

REVIEWS

Some Contemporary Meta-Ethical Theories : Ved Prakash Varma
University of Delhi, Pages 234, Price Rs. 45/-.

The work under review is a revised version of doctoral thesis submitted by Ved Prakash Varma to the University of Delhi in 1967 and published in a book form in 1978. The main objective of this work is to make a critical survey of some of the contemporary Meta-Ethical Theories like Naturalism, Subjectivism, Emotivism, Prespectivism, etc. These theories are concerned with the clarification and logical analysis of ethical language. This book is divided into three parts. The first part is devoted to two types of ethical subjectivism, which W. D. Ross characterises as (1) "Public reaction view" and (2) "Private reaction view". First type of ethical subjectivism is advocated by David Hume in his works on moral philosophy. The author has discussed this doctrine in detail in the first chapter and provides a brief historical introduction to this work.

Second type of ethical subjectivism advocated by Edward Westermarck, and Bertrand Russell is discussed in second and third chapter.

The second part of this work deals with the emotive theory of ethics. It is divided into two categories (1) Pure Emotivism and (2) Qualified Emotivism.

In the third part, he has discussed important post emotive ethical theories of four post emotive moral philosophers namely S. E. Toulmin, J. O. Urmson, R. M. Hare and P. H. Nowell-Smith.

This work is mainly confined to the discussion of some of important questions concerning meta-ethics rather than descriptive and normative ethics. Some of these meta-ethical questions are :
(1) What is the meaning and function of ethical judgements ?
(2) Are these judgements "Objective" in any sense of the term ?
(3) Can these judgements be rationally justified ? and if so, what are the valid reasons for their justification ?

All major contemporary ethical theories have been attempting to answer these meta-ethical questions but none of these theories has so far been able to give a completely satisfactory answer to them. Each of these doctrines is one sided and lays undue stress

upon one particular aspect of the moral judgement to the exclusion of many other important aspects. Both naturalism and intuitionism construe ethical judgements as referring to a natural or non-natural property of the object or action judged. They both maintain that moral judgements describe certain properties belonging to the object judged or action judged as good or bad, right or wrong.

The author agrees with them that they do contain a partial truth about the meaning of moral judgement. The judgements are objective rather than subjective, for they can not be equated with the reports of the existence of certain feelings, emotions or attitudes. But they are wrong in assuming that ethical judgements are descriptions and refer to a specific natural or non-natural property. It is mainly for this reason that both emotivist and the post-emotive writers have strongly criticised these descriptivist theories, and the author thinks that their criticism to a large extent is valid. Ethical subjectivism shares the naturalist and intuitionist view that moral judgements are descriptive statements which may be true or false. But it maintains that these judgements describe only the presence of certain feelings either in the speaker himself or in a set of people. For this reason, ethical judgements are wholly subjective and possess no objective validity. The author has raised at length many serious objections to this theory; and opined that moral judgements are objective in so far as they evaluate the object concerned and can be rationally supported or justified. Emotivism tries to get rid of the objections raised against the descriptive theories referred above. Emotivists are correct in calling our attention to the emotive meaning which these judgements often possess. They rightly maintain that ethical judgements are quite different from descriptive or factual statements. But they are wrong in holding that moral judgements are mere expressions of our feelings or emotions and are therefore neither true nor false. According to them, the question concerning the objective validity and rational justification of moral judgements is meaningless.

Thus the emotive theory like naturalism, intuitionism and subjectivism fails to account satisfactorily for the meaning and function of ethical judgements. Although the post-emotive writers do not wholly subscribe to this doctrine, they do support the emotivist view that moral judgements are primarily non-descriptive.

The author deals with the most important post-emotive trends in ethics namely Toulmin's "good reason approach", Hare's "universal prescriptivism", and Nowell Smith's "multifunctionalism". These trends share two important points in common. In the first place, they reject all descriptivist ethical theories, since according to them, moral judgements are primarily evaluative rather than descriptive statements. These philosophers regard moral judgements as capable of rational justification.

The author believes that, so far as the meaning, function and justification of moral judgements are concerned, the post-emotive philosophers are probably on the right track. He concludes that the meaning of moral judgements is not merely descriptive, emotive or prescriptive. The question of the "meaning" of ethical judgements seems to him to be of prime importance. So he does not fully subscribe to Toulmin's central thesis that the fundamental problem of moral philosophy is to discover valid reasons for ethical judgements. We must know what an ethical sentence precisely "means" before we are able to discover good reasons for or against it. He agrees with Hare in this respect who rightly attaches paramount importance to the problem of the meaning and function of moral judgements but he differs from his central thesis that all ethical judgements are primarily prescriptive and their chief function is to guide choices. It can be justifiably maintained that not all moral judgements are choice-guiding or prescriptive. At the end of the book, the author holds that moral judgements are primarily evaluative rather than descriptive, emotive or prescriptive. They are objective in the sense that they evaluate or appraise certain objects, actions, motives, experience, attitudes, persons by virtue of their factual characteristics and are subject to rational justification.

The book acquaints the reader with the view of the most eminent thinkers namely Hume, Westermarck, Russell, Moore, Carnap, Ayer, Stevenson, Edwards, Toulmin, Urmson, Hare and Nowell Smith. The author examines critically the views of such great ethical philosophers. Uniform method of giving references in the foot-notes, authorwise bibliography, subject indices will certainly increase the utility of this work for research students of the subject. He certainly deserves our compliments for his work.

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Naturalistic Ethical Theory : V. K. Bharadwaja :

Delhi University Press, 1978 : Price Rs. 35 pp. 191.

This book is a faithful reproduction of the author's doctoral dissertation with the same title having been completed under the supervision of Dr. R. Prasad and submitted to the Indian Institute of Technology (Department of Humanities and Social Sciences), Kanpur in 1969 (where the author worked as a research student for a number of years) which was subsequently approved for the award of Ph.D.

The present work addresses to itself the question : "Can ethical predicates be analysed in terms of naturalistic or empirical predicates ?" (Introduction P. 1.) and starts with a concept of ethical naturalism as per Moore's formulation of the same (he calls it ethical naturalism *a la* Moore) which implies " (a) that ethical assertions themselves are empirical assertions, or (b) that they are to be justified wholly in terms of empirical assertions. " He rightly points out that mere acceptance of (b) but rejection of (a) may or may not amount to naturalism. And it is this possibility which enables him to present his own formulation of ethical naturalism in a manner that suggests the exemption of many an ethical theory from naturalistic interpretation. But later on he forgets this distinction and goes on to call even those philosophers who reject (a) but hold (b) ethical naturalists. It is indeed true that whether an ethical theory is naturalistic or not depends on " the sort of logical relation it envisages between the justified ethical assertion and the justifying empirical assertions". It will be naturalistic if the relation that holds between them is one of deducibility. Bharadwaja points out that certain ethical theories accepted as naturalistic by Moore would fall outside the scope of naturalism *a la* Moore the reason being defective formulation of naturalism offered by Moore. But from this it does not follow what he intends to establish, viz. that " not all naturalists, however, can be comprehended under Moore's conception of ethical naturalism" (P. 4). Moreover, the reason why the so-called naturalists like Mill and Spencer should not, in the ultimate analysis, be called naturalists is not Moore's mistaken formulation of naturalism but

Moore's misunderstanding of their position vis-a-vis conditions (a) and (b) stated above. The difference between Moore and the author in respect of calling an ethical theory naturalistic amounts to this that whereas for Moore subscription to either (a) or (b) is enough to make an ethical theory naturalistic, for Bhardwaja it is the acceptance of (a) and (b) together or merely that of (a) which necessarily makes a theory naturalistic while acceptance of (b) may or may not justify the inclusion of a theory within the naturalistic fold. But that there is some initial confusion in the author's mind with regard to Moore's position is evident from the fact that he fails to appreciate what Moore wants to include under (b) i. e., ethical assertions are to be justified wholly in terms of empirical assertions. As Moore understood it, it will imply the acceptance of (a) because if an ethical assertion is justified 'wholly' in terms of empirical assertions, the relation between (b) and (a) turns out to be one of deducibility. What is at fault here is the mistaken assumption of Moore that all those who justified ethical assertions in terms of empirical ones were offering 'logical' justification. That it is neither necessary nor it is what all Moore's 'naturalists' have done has become quite obvious thanks to the writings of men like Stevenson, Toulmin and Baier.

The logical approach of the present work (P. 6) accounts for the analytic and methodological treatment of the views of Mill and Spencer (Chs. 4 and 5) whom Moore has discussed in *Principia Ethica* (Chs. II & III) and Perry and Dewey (Chs. 6 and 7) who lie outside the canvas of the *Principia*. These accounts are preceded by a general discussion of Moore's views on ethical naturalism (Ch. 1.) and those of various post-Moorean thinkers, chiefly Stevenson, Toulmin, Baier and Hare, on the nature of relation between 'Ought' and 'Is' (Ch. 2) and between ethical and factual expressions (Ch. 3). Finally, in the manner of dissertations, there occurs *Conclusion* which is a sort of an abstract of what he has said in chapters 1-7. It of course strikes as redundant from the point of view of a book.

There are numerous statements, interpretations and conclusions, with respect to what Moore or others have said, or concerning certain important concepts and problems in ethics, about which readers may feel uncertain or even uncomfortable. The

present review has to be too short and restricted to discuss most of these. I will, however, briefly touch upon a few of these.

The author approvingly refers to Stevenson's criticism of Moore where by the former suggests that Moore's avowed intuitive knowledge of good is one of the 'elaborately sophisticated fictions' (P. 11). It appears that this can be said if the author has failed to notice that by 'intuitive' Moore only means 'incapable of proof or disproof'. That Bhardwaja says it immediately after quoting Moore's view concerning intuitive judgements (P. 10) is surprising. It is true that if good is simple, it can only be asserted on intuition. The non-identifiability of any other concept (natural metaphysical, i. e. non-moral) with good (as its equivalent or definiens) is the reason which Moore has to offer in support of the simplicity of good. That the author does not accept it to be a good reason (P. 12) suggests as if there can be a good reason (or reasons ?) for it. However, the author does not state any. Similarly, he speaks of the inability to offer a 'real' definition (in Moore's sense of the term 'real definition') of 'good' a *tacit* assumption (P. 15) of Moore whereas every student of Moore would agree that it is one of the most explicit views presented in the *Principia*.

The author holds that Moore's unsuccessful bid to prove the indefinability of good is based on his too restrictive a concept of definition which is equated with analysis (P. 12). The view of definition he supports is the one which is recommended on the authority of Abraham Kaplan (*The Conduct of Inquiry* pp. 71-78): "In defining an expression, we state the conditions which are both necessary and sufficient for the application of the expression defined" (p. 16). But to say that we only define the *use* of linguistic expressions is one of the conceptions of definition and is surely not the one which Moore entertained exclusively.

While analysing the logical structure of Moore's naturalistic fallacy argument, the author quotes several statements from *Principia Ethica*, Pages 10, 13 and 40 (pp. 21-23) and remarks that two of them (b i) and (b ii) (They are in fact the same) contradict each other. It is surprising that an author claiming to be analytic and logical in his approach call these two statements contradictory because in (b i) Moore says that when anyone defines a natural

object (pleasure) as any other natural object " that would be the same fallacy which I have called the naturalistic fallacy ", and in (b ii) he continues to say that if in the expression " 'I am pleased', I meant that I was exactly the same thing as 'pleased', I should not indeed call that a naturalistic fallacy, although it would be the same fallacy as I have called naturalistic with reference to Ethics " (PE, P. 13). Where is the contradiction ? Bhardawaja calls Moore's theory of definition 'Ontological theory of Definition'. The way he has explained this view of definition, it would have been better to call it substitution Theory of Definition.

In his discussion of the possibility or otherwise of the deduction of 'Ought' from 'is' (ch. 2), he makes a special review of the nature of ethical reasoning according to Toulmin and Bair and discounts their claims concerning complete justification of ethical conclusions in terms of factual reasons. He seems to agree with Hare who has earlier said that Toulmin's claim can not stand since he uses a rule of inference to derive ethical conclusions from factual reasons and that the rule of inference contains an evaluative premise. Bhardwaja rightly applies the same interpretation to Baier's thesis and very well brings it out that what Hare has said against Toulmin equally holds in case of Baier. In fact one of the recurrent themes of the book is the statement of Harean position vis-a-vis 'the prescriptivity of ethical judgements' (pp. 51, 150 *et al*). He goes on to assert that admission of the prescriptivity of moral language is the only way to salvage the autonomy of ethics. His own criticism of naturalism is also based on its failure 'to account for the action-guiding function of ethical expressions' (p. 58).

The first three chapters clearly bring out the methodological issues involved in the development or critique of naturalism. But his stipulation of an alternative model of naturalism leads us nowhere. His statement of naturalism at times seems so wide that even Moore's position would be included under it as a number of requirements for his brand of naturalism (pp. 179-80) may be accepted by Moore for at least his obligation-judgements. His interpretation of naturalism and his reading of most of the well-known moral philosophers suggest that almost all moral philosophers are naturalists. His only distinction would be between the naturalists who do and those who do not commit the naturalistic

fallacy. This makes the whole exercise pointless. The author's prejudice comes out most explicitly in his study of 'Mill's Utilitarian Naturalism' (Ch. 4). He quotes from Mill's *System of Logic* (p. 616) : " . . . the reasons of a maxim or policy, or of any other rule of art, can be no other than the theorems of the corresponding science". And immediately comments : "In other words, the reasons or grounds for the first principles of ethics must be some statement of science" (P. 65). It is a glaring example of misreading what Mill has said. By no stretch of imagination can Mill's rule of art or policy be identified with his first principles. In *System of Logic* (p. 619) Mill clearly says: "Every art has one first principle, or general major premise, not borrowed from science." After having cited numerous passages of this import from Mill it is unintelligible how does the author conclude that for Mill "the ground or reasons for any ethical principle, then, are to be found in the theorem of science" (P. 66). What Mill want to say is that the rules of action (or all ought-statements for that matter) are grounded in empirical or scientific considerations.

The author, however, has rightly defended Mill and Spencer against the charge of committing the naturalistic fallacy and his reconstruction and defence of Spencer are commendable. But he holds that Perry and Dewey have committed the naturalistic fallacy. In case of Perry, the author admits that no cognitive or logical justification has been given and what Perry has to offer is only pragmatic justification and the author almost suggests that Perry has dealt with the problem of ethical justification in the same manner as Mill has done it (pp. 73-79). He further remarks that Perry is in fact not defining 'value' but 'a valuable object' (P. 14). But if it is so, he must also absolve Perry of the charge of committing the naturalistic fallacy. He also draws the analogy between Perry's and Stevenson's positions concerning ethical reasoning which is persuasive in either of the two. Perhaps many of the inconsistent remarks about Perry are due to the fact that the author mainly draws from Perry's *General Theory of Value* (1926) whose orientation he claims to be psychological rather than from *Realms of Value* (1954) which is logical (P. 139). Of course, at places he does refer to the latter work but without much care. That is why he says that Perry identifies 'reasons' with 'causes' which enables him

to apply the perceptual model of verifiability of ethical judgements while it is not Perrys' position in *Realms of Value*.

On the whole it may be said that the book succeeds in clarifying some of the important issues in Moore's exposition and rejection of ethical naturalism though it also creates some confusion about the application of the label in question on many moral philosophers. The get-up of the book is good and the bibliography very helpful to any student of contemporary ethics.

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