

'The use of terms such as 'right' and 'wrong' conveys nothing more than the speaker's attitudes.' Discuss.

The statement is a broad summary of a version of *ethical naturalism*, a cognitive theory of meta-ethics, holding that ethical statements can be translated into non-ethical ones. In this version, ethical statements are reduced to expressions of approval or disapproval. So to say, 'Abortion is wrong', is to convey my disapproval of abortion and no more. Ethical naturalism would take a descriptive approach to the study of ethics, seeing it as entirely open to scientific scrutiny - goodness, rightness, and so on, ought to be accessible to observation.

A major objection to all forms of ethical naturalism is the way they appear to prevent debate about and resolution of moral conflict. If I say, 'Abortion is wrong', and Jane says, 'Abortion is right', then according to this version of ethical naturalism we have both made valid judgements; each statement expresses that speaker's attitude. In fact, ethical naturalism would only question a judgement as to its accuracy in expressing the mind of the speaker. The theory would allow the seeming inconsistency of my saying: 'Abortion is right' at some later date, so long as this expresses my changed attitude. Even if evidence were to come to light that made me change my attitude fundamentally, my original claim would be correct since it expressed an attitude held at a particular moment in time.

A famous objection to ethical naturalism was lodged by G E Moore in his book *Principia Ethica*. He asserted that attempts to define moral words like 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong', in non-moral terms were subject to what he called 'the naturalistic fallacy'. He held that definitions are only correct if they beget what he called 'closed questions'. So, for example, we

define a bachelor as an unmarried man. This begets a closed question: *Arthur is a bachelor, but is he unmarried?* Similarly, if we define a mammal as a warm-blooded vertebrate weaned on milk, we can ask: *Rats are mammals, but are they warm-blooded vertebrates weaned on milk?* The closed questions testify to the validity of the definitions. The statement above would presumably define 'right' by 'that of which I approve' and 'wrong' by 'that of which I disapprove'. But, according to Moore, I cannot make *closed* questions from these definitions. Instead, I get *open* questions: *I disapprove of abortion, but is it wrong? I approve of fidelity in marriage, but is it right?* So, since the questions are *open*, the definitions are, in Moore's thinking, invalid.

So, to Moore, the statement above would be unacceptable for its reduction of 'right' and 'wrong' to attitudes of approval or disapproval. For him, moral goodness presents itself as a self-evident quality beyond definitive analysis - something we recognise by *intuition*. To use his analogy, the colour yellow can immediately be recognised, yet the sensation of 'yellowness' cannot be conveyed to one who has not experienced it. Likewise, goodness can be recognised but not put across by definition. It is what Moore called a 'simple notion', an ultimate term of reference - simple in that it has no constituent parts by which it might be defined. He called the quality of goodness *non-natural* so as to distinguish it from natural, in other words, *empirical* (accessible to scientific scrutiny) qualities. It must be remembered that Moore's theory pertains to goodness as an intrinsic quality; he would presumably accept a naturalistic definition of some other sense of 'good' - for example, 'good' as that which evokes desire, leads to harmony, brings pleasure,

and so on, but he would deny that these define 'good' in itself. Still, Moore's theory has its weaknesses, not least, its preclusion of moral dispute and resolution - a weakness it shares with ethical naturalism.

Moore's word is certainly not the last on naturalistic ethics of the kind expressed in the statement above. There are those who would accept the statement whilst being well aware of Moore's *naturalistic fallacy* objection. Some would argue that ethical naturalism is advantageous in that it provides a scientific basis for ethics, thereby bypassing appeals to intuition in ethics. But this leads to the suggestion that ethical disputes can be resolved by conclusions or generalisations based on observed data - a suggestion not true to our experience of resolving disputes in ethics. Furthermore, even if one rejects the intuited 'good', one's naturalist definition of 'good' (or of 'right'), whatever it may be, cannot define all the 'good' (or 'right') one recognises. It could also be argued that the statement above is an attempt to reduce moral terms to non-moral, and so is synonymous with that to reduce *ought*-propositions to propositions about what is - *ought* is essentially different from *is*.

Finally, if 'speaker's attitudes' is taken to mean a non-cognitive expression, a

sounded emotion or feeling, then we must bring in to the discussion emotive theory, of the kind propounded by Ayer, and refined by Stevenson and Hare. This theory would have that ethical statements communicate no knowledge whatever; they merely express feeling or arouse it in others and perhaps goad them to action. Accordingly, my saying: 'Abortion is wrong' is akin to shouting 'Boo to abortion!'; Jane's saying: 'Abortion is right' is akin to 'Hurrah for abortion!' Broadly speaking, the difference between naturalistic ethics and emotive theory is shown by the difference in saying, 'I am in pain', and crying out 'Ouch!' One sees ethical statements as empirical propositions, the other as basic expressions of feeling which cannot be subject to empirical scrutiny. Emotive theory shares weaknesses with those it would seek to replace. One could object to it on grounds that ethical statements must be supported by the cognitive - one normally would resort to reasons when questioned about one's moral stance. Furthermore, one may well use terms such as 'right' and 'wrong' to guide future choices - our own and others'. Hare's refinement of emotive theory - *Prescriptivism* - goes some way to meeting those objections just mentioned. According to Hare, the speaker's use of 'right' or 'wrong' would not only express an attitude but also commend action.