

A critical analysis of deriving moral statement from factual statement

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Abstract

The problem of deriving moral statement from factual statement(s) is a controversial issue of moral philosophy. British philosopher David Hume raised the issue at first. Moral philosophers have contributed each other interpreting Hume's 'is-ought' passage in many ways. Some moral philosophers believe that a value term or moral term in particular can be defined by a factual term, or moral statement can be derived from absolutely factual premises. On the other hand some others oppose that view and argue that there is no relation between factual term and moral term. They claim that it is not possible to define moral terms by factual terms or to derive a moral statement from s factual statement. In this article I shall critically examine the above two opposing views. I believe that both these views are partially true. Those who believe that value statement cannot be defined by or derived from factual statement are right in the sense that value statement cannot be derived from factual statement formally or deductively and a definition of value terms by natural terms commits *naturalistic fallacy*. But they are wrong to say that value statement cannot be derived from factual statement in any way, or that there is no relation between them. Similarly those who claim that moral statement can be derived from factual statement(s) are partially right in the sense that there is a way to draw moral statement from factual statement(s). They are partially right because I believe and will try to establish the fact that moral statement can only be drawn from factual statement informally.

1. Introduction

In the history of meta-ethics we see that naturalism find a very close connection between fact and value. They attempt to define value terms, such as, good by different natural properties. On the

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other hand, some emotivists, like A. J. Ayer, believe that factual statement and moral statement contain different properties and hence there is no relation between them. Similarly, Searle and some others believe that there is a logical connection between factual statement and moral statement(s). They try to show how moral statement or *ought statement* can be derived from factual statement(s) or *is statement(s)*. But R.M. Hare and some others disagree with them. They find no logical connection between *is* and *ought*.

We believe, naturalist's view that *good* is definable and Ayer's view that moral statements are devoid of all factual contents are too extreme. We will argue that there are some sort of connection between fact and value, but that connection is varying different from that of naturalist's claim. Like non-naturalists, for example G. E. Moore, we believe that a moral term, such as *good* is indefinable. But at the same time we believe that there is some sort of connection between fact and value, that values are rooted in facts in the sense that we explain value with the help of fact.

Again, Searle and Hare's view that "moral statement can be derived from factual statement" and "moral statement cannot be derived from factual statement" are respectively also too extreme. We are in agreement with Hare that formal deduction from *is* to *ought* is not possible, but we believe that there is a logical connection between *is* and *ought*. For we can arrive at *ought* from *is* informally.

2. Ethical naturalism: Moral term can be defined by factual term.

Ethical naturalism is a theory of meta-ethics according to which, moral terms can be defined by non-ethical terms, and moral statements can be replaced by non-ethical statements without changing their meaning. According to naturalism, William Frankenna says, "Ought can be defined in terms of is, and value in terms of fact" (1970, 97).

Some moral philosophers, G. E. Moore, for example, characterize naturalism as a theory which holds that moral statements are a sub-class of empirical statements because like factual statements moral statements are also empirically verifiable:

According to the naturalistic ethics, ethics is an empirical or positive science; its conclusion could be all established by means of empirical observation... Those theories of ethics, then are naturalistic, which declare the sole good to consist in some one property of things, which exists in time; and which do so because they suppose that 'good' itself can be defined by reference to such a property (1903, 39).

The naturalists believe that there are no special moral facts or properties to be known other than by empirical observation. Instead, they think that moral terms, such as, *good* or *right* can be identified with, or reduced to natural properties. Therefore, ethical naturalism is the view, in short, which

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denies the gap between fact and value. According to this theory, like factual statements, moral statements can also be rendered either true or false by empirical verification and all these are possible because a value term can be defined by a factual one without changing its meaning. The most discussed definition of *good* is the hedonistic definition. According to which, *good* means pleasure. The sentence 'X is *good*' is equivalent to the sentence 'X is pleasant'. This kind of definition of good is popularly known as utilitarian definition.

2.1. The indefinability of good : G. E. Moore

In his book *Principia Ethica*, G. E. Moore has offered the most powerful argument against naturalism. We see that the utilitarian as well ethical naturalists Bentham, Mill and Spencer try to define ethical term (good) by non-ethical property or natural property (pleasure). Moore strongly opposes such kind of attempt because it commits *naturalistic fallacy*. He says, many moral philosophers are guilty of this fallacy. Now we will consider his grounds against the definability of good.

2.2. Good is a simple notion.

Moore proposes a special kind of definition which expresses the real character of the object or notion denoted by a word, and do not simply inform us what the word is used to mean. He says:

You can give a definition of a horse, because a horse has many different properties and qualities, all of which you can enumerate. But when you have enumerated them all and when you have reduced a horse to his simplest terms. They are simply something, which you think of or perceive them; you can never, by any definition make their nature known (1903, 7).

Moore argues that good is a simple notion as like as color yellow is a simple notion. Nobody can able to explain yellow to a blind or an ignorant person who does not already have the knowledge of yellow. For the same logic we cannot explain what good is. We cannot equalize the word yellow as some naturalists do it with the words produce of a certain kind of vibration in the light; similarly, good is not equalized with the words produce of pleasure.

2.3. The open question argument

According to open question argument, whatever definition is offered for good, it may always be asked with importance whether it is good. Suppose, good is defined as pleasure. Someone may ask, "Is pleasure good?" If this definition is correct then the question will be insignificant. And if the definition is not correct then the question is significant.

2.4. The naturalistic fallacy

Finally, Moore concludes that good cannot be defined by pleasure. And any attempt to define good by any natural property must commit *naturalistic fallacy*. The naturalistic fallacy is committed when anyone tries to identify or define value properties with natural properties. So

Moore claims that ethical naturalists, such as, Bentham, Mill, Spencer and Green commit naturalistic fallacy by defining moral terms with natural terms.

3. Values are devoid of factual content: Intuitionism

Ethics, according to intuitionism, does not depend logically on facts about man and the world, empirical or non-empirical, scientific or theological. (Frankena, 1963, 84) Rather than, intuitionists hold, ethical statements are intuitively known to be certain. According to C.A. Patterson, ethical intuitionism is:

The doctrine that what is right or wrong is something that can be known immediately without stopping to reflect on the matter or taking into account the consequences which belong to the action in question (1949, 77).

Ethical intuitionists are in agreement that moral knowledge is immediate, self-evident, clear and distinct- that moral truths are known by intuition without appealing to fact or reason. In other words, they hold that there is no relation between fact and value.

3.1. G. E. Moore: Factual terms and moral terms are different

We have seen that according to Moore, moral terms such as good cannot be defined in terms of natural properties. Indeed he believes that goodness is a non-natural property. He holds that we know by our intuition that there is a gap between fact and value. Value concept-such as, *good*, according to him, is a unique object which is very different from natural properties, e.g., producing pleasure. The truthfulness or falsehoods of moral statements do not depend on sense experience or reason. We can know their truth-value immediately, i.e., by intuition. We know that men without moral eyesight do know what yellowness is and a man who is not suffering from physical and mental disorder directly can experience the taste of food. Similarly, a man with average intellect can experience what goodness is. But although the knowledge of yellowness and the knowledge of goodness are immediate and direct, yet they differ in respect of the way we know them. While the knowledge of yellowness is perceptible, i.e., depends on sense experience, the knowledge of goodness is intuitive. In other words, the sensory knowledge of yellow is empirical and the knowledge of good is non-empirical. Thus Moore comes to the conclusion that there is a logical gap between factual statement and moral statement.

3.2. Limitation of intuitionism

We have seen Moore's reason for thinking that there is a difference between moral good and natural fact. We all know it by intuition that there is such a gap. And good is a unique object. But do all men have before their minds this unique object when they think about good? If someone's answer is negative, then we cannot refute him. Hudson says, "...the logical gap between 'good' and any 'naturalistic description cannot be established by Moore's appeal to intuition."(1970:85). We believe that Hospers is right to say that Intuitionism is not an acceptable view. It seems an

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extreme view. Now we will discuss another extreme view regarding fact-value relation, called radical subjectivism, which also claims, like intuitionism, that ethical statements are devoid of factual contents.

3.3. Radical subjectivism: Moral statements are purely expressive

Regarding the nature of moral statement British empiricist as well as logical positivist A. J. Ayer also rejects intuitionism advocated by G. E. Moore, H. A. Prichard and W. D. Ross. According to them goodness and badness, or rightness and wrongness of an action can be known by intuition. Ayer agrees with Moore and others that moral statements are not empirically verifiable, but he does not recognize as a scientific mode of verification. "Intuition", he says, "is worthless as a test of proposition's validity because it cannot serve as a criterion to resolve conflicts" (1936, 141).

According to radical subjectivism, an ethical statement does not express real feelings of the speaker. It does not necessarily involve any assertions; or does not ever report the mental state of the speaker. Thus if the speaker says that x is good but I do not approve of x, he does not contradict because he is not expressing his real feeling. Why? Ayer answers,

If I say x is good I should not be making any statement about feeling or about anything else. I should simply be evincing my feeling which is not at all the same thing as saying that I have them (1936, 144).

Ayer claims that ethical statements are purely expressive, since they say nothing; they are like a cry of pain or a word of command. Ethical statements do not express actual propositions; they are pseudo propositions. Therefore they are neither true nor false.

For in saying that certain type of action is right or wrong. I am not making any factual statement, not even a statement about my own state of man. I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments. And the man who is ostensibly contradicting me is merely expressing his moral sentiments. So there is plainly no sense in asking which of us is in the right. For neither of us is asserting a genuine proposition (1936, 142-143).

So, in brief, we can say, Ayer's radical subjectivism claims that ethical statements are devoid of all factual contents; they do not even report speaker's mental state. We will show that this claim is unacceptable.

4. Arguments for factual-evaluative transition

We saw that naturalists argue that there is a very close relation between fact and value. But we said that Moore is right to claim that moral statement(s) cannot be defined by factual statement(s). Even though we disagree with the naturalists that moral statement(s) can be defined by factual statement(s), we agree with them, on different ground that facts and values are related. Similarly, even though we agree with Moore that moral statements cannot be defined by factual statements,

but we disagree with him and others like intuitionists and radical subjectivist that values are devoid of all factual contents.

The reason why we believe that fact and value are related is that the justification of moral statement depends on factual statement(s), in the sense that if someone asks me what is *good* then I cannot make him understand or explain to him what *good* is without reference to or taking help of factual statements. Let us remember that there are some statements of morality. If someone says that 'x is good' and if we ask him why does he believe that 'x is good' then he will mention a standard on the basis of which he called 'x' good. For example, some use 'approval of self' as a standard some use God's approval, some use majority's approval and some others use 'survival of the fittest as the standard of morality. If we look at these standards carefully, we can see that these standards are factual. Indeed, religion, society, law, culture etc. are frequently used as the standards and origin of morality. As we have noted earlier that whenever someone says that 'x is good' and if asked why does he believe so, he gives reference of the standards mentioned above; and these standards are factual. In order to justify moral statements people frequently uses factual statements. Thus morality is related with fact.

Let us grasp the issue in a different way. Supposing we are asked-what is yellow? Or what is wave? Usually, we answer that such and such kind of vibration (causes) is yellow. Similarly, we say that wave is such and such kind of particle. We have already said with reference to G. E. Moore that it is true that vibration and yellow is not the same thing. But at the same time it is also true that without vibration the color yellow is impossible. This means that even though vibration and color are different; still in order to explain what yellow is, we need the reference of vibration. In this way yellow and vibration are related, though they are different in nature- one is natural (vibration) and the other is non-natural (yellow).

What we have acknowledged so far is that two different properties can have relation. If so, fact and value can also be related. We generally explain value with an appeal to fact. In other words, the justification of value mostly depends on fact. So we conclude that fact and value are related each other. The reason on which we base our claim that fact and value are related is very different from those of naturalists offer. Naturalists believe that ethical terms are definable by factual terms and they are synonymous. But we do not agree with them. Like Moore, we think that moral terms cannot be defined by factual terms. At the same time we disagree with Moore that goodness can be determined by intuition. For we have argued that intuition cannot be a reliable source of knowledge. In the next we will consider the logical relation between fact and value.

5. The logical derivation of moral statement from factual statement(s)

Here we will consider the logical connection between factual statement and moral statement. Some moral philosophers believe that there is a relation between fact and value, that is, there is a logical connection between Factual statement or *is statement* and moral statement or *ought statement*. On the other hand, some philosophers say that there is no logical connection between

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is-statement and *ought-statement*. Let us see how some moral philosophers try to deduce *ought* from *is* and others deny it.

5.1. Searle's attempt to derive evaluative statement from factual statement(s)

Searle depicts and defends with a case of an evaluative conclusion derived exclusively from descriptive premises. He begins his five steps of derivation with a purely descriptive statement such as, Jones uttered the words, I hereby promise to pay... and to continue by a series of reasoning moves to the purely evaluative conclusion 'Jones ought to pay...' The proof discloses the relation between the utterance of certain words and the speech act of promising, and then in turn discloses promising into commitment that moves from obligation to 'ought'. Searle designs his argument as follows:

- 1) Jones uttered the words, "I hereby promise to pay you, Smith, five dollars".
- 2) Jones promised to pay Smith five dollars.
- 3) Jones placed himself under an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.
- 4) Jones is under an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.
- 5) Jones ought to pay Smith five dollars.

Searle explains, (1a) under certain condition C anyone who utters the words "I hereby promise to pay you, Smith, five dollars", promises to pay Smith five dollars. For the act of promising the conditions must be empirical, such as, the speakers and hearer are both conscious, speak of English, speaking seriously; the speakers and hearer are both conscious and the speaker knows what he is doing, not under the influence or drugs, not hypnotize, or not acting in a play, not telling a joke or reporting an event etc.

(1b) Conditions C obtain.

From 1. (1a) and (1b), 2 is derived.

Between (2) and (3) Searle takes 'promise' by its definition, such as, an act of placing one's under an obligation. So, (2) entails (3) directly.

The tautological premise is:

(2a) All promises are acts of placing oneself under an obligation to do what are promised.

(3a) other things are equal.

(3b) All those who place themselves under an obligation are, other things being equal, under an obligation.

From (3), (3a) and (3b), (4) is derived.

The relation between (4) and (5), the additional statement is also tautological.

(4a) Other things being equal.

(4b) All those who are under an obligation to do an action 'ought', other things being equal, to do that action.

Searle believes that there is nothing evaluative about the *ceteris paribus* clause. The phrase other things being equal contains the sense "unless we have some reasons or we are actually preparing to give some reasons, for supposing the obligation is void, or the agent ought not to keep the promise then the obligation holds and promise ought to be kept" (1964. Vol. LXX). He argues that the conclusion of the derivation is not a hypothetical but categorical. Thus, Searle derives evaluative statement from factual premises.

5.2. R. M. Hare: Denial of *is-ought* derivation

Hare denies Searle's derivation in his article *promising game* (1964:144). He mainly attacks the status of the extra premise, which Searle introduces between (1) to (2) and (2) to (3) as an entailment. Hare analyzes Searle's extra premise (1a) and argues that it contains a synthetic evaluation or prescription. He combines Searle's (1a) and (1b) into a single constitutive rule: (1a*) under certain condition C anyone who utters the words, "I hereby promise to pay Smith five dollars" place himself under an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.

Hare concludes that (1a*) is neither a synthetic nor a tautological statement. Uttering the word *promise*, we should not think that this makes (1a*) a tautology, or a mere statement about word usage. It is an essence of a word like *promise* has a meaning only when certain synthetic proposition about how we should act is assented. (1a*) is such kind of proposition. The word *promise* depends for its meaning upon the proposition but the proposition is not true solely in virtue of the meaning of the promise. He believes that (1a*) is a synthetic constitutive rule of institution of promising and the constitutive rules of promising are moral principle, so (1a*) is a synthetic moral principle. If (2a) is tautological statement then (1a) is either explicitly or implicitly contained a synthetic moral principle. Therefore Hare concludes that Searle does not reach evaluative conclusion from exclusively factual premises. He just draws an evaluative statement from concealed evaluative premise(s).

6. Informal way of deriving ought from is

Now we are going to explain how moral statement can be derived from factual statement(s) informally. For this we discuss conduction and legal reasoning as the examples of informal logic. Through these discussions it would be clear that there is a way to derive *ought* from *is*.

6.1. Informal logic

There are some kinds of arguments, which are neither deductive nor inductive. These arguments are named informal reasoning. Informal logic helps in those fields where formal logic is unable to help. Informal logic like, conduction and legal reasoning will help us to understand how value statements can be derived from factual statement(s).

6.2. Conduction

Karl Wellman advocates conduction. He defines conduction "as a kind of reasoning in which the conclusion about some individual case is drawn non-conclusively from one or more premises about the same case without any appeal to other cases" (1970, 52).

There are three patterns of conduction. The first pattern consists of one premise and the conclusion. In this pattern other premises are not added because the reason given by the single premise is so clear and powerful that it alone is enough to draw the conclusion. For example,

You promised to return my book.
Therefore you ought to return my book.

The second pattern consists of more than one premises to draw the conclusion. Here each premise provides independently positive reason for the conclusion, for example,

You are rich.

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You are kind hearted.
Your neighbor is poor.
Therefore you ought to help your neighbor.

In the third pattern of conduction the conclusion is drawn from both positive and negative premise(s). The positive premises provide favorable reasons for the conclusion and the negative premises provide reasons against the conclusion. For example,

He is rude.
He is eccentric.
He is honest.
He is benevolent.
Therefore He is good.

Here two premises are positive. They provide reasons for the conclusion. And two other premises are negative. They give reasons against the conclusion. But the reasons for are stronger than the reasons against. Thus the argument presents convincing evidence to tell the person good.

All the three patterns of argument mentioned above, consist of factual premise(s) and evaluative conclusion. We may conclude that conduction which provides us value statement on the basis of factual statement(s).

6.3. Legal Reasoning

Legal reasoning is another branch of informal logic which allows us to draw value conclusion from factual premise(s). In his book *An Introduction to Legal Reasoning* Edward, Levi characterizes legal reasoning (1970:1-2). Following him Let us construct arguments:

Suppose that Karim has stolen a necklace from a shop. Suppose also that Rahim stole from a shop. In Rahim's case the court has declared him guilty. So in Karim's case the judge probably call him guilty, because the present case has the similarity with the previous case.

X steals money.
Y steals money and he was declared guilty.
Therefore X is guilty.

It shows us how moral statement can be drawn from factual statement informally. In legal reasoning, the premise (e.g. Rahim stole money) is factual; but the conclusion (e.g. Rahim is guilty) is evaluative. And the conclusion does not derive from the premise formally. As a result legal reasoning again helps us to understand that there is a logical connection between fact and value.

7. Conclusion

We have explored whether there is any valid relationship between fact and value. We have critically examined all the views regarding fact-value relation. We elaborately discuss naturalism and see that naturalistic definition is not justified. Therefore their entire attempt to define moral

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terms by factual terms is futile. We explore the two other extreme views, namely, intuitionism and radical subjectivism where we find that value statements or moral statements in particular, are devoid of all factual contents hence there is no relation between them. Here we have argued that their claim is also extreme and unacceptable.

But we believe and argue that there is a relation between descriptive element and evaluative element of a moral term. For this we consider the logical derivation of moral conclusion from absolutely factual premise(s). Here we critically examine Searle's derivation and Hare's criticism. We convince with Hare that moral conclusion cannot be drawn from pure factual premises deductively or formally. Finally we use informal logic as a tool to show how moral statement can be drawn from factual premise(s).

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