Yet she does seem to redress an imbalance in Hare's analysis,



in emphasizing the importance of facts as reasons in moral arguments. And it is certainly true that some rational criticism of attitudes is possible. But beyond this there appears to be an impasse between Hare and Foot over what is to count as a rational and intelligible moral position.

It is my contention that there are certain other more fundamental difficulties with Hare's analysis of moral language which render his anti-naturalist position highly suspect. Take first Hare's contention that all genuine value judgements entail imperatives.

I propose to say that the test, whether someone is using the judgement "I ought to do X" as a value judgement or not is, "Does he or does he not recognize that if he assents to the judgement, he must also assent to the command 'Let me do X'". Thus I am not here claiming to prove anything substantial about the way in which we use language; I am merely suggesting a terminology which, if applied to the study of moral language, will, I am satisfied, prove illuminating. 12

Hare readily grants that a value judgement by definition entails an imperative. Combining this with his earlier rule stating that indicative (or fact-stating, or descriptive) sentences as premises cannot entail an imperative conclusion, we can conclude that an evaluative conclusion (moral or non-moral) cannot be derived from factual premises. If we are to accept this definition we might well find ourselves talking about "value judgements" and "imperatives" which did not look or act like anything in ordinary usage. These immune to counter-examples may be neat, but usually at the expense of being trivial. In order to take Hare's arguments against naturalism

seriously we must take his contention that value judgements entail imperatives not as a definition, but as an alleged fact about our use of language, and thus vulnerable to counter-example. Imagine octogenarians both on the verge of death discussing a former acquaintance of theirs. One of them concludes "He was a good man". It cannot be plausibly maintained that either of them assents or would assent to the imperative "Let me be like him". Are we to conclude that "He was a good man" is not a value judgement? Hare has been drawing attention to the fact that value judgements often serve to reveal a person's principles. He also asserts that genuinely to hold a principle (or make a value judgement) one must act or resolve to act in accordance with it. But this simply is not true. We often and sincerely praise others for a moral integrity and a strength of character which we know full well we could not live up to. It is not at all clear that a person's conduct must be consonant with his avowed principles in order for us to classify certain of his statements as value judgements.

There is another problem which arises in the case of moral principles. Given Hare's analysis, in any situation where someone judges a man or action and is willing to universalize his judgement (i.e. have it consistently apply to anyone in similar circumstances including himself) we have an example of a moral principle. "It is wrong to wear overshoes indoors" if universalized, becomes a moral principle. Hare says in his chapter, "Good in Moral Contexts":

We get stirred up about the goodness of men because we are men. This means that the acceptance of a judgement, that such and such a man's art is good in circumstances of a certain sort, involves the acceptance of the judgement that it would be good, were we ourselves placed in similar circumstances, to do likewise. 13

and further:

When we use the word "good" in order to commend morally, we are always directly or indirectly commending people. Even when we use the expression good act or others like it, the reference is indirectly to human characters. 14

For Hare, the domain of moral judgements can be separated out from that of all value judgements solely on the basis of the class of comparison. Our evaluations of "people's characters" or "of men as men" are all moral judgements. In the absence of qualification a disposition to wear shoes indoors is as much a "character trait" as a disposition to keep a promise. The possibility of a number of such principles is infinite and their lack of resemblance to what we usually call moral principles makes Hare's account suspect. He may be correct in showing that the demand for generalizations or universability does reflect the notions of consistency and impartiality implicit in moral discourse. However, it appears that moral principles include more than just consistency and impartiality. Here I am tempted to agree with Foot that there is an additional connection with human needs and desires.

I think it is clear from the preceding discussion that Hare has not conclusively shown that all naturalistic moral theories are false. His assumption that all moral discourse

is prescriptive appears false. Nor is it clear that all moral judgements (let alone all value judgements) are related to conduct. The rule that indicative premises cannot entail an evaluative conclusion if true by definition would be trivial, if intended as a general rule "governing" our linguistic behaviour would be false.

### 3. The Value Content of Facts

Suppose then, looking elsewhere, we say that there is general agreement as to how one goes about resolving disputes over matters of fact, whereas in the case of moral disputes (and more generally questions of value) there is not. [Stating the distinction in terms of disputes is appropriate because, it is in such contexts that the ways of supporting judgements (factual or value) are revealed.] The reason for this is that factual statements are believed to have, ultimately, reference to evidence of the senses (and inferences from such evidence). And there is little disagreement about this evidence. In the case of questions of value, we usually justify them by reference to a general principle or principles and agreement upon such principles is rarely so ubiquitous as upon evidence of the senses. Furthermore, where moral disputes are resolvable, it often happens that the disagreement was over facts, not principles. Disagreement over principles can be irresolvable because the principles dictate that different sorts of evidence are relevant to the issue. For example Kant might say that a certain

action was virtuous because the agent had good intentions and "the goodness of any action depends upon the intentions of the agent". Mill might claim that the action was in fact wrong because of certain of its consequences. In another sort of case two inveterate disciples of W.D. Ross might disagree as to the relative weight of two conflicting prima facie duties and thus be unable to reach agreement about one's actual duty. Here the difficulty lies in "weighing" the evidence.

The question arises as to whether or not there are any "factual" disputes which allow for such irresolutions? Taking the Kant-Mill dispute we can say that the principles determine what sort of evidence is relevant. It appears that we have no mutually acceptable way of choosing between these two principles.

In a home on Long Island about a decade or so ago strange things started happening. <sup>15</sup> Cups and saucers would mysteriously break or move about and from time to time pieces of furniture would shake. Needless to say the residents were disturbed and in order to find out what was causing these mysterious events they called in certain "experts". The experts included among others, a physicist and a parapsychologist. Each of them came up with an explanation of why the cups rattled and the furniture shook. As there were no earth tremors or nearby blasts, the physicist maintained that high pitched sound waves from some unknown source were causing the disturbances. The parapsychologist held that there was a poltergeist in the house. The physicist's explanation depended on, (or presupposed)

among other principles, the principle that all physical events must have physical causes. The parapsychologist's explanation would be inconsistent with any such principle. The principle to which he might be said to be appealing, that certain "spirits" can cause physical events, lies outside a scientific world view. Thus confirmation is out of the question. It is possibly now a question of the justification of different "ways of looking at" the world. We might run into similar problems when trying to justify our preference for scientific as opposed to animistic explanations. It will not do to say, merely, that no one takes an animistic view anymore. It has been at various times influential, but why has it receded before a scientific view? Either view offers us an explanation of events in the world. The animistic view offers us very simple and intelligible explanations although its capacity for prediction is severely limited. The inference of the existence of other minds resembles the inference made by the animist (i.e. that every natural object possesses an inherent being or soul). Animists might well not be concerned with prediction at all, but only with understanding. And as such an inherent being fares probably as well (i.e. is as understandable, in particular given the appropriate cultural setting) as the mysterious molecules or atoms or fields which the physicist talks about. A crucial experiment is out of the question. The 'facts' of human existence do not inexorably lead us to embrace a scientific view of explanation. The general acceptance of this view must be seen

as emanating from a cultural viewpoint in which certain things are valued. It may be noted here that I have switched from talking about simple facts (i.e. "this is red") and descriptions to the far more elaborate statements and descriptions which scientists come up with in their theories. This is because I believe, in opposition to Moore, that value judgements, when examined carefully, look much more like the latter sorts of facts.

Another way to state the difference between facts and values is to point out that value disagreements unlike factual ones are irresolvable because they ultimately depend upon choice and decision (i.e. to adopt a certain way of life or point of view). At one time there were two competing theories which both claimed to describe correctly the movement of the bodies in the "solar" system. Both the Ptolemaic and the Copernican views "accounted for the facts". The problem was to choose between them. They could not both be true because the implications of the theories were inconsistent. The usual way of resolving such a dispute is to accept the simplest hypothesis and the one most consistent with other theories.<sup>16</sup> Given competing theories which purportedly explain and describe the way in fact the world is and the not uncommon impossibility of a crucial experiment, the problem of choosing between the two becomes one of evaluation. We generally accept or reject certain descriptions (theories) on the basis of their measuring up to certain standards. For example, a theory must be rela-

tively simple, falsifiable, intersubjectively testable and it must be consistent with the currently received body of knowledge. Of course these standards are always subject to re-evaluation, usually on the basis of conduciveness of particular purposes which science is seen as fulfilling. The question arises: Why choose these standards (or purposes)? One answer might be that these standards lead us to accept theories and explanations which are intelligible. But this will not entirely do, since a variety of competing theories may be equally intelligible. I think that eventually an answer to why we adopt particular standards will force us to explain why we have particular purposes. And the answer to why we have certain purposes will be something like "Because we are human beings with certain desires and needs". This is a dead end of sorts in so far as purpose and desire cannot be explained independently yet, otherwise a choice would be completely arbitrary.

In the natural sciences there is an additional problem of confirmation. And this is not unlike the problem confronting W.D. Ross's disciples. Theories are, of course, not proven but rather confirmed. The acceptance or rejection of certain hypotheses depends upon deciding how much evidence is adequate. And there is no clear way to do this. This decision is not grounded in the evidence of the senses, but is rather about what to conclude from that evidence. Further what will count (as a result of our decision) as conclusive evidence will vary widely with different experiments.



Given these ways of resolving more complicated questions about what is the case, what effect does this have upon the value-fact dichotomy? First, if we take the view that it is possible for many disagreements over values to be ultimately irresolvable (while granting that both viewpoints are equally defensible), then many disputes, once thought to be factual and thus resolvable in principle, are potentially irresolvable. What we can say about the descriptions and explanations which we get in the natural sciences, is that given a certain viewpoint, defined by adherence to certain values we can resolve most disagreements (in principle) and make fairly accurate predictions. The pervasive scientific desire to get away from the relative, individual, idiosyncratic point of view in favor of the objective, intersubjective point of view can be criticized as a limited one. It is subject to the same criticism that certain value systems are.

What I have been attempting to show is that the similarities between the methods of supporting statements of fact and supporting statements of value are much closer than some philosophers would have us believe. Given that there are alternative ways to describe and explain our experience of the world, there may arise contexts in which we would be forced to defend a certain view (i.e. the scientific). Thus we would have to bare the theoretical underpinnings of our science. Defending these underpinnings involves taking into account certain values which we have. It becomes a question of justi-

fication. It is assumed that in the case of judgements of value the need for justification arises far more frequently, and consequently we are far more aware of the possibility of irreconcilable disagreement. Whether or not such disagreement is indeed irreconcilable depends upon whether or not a choice of a "way of life" is dependent on certain human desires and needs and whether or not such desires and needs are to be found in all persons.

#### IV

#### THE PROBLEMS OF ETHICAL NEUTRALITY

In discussing Blackstone's interpretations of the question "Are metaethical theories normatively (ethically) neutral", I pointed out that two questions were central. They are "Do one's ethical beliefs logically entail one's metaethical theory?" and "Do metaethical theories entail certain ethical statements or moral claims?" Included under the rubric of the second question are two further questions: "Do metaethical theories logically entail certain accounts of moral justification?" and "Do metaethical theories contain explicitly or implicitly any actual value judgements?" I have maintained that in the case of naturalist ethical theories, answers to the two general questions are affirmative and I have left the question more or less open with respect to non-cognitivist theories.<sup>1</sup> Is it possible, then, for a metaethical theory to be neutral in both senses? If such neutrality is possible, will the price of such neutrality be virtual irrelevance? Alternatively, if such neutrality is not possible does it still make sense to consider a certain degree of neutrality as a standard by which (among others) such theories should be judged?

What pitfalls must a metaethical theory avoid in order to be ethically neutral? First, let us take what I will call

methodological neutrality, which is the sort of neutrality which one will have if he considers all the relevant data in his enquiry. What are the data of a metaethical enquiry and more critically what will be our criteria of relevance? Metaethics is about ethics. Ethics includes actual moral discourse: decisions, judgements, disagreements and justifications. There will also be reference to certain experiences, feelings and attitudes. Metaethics has for its subject-matter a variety of ethical systems, but more generally a host of 'moralities' in all of their variations and complexities. The data which are relevant then are those we can extract from "moral" contexts or situations in which "moral" issues arise. What we must be careful not to do is to assume that what is common to our own ethical beliefs is therefore common and definitive of all moral beliefs. While reference to common usage may be important, it cannot be a final arbiter. This is because people have different metaethical presuppositions and the effects of these will be reflected in common usage. For example, some uses of moral terms in argument and justification reflect the belief that they are grounded in some external (to human desires and preferences etc.) locus of truth, while other uses will reflect the belief that moral rules are only conventional precepts of taste, opinion or prudence. The terms "moral" and "morality" are subject to a wide variety of uses (and perhaps misuses) and it is questionable whether or not a common meaning threads its way through most of them. In order to differentiate between

the moral and the non-moral, and to identify a morality, a theory of the "concept of morality" must be constructed. Such a theory will have to preserve certain salient features of common usage and also achieve the purposes we have in mind when we set out to define morality and, ideally, give necessary and sufficient conditions for the use of the term "moral".

The question arises as to whether or not we can come up with a set of criteria for identifying moral discourse, judgement, experiences etc. which is inclusive of all "ethical" positions and thus neutral. There is, of course, a certain circularity here in so far as moral and ethical are virtually interchangeable. A tentative stipulation which seems to incorporate most uses of the term "morality" (or "moral") appears to be the only way out. What is important is that the definition does not settle any substantial issues by fiat. There are certain criteria which have been proposed which do not fulfill the requirement of neutrality. In his book Ethics, William Frankena remarks:<sup>2</sup>

"the moral point of view is disinterested, not interested" and that "if one takes a maxim (as a moral maxim), one must be ready to universalize it."<sup>3</sup> Both of these statements arise in the context of an argument to the effect that ethical egoism is not a "moral" position at all. Ethical egoism (i.e. the view that one ought to pursue exclusively his own good) clearly involves taking an "interested" point of view. There are many problems with any espousal of ethical egoism, but it is at least possible that one would not be willing to universalize

the maxim. For example, if (as it usually is) the doctrine is defended by reference to psychological egoism, the egoist might give advice to others solely on the basis of his own good. In fact he might not be capable (given certain beliefs and the truth of psychological egoism) of admitting that everyone pursues his own good. He might advocate ethical altruism to others. Can ethical egoism be considered an ethical position at all? It fulfills neither of the two aforementioned conditions. It has been claimed that ethical egoism is not an ethical position at all, but rather a metaethical position about what we are really doing when we make moral judgements.<sup>4</sup> I would agree that ethical egoism is a metaethical claim. The claim "I ought to pursue exclusively my own good for its own sake" or if given in a more universalized form such as "Everyone ought to promote for its own sake only his own welfare"<sup>5</sup> can be seen as an injunction that one guide one's actions in a certain way and that such a principle of action provides justifiable and thus "good and sufficient"<sup>6</sup> reasons for acting.

It seems that if we are to eliminate ethical egoism as a moral position, we are already taking a stance which is not neutral. However, it might be possible to hold that our stand is morally neutral in that we are only using "moral" descriptively, that is as opposed to non-moral rather than immoral. Thus the "ought" in the principle, while action-guiding might be seen as a non-moral ought. There are some difficulties with this view. First it is confusing to describe the stance as

morally neutral since we are trying to figure out what "moral" means. What is meant, of course, is that the position of the ethical egoist is not being called immoral, not being morally evaluated in accordance with some particular ethical view. What is not clear is that "moral" and "non-moral" can be used in a purely descriptive way.

A variety of different criteria have been thought necessary in order for a position or principle to be properly called moral. Frankena in his article "The Concept of Morality"<sup>7</sup> discusses among others the following three: (X is said to be taking a moral position if)

- 1) X takes it as prescriptive
- 2) X universalizes it
- 3) X regards it as definitive, final, overriding, or supremely authoritative.

Now, since an ethical egoist might not be willing to universalize his principle, we might call it non-moral. However, this is not to imply that the egoist's position is therefore not to be taken as definitive or overriding and prescriptive with respect to future action. This descriptive use of moral gets us into an awkward situation. For it is part of the meaning of moral that the sorts of reasons and considerations which are called "moral" are ones which are "seriously committing" and which can "take precedence in a conscientious calculus of action guiding considerations".<sup>8</sup> If the assertion that egoism is not a moral position does not include a denial of its right to be "seriously committing" and "take precedence" etc., then it is

a trivial one. It is trivial since all the heated debate about overriding, proper and sufficient reasons for acting would take place under a new name. Alternatively, if saying that the egoist's position, taken as an ethical one, is not moral is saying that it is neither "seriously committing" nor "takes precedence" over other considerations, then "moral" is being used evaluatively. It often appears that there is a latent argument to the effect that since the egoist's position is not universalizable, it lacks any special force which moral positions have. Saying that a position is not moral is to belittle the status of reasons for acting which are in accordance with that position. Being non-moral these reasons become inferior when adduced in support of a position where a moral issue is involved.

So far it is clear that disinterestedness is not adequate as a neutral characterization of what is distinctively moral. Most attempts to define "moral" can be classified into two categories: one of form and the other of content. Some attempts have included one or more characterizations from each category.<sup>9</sup> An example of a formal criterion is universalizability in that practically any principle about anything could be a moral principle provided that it was appropriately universalized.<sup>10</sup> Hare strongly relies upon this principle. Other formal criteria might be certain attitudes or feelings which when they accompany judgements render them distinctively "moral". E.A. Westermarck in his book Ethical Relativity speaks of the



(disinterested) emotions of approval and disapproval which mark moral judgements.

In calling the emotions disinterested, Westermarck will have the same difficulties with neutrality which I have mentioned. If the characterization is simply in terms of approval and disapproval, other problems arise. First there is the problem of distinguishing these emotions from other emotions (without using disinterestedness). If the claim is that there is no distinction then the connection with ordinary usage becomes very tenuous or the explanatory value of "approval" dwindles. The point is that it is not very clear what approval is. If it is merely a name for another emotion or feeling such as "liking", there are problems with usage. There is also the problem with a claim such as Kent's that moral judgements are characterized by reference to human reason not emotions. W.D. Falk gives a somewhat broader final criterion for identifying a moral principle: any rational definitive, and authentic commitment of a self-directing person.<sup>11</sup> Even this runs into difficulty in that a morality is often presented as being essentially non-rational. Stated differently we could not then include non-rational commitments as data to be examined. There is an additional difficulty in considering a morality definitive or overriding. This is to assert that moral principles or beliefs by definition have a particularly important role in the lives of individuals. Accordingly a person either acts in accordance with his moral principles or feels remorse or guilt if he does not.

An alternative or additional way of defining "moral" is in terms of the content of certain judgements or experiences. This approach is in terms of what the judgements are about or what they refer to. Under the rubric of utilitarianism and certain (other) naturalist views "moral" concepts are those which refer to the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of human desires, wants, needs or the promotion of well-being or good. Foot considers "moral" to indicate reference to human wants and needs. For Mill "moral" referred to certain principles and situations in which human pleasure and pain were involved. Now it is probably fair to say that most moralities are concerned in one way or another with human good. Still problems arise when we attempt any neutral specification of good. Perhaps certain intuitionist accounts such as Moore's are good enough, but they are woefully vague. Of course, with Moore, in particular, there is the additional problem of cognizing a non-natural property. In the case of naturalist accounts there is an obvious conflict with a purely formal view such as Kant's. Anyway, I have already argued that for other reasons any naturalist view will not yield a neutral metaethic. The difficulty with any specification of "moral" in terms of content is that it appears to exclude certain other proposed "contents". If we specify a particularly human content, then we exclude possible reference to the "will of God" or the "ultimate purpose of the universe".

I hope I have made it clear that the problem of delimiting the subject-matter of ethics renders a neutral approach to metaethics extremely difficult. One sense of "moral", that of being felt overriding or authoritative with respect to conduct is I believe, indispensable. This stems from my view that moral theory is at least about competing or alternative views about right conduct. It is at least clear that the frequent characterizations of "moral" as disinterested or universalizable is not to take a neutral stance. I do not claim that the problem of coming up with (neutral) necessary and sufficient conditions for a "morality" is insoluble; yet, given the range of positions held in ethics ( i.e. that it is interested, that it is disinterested, that it is rational, that it is a series of non-rational expressions of emotion, that it is about human wants and desires, that it has no connection at all with human inclinations, etc.) the problem remains formidable.

The philosopher attempting to approach metaethics in a neutral manner is in an awkward position. He is attempting to explain or elucidate or characterize a particular dimension of human experience, or point of view, or domain of discourse-- that referred to by "moral". Whatever is contained within these areas will comprise the "data" with which he must deal. Yet if he is to separate out these data from even broader contexts, he must have already come to certain general conclusions about what "moral" means or what morality is. In so far as the criteria used will be stipulated as necessary conditions for something being called moral, then it is likely that the

criteria will be non-neutral. This results from the peculiarly complex and controversial history of the term "moral" and at least one purpose which appears in most "moral" contexts, namely: to determine sufficient and authoritative reasons for acting. In trivial cases it is not particularly difficult to distinguish between the moral and the non-moral and usually we can make such a distinction. Yet even in these cases, justifying calling them trivial leads us back to the difficulties already outlined.

One might give up the suggestion that there are any necessary conditions for a morality and instead characterize "moral" and "morality" in terms of sufficient conditions. One possibility might be to define morality in terms of a disjunction of the above mentioned formal and material criteria. It is likely that we would then have an immense body of "data" with which we would have to deal and the problem of sorting out moral judgements would become even more acute. Still we may have so far preserved neutrality. Now we must be careful not to say anything in the metaethical theory which will entail a certain normative ethical position.

A metaethical theory is neutral in that ethical views do not need to be judged as either moral or immoral. There is sometimes an implicit evaluation being made when certain views (e.g. the egoist's) are "classified" as non-moral. This classification or appraisal is evaluative in that it implies that reasons given from this point of view lack the authority or

weight of reasons given from the moral point of view.

Metaethical theories are not neutral in another sense, in that given certain metaethical views, we are rationally committed to certain types of justifications. Or, in some cases we are limited in the sorts of reasons we can give in support of our moral views. Where moral views or beliefs (e.g. that war is wrong or abortion right etc.) are held without supporting reasons (explicit or implicit) a metaethical view may not make much difference. But the fact remains, some people hold certain views because they believe that they have good and sufficient reasons for so doing. A metaethical position may change their ideas about what constitutes good and sufficient reasons.<sup>12</sup> Certain views would then no longer be rationally defensible.

In effect metaethical analyses afford us a rational (intellectual) appraisal of the sorts of things we do when we disagree about moral issues, make moral judgements, and support them by giving reasons. The kind of reason which we can utilize will depend upon our metaethical view. In the case of Stevenson's version of emotivism, ultimate ethical disagreement (if such exists) is seen as disagreement in attitude. Given that we wish to convert someone to our position, legitimate "reasons" in support of our position are any which will influence the listener in the desired way. If we are rational and intelligent persons then we will update our methods of argument since we now know what is really going on. We will not employ cer-

tain arguments (which we used before we encountered Stevenson) because they are irrelevant to the real issue. Perhaps another case will make this clearer. Our arguments in support of ethical judgements will depend upon what we think certain moral words mean. If good is thought to be an objectively present consequential<sup>13</sup> property of objects, then we argue about whether or not something is good on the basis of the presence of certain other properties. If good means "willed by God", we might consult the Bible for arguments. Whether or not we can say that good is a consequential property or good means "willed by God" depends upon (among other considerations) our views on meaning. In the case of judgements, disagreements, and justification our metaethical presuppositions will determine what we think we are doing. Given a conception of what we think we are doing, we will see ourselves as rationally compelled to accept or offer certain reasons, and reject as irrelevant certain others. In determinate contexts our judgements may vary accordingly.<sup>14</sup> It might be replied here that I am confusing a descriptive metaethical account of different sorts of justification with actual ethical justification. With respect to justification, we can preserve this distinction, by, for example, only cataloguing different justifications which are actually given. We might even conclude that there are certain characteristics typical of almost all justifications. Still we could refrain from saying that therefore these characteristics are definitive of proper and legitimate justifications.

But is this the case when we consider, in addition, the implications of an analysis of the meanings of ethical terms and perhaps their logic? I think not. Given the meanings of these terms certain evidence or reasons will be appropriate to their use. And certain evidence or reasons will be inappropriate.

In the case of individual metaethical theories there is also the possibility that they will incorporate either implicitly or explicitly certain value judgements. This can be seen in Hare's discussion of universalization in Freedom and Reason. Hare's position is of particular interest in so far as he claims that his analysis is both relevant to ethics (as are naturalist metaethics) and (unlike naturalist metaethics) ethically neutral. In particular the requirement of universalizability is, according to Hare, purely logical and thus does not contain any implicit moral premises. It is important that the requirement of universalizability be neutral for two reasons. First, Hare intends to show that it is possible to come up with cogent and compelling moral arguments provided only that our interlocutor be rational (e.g. not be self-inconsistent or contradict himself). Secondly, the principle of universalizability must be neutral if it is to be considered a generally acceptable defining characteristic of moral judgements. Alternatively, if it is itself a moral judgement then it will be subject to the usual questions of justification and significance etc.

However, the requirement of universalizability as Hare presents it is not neutral for at least two reasons. As I mentioned earlier it excludes one version of ethical egoism by fiat. Secondly, it incorporates a value judgement to the effect that all persons are equally worthy of consideration in any process of moral deliberation. This judgement or principle implicit in Hare's position is called by Munro the principle of impartiality. Munro has in his book Empiricism and Ethics gone to some length to show that Hare's position on universal-<sup>15</sup>izability does incorporate this principle. As I agree with Munro (on this point) I will not attempt a full criticism of Hare. However, I will attempt to indicate that the employment of the principle of universalizability presupposes agreement on at least one normative question. The principle of universalizability can roughly be stated as follows: If it is right for me to do X in certain circumstances then it is right for anyone to do X in relevantly similar circumstances. Hare suggests that to universalize a moral judgement (i.e. prescription) is to move from assenting to the prescription "Let this not be done to me" to the generalized prescription "Let this not be done to others in similar circumstances."<sup>16</sup> Hare would have us in any given situation imaginatively switch places with another person affected by a particular action (which we are contemplating and think right). If we can still admit that the action would be right (even though we would be on the receiving end), then we have properly universalized our judgement. Sup-



pose we were to deny that the affected "persons" were really persons and thus claim that the the imaginative leap was not required. This position need not be an irrational one (take the case of paraplegics and suppose we are considering euthanasia). Of course, this will lead to a dispute about the criteria for assigning a being personhood. But why a dispute? Presumably because if "they" are persons, then their wants and hopes will be treated on a par with our own. Hare says that, since these wants can be (logically speaking) of anything, the requirement of universalizability is only a logical one. But the mere act of elevating the status of the affected beings to that of persons is to value (in moral deliberation) their interests and wants as if they were our own. This is hardly a neutral act. Hare's principle of universalizability can thus be seen as presupposing a certain view about how persons ought to be treated and (I would venture to speculate) about who are to count as persons.

I have argued that any metaethic which either gives or allows for a naturalist definition of ethical terms will not be ethically neutral. Non-naturalist theories, in so far as they incorporate non-empirical "facts" will also be non-neutral. With respect to non-cognitive metaethical theories (and for that matter both naturalist and non-naturalist theories) there are two sorts of considerations which render the likelihood of a neutral metaethic slim. One stems from the complexities involved in defining "moral" or "a morality". The other stems

from the implications for justification of the analyses of the meanings of ethical terms. Metaethical theories do affect our ethical beliefs and discourse and it appears likely that they will continue to do so. The recurrent attempts to construct neutral metaethical theories, while laudable in some respects, can achieve their aim only by becoming irrelevant to ethics.

## FOOTNOTES

### I

1. Instead of "ethics", the expression "normative ethics" is often used.
2. I will be using the expression "ethical" and "moral" interchangeably except in the expression "moral philosophy".
3. W.D. Ross, The Right and the Good (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1930), pp. 21-22 and John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism", in The Utilitarians, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), Chapter 11.
4. See A.J. Ayer, "On the Analysis of Moral Judgement", Philosophical Essays (London: Macmillan & Co., 1954), p. 246.
5. See William T. Blackstone, "Are Metaethical Theories Normatively Neutral?", The Australasian Journal of Philosophy, XXXIX, (1961).
6. G.E. Moore, Principia Ethica (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 5-6.
7. Ibid., p.3.
8. Ibid.
9. Moore's argument here is more elaborate than this, but I do not think much is to be achieved by going through it. Cf. pp. 2-3.
10. Moore, Principia, p. 21.
11. Ibid.
12. Cf. William K. Frankena, "The Naturalistic Fallacy", Mind, XLVIII (1939).
13. Moore, Principia Ethica, p. 8.
14. Ibid., p. 10.
15. Ibid., p. 14.

16. Ibid., p. 12.
17. Cf. Principia Ethica, Chapter IV.
18. Ibid., p. 15.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. This is just as well, since if good were a complex whole, there would be nothing wrong (given Moore's 'important' sense of definition) with analysing it in terms of its parts.
22. Ibid., p. 16.
23. Ibid., pp. 16-17.
24. Cf. Robert J. Fogelin, Evidence and Meaning: Studies in Analytic Philosophy, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967) p. 120.
25. Moore, Principia Ethica, p. 25.
26. Ibid., p. 161
27. Ibid., p. 23.
28. Ibid., p. 143.
29. Ibid., p. 144.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., p. 93.
32. Ibid., Chapter IV.

## II

1. (See supra Chapter I and infra Chapter III)
2. (See infra Chapter IV)
3. A.J. Ayer, "On the Analysis of Moral Judgements" Philosophical Essays (London: Macmillan & Co., 1954), p. 246.
4. Ibid.
5. R.H. Hare, Freedom and Reason (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 69.
6. William T. Blackstone, "Are Metaethical Theories Normatively Neutral?", The Australasian Journal of Philosophy XXXIX (1961), pp. 65-74.
7. Cf. H.B.E. Smith, "Indifference and Moral Acceptance", American Philosophical Quarterly IX (January, 1972), pp. 86-93.
8. In Language, Truth and Logic, Ayer compares moral judgements to utterances such as "oh!". Clearly the idea of supporting an interjection makes no sense.
9. Cf. John T. Wilcox, "Blackstone on Ethical Neutrality", Australasian Journal of Philosophy, XLI (May, 1963), pp. 89-91.
10. Blackstone, "Are Metaethical Theories Normatively Neutral?", p. 66.
11. (See infra Chapter IV)
12. (See infra Chapter III, section 2)
13. Jeremy Bentham, Principles of Morals and Legislation in The Utilitarians (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961) pp. 19-20.
14. Ibid.
15. J.S. Mill, Utilitarianism in The Utilitarians (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961) p. 419.
16. Blackstone, "Are Metaethical Theories Normatively Neutral?", p. 70.
17. (See infra Chapter III)
18. Wilcox, "Blackstone on Ethical Neutrality", p. 91.

19. Paul V. Taylor, "The Normative Function of Metaethics", The Philosophical Review LXVII (1958) p. 18.

### III

1. See Moritz Schlick, Problems of Ethics, trans. by David Rynn, (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), p. 1.
2. Cf. R.M. Hare, The Language of Morals (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), Chapter 5 and P.H. Nowell-Smith, Ethics (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1954) Chapter 2.
3. R.M. Hare, The Language of Morals, p. 30.
4. Ibid., p. 28.
5. Ibid., p. 127.
6. Ibid.
7. Hare is not very clear on this point. See The Language of Morals, pp.
8. Philippa Foot, "Moral Beliefs", Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, LIX (1958-1959), pp. 23-104.
9. R.M. Hare, "Descriptivism", British Academy Proceedings, XLIX (1964) pp.
10. Ibid.
11. M.B.E. Smith, "Indifference and Moral Acceptance", American Philosophical Quarterly, XI (January, 1972) pp. 86-93.
12. Hare, The Language of Morals, pp. 168-169. I believe that it is clear from the context of this statement that this is a more general argument about the relation between value judgements and imperatives.
13. Ibid., p. 141.
14. Ibid., p. 144.
15. I have borrowed this example in a somewhat abbreviated form from E.K. Adams.

16. For a criticism of this requirement see P.K. Feyerabend. "How to be a Good Empiricist--A Plea for Tolerance in Matters Epistemological" in F.H. Gidditch, ed., The Philosophy of Science, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 12-39.

## IV

1. That leaves non-naturalist theories which I am inclined to treat in the same way as naturalist theories given my present purposes. In any case, I believe that the following discussion of the difficulty of constructing a neutral metaethical theory applies to all such attempts.
2. William Frankena, "Ethics", 2nd ed., (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973) p. 20.
3. Ibid., p. 18.
4. E.M. Adams, "Classical Moral Philosophy and Metaethics", Ethics, LXXIV (1964), pp. 97-110.
5. Ibid., pp. 101-102.
6. W.D. Falk, "Morality, Self and Others" in Kenneth Fehel & Marvin Schiller, eds., Readings in Contemporary Ethical Theory, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970) pp. 380-390.
7. Frankena, "The Concept of Morality", The Journal of Philosophy, LXXIII (1966).
8. Falk, "Morality, Self and Others", p. 364.
9. e.g. Hume.
10. The requirement that a moral principle must be universalizable may incorporate certain value judgements.
11. Falk, "Morality, Self and Others".
12. Imagine someone implicitly adopting Bentham's views about the meaning of good and then switching to Hare's after reading The Language of Morals. (See supra Chapter II).
13. A property consisting in a certain combination of other properties.

14. (See supra Chapter II, p. 37)
15. D.H. Munro, Empiricism and Ethics, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), Chapters 13-16.



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