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# UNIT 11 ETHICAL NATURALISM AND NON-NATURALISM\*

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## 11.0 OBJECTIVES

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The aim of this unit is,

- to explicate the meaning of ethical naturalism and non-naturalism as metaethical theories and also
- to locate an important distinction between them.
- to show how ethical naturalism and non-naturalism deals with metaethical questions like: Are there moral facts? If there are moral facts, what is their origin? And how do we learn about the moral facts, if there are any? What exactly do people mean when they use the words like “good” and “right”?

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## 11.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## 11.2 ETHICAL NATURALISM

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

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

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

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

**Check Your Progress I**

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

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

1. Define ethical naturalism.

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**11.3 ETHICAL NON-NATURALISM**

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

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

**Check Your Progress II**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

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

1. Define Ethical Non-Naturalism.

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### 11.3.1 G. E. Moore on Naturalistic Fallacy

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

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

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

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

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

### 11.3.2 Open Question Argument

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

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

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

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

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

### 11.3.3 Intuitionism

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

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

### Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

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

1. What is a Naturalistic Fallacy?

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

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## 11.4 LET US SUM UP

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

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## 11.5 KEY WORDS

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

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

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## 11.6 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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Jacobs, Jonathan. *Dimensions of Moral Theory: An Introduction to Metaethics and Moral Psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.

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## **11.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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### **Answers to Check Your Progress I**

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

### **Answers to Check Your Progress II**

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

### **Answers to Check Your Progress III**

1. Naturalistic fallacy is proposed by G.E. Moore against ethical naturalism. Moore called the attempt to define goodness in terms of any natural property as naturalistic fallacy.
2. G. E. Moore argued that goodness is a simple, undefinable, non-natural property. He compared it to yellow colour. Yellow is a simple property, and we cannot explain what yellow is to someone who doesn't know what yellow is. Similarly, 'goodness' cannot be defined in terms of other (natural) properties. It can only be shown.