

ETHICAL NATURALISM IN THE NEXT MILLENNIUM: IMPLICATIONS, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

By

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INTRODUCTION

The controversy as to what morality is, how ethical problems arise and can be resolved, are themselves ethical problems. From a naïve perspective, these problems have been so thrashed that they might have been resolved once and for all. But as the history of philosophy reveals, philosophical problems hardly die permanently. This is evident in recent philosophical literatures.

Ethical naturalism is one answer to the questions "what is morality?" and "How are ethical problems to be resolved?" The answer it professes is that ethical problems can only be resolved by an appeal to facts, whereby 'facts' is understood to be facts as discovered by science.

The aim of this paper is to examine the fundamental claims of ethical naturalism with a view to determining its tenability and consequently its viability as an ethical theory. Where the theory is found deficient, the paper shall proffer solutions or make recommendations for a more rigorous and thorough-going version of ethical naturalism.

NATURALISM: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

According to Patrick Romanell (2), naturalism unlike its slightly older and more outspoken contemporaries, Pragmatism and moral Realism, is in effect more of a reaction to, than an outright revolt against, the various forms of the idealistic philosophical traditions. Specifically, naturalism in the twentieth century is a reaction to the nineteenth century naturalism which was characterised by a reductionistic kind of thinking. This reductionistic kind of thinking, Romanell (2) maintained, was reflected in the scientific procedures of the time, as well as by "the dreary picture of the alien world reflected in the terrific controversy raging then over the Darwinian theory of evolution". A wider conception of philosophical analysis and a more friendly view of nature and man were subsequently substituted for both respectively. There was a resultant broadening of philosophical analysis both in theory and in its identification with the more inclusive and flexible conception

of scientific method. Nature came to be looked at as man's home and man as a child of nature in whom "everything ideal has a natural basis and everything natural has an ideal development", according to Santayana (21).

Ralph Winn links the origin of naturalism with the awakening of interest in nature and especially with the accumulation of factual generalisation. Naturalism, Winn (451) maintains, "arose in opposition to certain traditional presuppositions subsequently exposed by science as mere sacred fancies". For Frederick Woodbridge in his work **Nature and Mind**, two factors are responsible for the view of nature called naturalism, namely, the theories of modern physical science and the part that machinery has played in industrial and social development.

In summary, naturalism owes its birth to the tradition of the scientific age that came into being in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and significantly as a reaction to the various conceptions of nature that lacked factual support. It is important at this point to consider what naturalism and consequently ethical naturalism is. In other words what is naturalism and ethical naturalism respectively?

NATURALISM: ITS MEANINGS

Naturalism is the theory which holds that man is an integral part of nature; that nature is all there is and that scientific method is applicable to any field of enquiry. It is the position that demands, according to Woodbridge, that:

We apply to all aspects of experience the enlarged and deepened science and scientific method which is taken to be the one type of knowledge and truth. (85)

Naturalism affirms not only that men can live by the carefully built-up knowledge of the scientific enterprise, but also that they cannot live well by any other truth. Hence, Ralph Perry (113) defines it "as the philosophical generalization of science".

Naturalism holds strictly to the knowability of nature and does not view nature to be incomprehensible. It denies the bifurcation between man and nature.

According to Errol Harris (115) naturalism may be used to indicate a metaphysical position or attitude, characterized by the belief that all things, including human mentality, knowledge, and morality must and can only be explained in terms of laws of nature discovered empirically by science. Naturalism may thus be

viewed in modern thought as occupying the position of and carrying on the theory of materialism. Naturalism, however, does not maintain, as materialism does, that material atoms and their motions are the sole constituents of reality.

Naturalism has numerous varieties. Ethical naturalism is one variety of naturalism. So what exactly is ethical naturalism?

ETHICAL NATURALISM: ITS MEANING

The term naturalism as applied to ethics suffers from the lack of a univocal analysis of its applicability. It does appear impossible to capture in a single definition the meaning of ethical naturalism. This perhaps explains Robert Scott's (261) view that "no tenet is common to all the views labelled as ethical naturalism". I shall attempt, therefore, to give some definitions of ethical naturalism, on the basis of which I shall infer the salient features of ethical naturalistic theory. According to Errol Harris, ethical naturalism is the view that:

The hallmarks of value are natural properties...,
and it is used to refer to the doctrine that moral
obligations follow and can be deduced from the
way things are. (261)

For A. C. Ewing (36), a naturalistic view in ethics is "one which while admitting that ethical propositions are sometimes true, analyses ethical concepts solely in terms of the concepts of a natural science". As used in philosophical discourse on ethics by Moore, it consists of "identifying good with some natural object or property". In Adams' view, naturalistic theory is,

one that holds that there are no values in the world
that are not reducible to or explainable away in
terms of the naturalistic conceptual scheme of
things. (40)

The list of these definitions can, in fact, be endless, as every ethical naturalist would have his/her conception of what the theory he/she defends implies. The production of an endless list of definition is not the goal of this work.

In summation, therefore, we may conclusively say that ethical naturalism is an attempt to answer the question whether we can find in human nature any

indication of the end of human conduct, or principles on which human beings ought to act? Ethical naturalism insists that this is possible. It is the view that the hallmarks of value are natural properties. It professes to deduce moral prescriptions from facts of nature, human and non-human. Thus, morality is meaningful only on the backdrop of a total cognizance of natural factors and scientific facts. Ethical naturalism is thus against any system of ethics which separates moral values from facts and separates the study of the former from the study of the latter. Romanell aptly captures this point thus,

In positive terms, the naturalistic postulate in metaphysics (the continuity of nature and man and in methodology) the continuity of science and humanities implies the continuity of facts and values in ethics.(70)

It is thus a perfect inference to maintain that if the theory of naturalism signifies "anti-bifurcationism" in the theory of nature and logic, it equally signifies the same thing in the theory of ethics. As such, goodness after all can be tied down to what we can perceive or feel.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE TENETS OF ETHICAL NATURALISM

Ethical naturalism as noted in this paper is the view that an analysis of human nature will yield conclusions about the requirements for human happiness. Two claims are involved in these assertions. The first is the claim that there are certain universal qualities of the human make-up; and the second is a philosophical claim that in deciding what is good for man and how he ought to act or live we can and must reason from the facts established under the first.

Beginning with the first implication of the ethical naturalistic claim that there are certain universal qualities of the human make-up, one may ask, has man this basic nature? or is there such human nature? In a paper on "Natural Rights", Margareth Macdonald has argued that,

the statements of the law of nature are not even of the laws of an "ideal nature" For nature provides no standard or ideals ... Natural events cannot tell us what we ought to do until we have

made certain decisions when knowledge of natural fact will enable the most efficient means to be chosen to carry out those decisions. Natural events themselves have no value, and human beings as natural existents have no value either, whether on account of possessing intelligence or having two feet. (44)

This view rules out the possibility of human nature by denying the qualities acclaimed to be derivation from nature. In the same vein Kai Nielsen wrote,

...let us also concede that somehow we can discover or intuit that man was constructed for a certain purpose. This by itself would still not enable man simply to discover or apprehend that he ought to act in a certain way, for such "discoveries" would still simply be facts about man and about what there is. (134)

Other philosophers including Cottingham have equally maintained this viewpoint namely, that there are no such human nature or facts. They are of the view that even if there are present in every human being invariable genetic constraints of one kind or another, there is still no reason why these constraints necessarily have to be reflected in the specification of the good for man. The fact about human nature represents only prevailing tendencies and there might be no universal laws. Moreover, granted that some truths about these prevailing tendencies are labeled by the naturalist as "human nature" do have the authority of science, these are not promising, necessary and sufficient foundations for ethical choices.

It is perhaps in recognition of this fact that Paul Woodruff (308) asserted that "it is reasonable to doubt whether anyone has ever known enough about human nature to grant specific ethical judgment". And from a theoretical perspective, Bernard Williams has argued that,

It is hard to believe that an account of human nature - if not already an Ethical theory - will

adequately determine one kind of ethical life against others. (52)

Thus, while it would be crude to declare that the ethical naturalist claim and account of human nature (even though these are prevailing tendencies) is totally false, its adequacy in the determination of an ethical life leaves much to be desired.

The second implication of the ethical naturalist thesis is that from the observation of how things are in nature, we can deduce how man ought to behave. That is, that the 'ought' is a necessary consequence of the 'is'. In other words, that the 'ought' is derivable from the 'is'. We must therefore, revisit the 'is' 'ought' question in ethics, with the intent of ascertaining how much the ethical naturalistic claim is adequate.

The thesis that there is a gap between 'is' and 'ought' between 'fact' and 'value' has its origin in David Hume's *Treaties*. Hume noted thus:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning ... when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulation of proposition, is, and is not, I met no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. (469)

Hume insists that such a change is unwarranted and illegitimate. Hence he says:

this change is imperceptible, but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. (469)

Hume's view expressed above amounts to the claim that an 'ought' statement can not be validly inferred from an 'Is' statement. Merely detailing how things are or how they tend to be cannot reveal how they ought to be. In line with Hume, G. E. Moore shares this view when he pronounced as fallacious any effort at deriving evaluative conclusion from factual premises. So can there be a naturalistic account of our value experience?

In her work *Beast and Man*, Midgley argues strongly in favour of this position and against the anti-naturalist who thinks this is impossible. Midgley (94) argues "that anti-naturalists misconstrue facts to be simple, neutral things, easily defined matters seen and observed ... without reference to standards which arise separately". Thus by cutting values from facts, non-naturalists make arguments irrelevant to ethics. She insists that (with some exceptions) facts are never logically isolated from some kind of evaluating because the inevitable need to select, interpret and classify applies to scientific observers as well as to ordinary ones. Midgley employs the notion of wants to support her thesis thus:

When we wonder whether something is good common sense will naturally direct our attention to wants and in dealing with value conflicts we have ... no option but to reason from facts about human wants and needs. (182)

She concludes that in a minimal sense whatever we want has to have something good about it. But even a cursory attention to Midgley's argument would reveal the pitfalls that are inherent in it and consequently reveal some of the problems that plague the theory under discussion. In the first place it is not a necessary truth that when we want something there must be something good about it. Not all things that are desired are good.

John Rawls shared this view when he wrote in reaction to the utilitarian thesis that the satisfaction of any desire has some worth itself thus:

an individual who finds that he enjoys seeing others in position of lesser liberty ... has no claim whatever to this enjoyment. The pleasure he takes in others' deprivations is wrong in itself. (31)

Cottingham puts the same point this way

the obvious difficulty about trying to reason to goods from wants simpliciter is the simple though perhaps still not well enough appreciated fact that what is desired is not necessarily desirable. (460-61)

It may be true that investigating any phenomenon is very often motivated by certain desires and perhaps values. Granted this to be true, it does not follow from this that the results of such investigation are always logically bound to the value or desire that motivated it as Midgley's position seems to be. If this were to be the case then scientific theories rather than being theory laden would be value laden. When science crosses the boundaries of facts to value, it ceases to be science per science. Moreover, to be able to predict as is evident in science we must detach ourselves from the phenomenon under study; but when valuation is in question then 'engagement' is the proper response. McDowell (118) must have been stating the same point when he wrote, that "the evaluative cannot be reduced to the natural because of the disparate commitments of the evaluative and naturalistic schemes"

There is, therefore, what I will call "an unwarranted and illegitimate leap" problem associated with the ethical naturalistic thesis that the 'ought' is derivable from the 'Is'. The leap problem is simply this; no matter the length of items we list, as constituting what people do, desire and seek, (infact consider the list as flawlessly endless), it is impossible to see how moral conclusions, in the sense of what people **ought** to do, or seek can be deduced from them. For one is a question of "what is" (fact) and the other the question of the **ideal**. Finnis (237) supported this view point when he wrote that "no set of non-moral (non-evaluative) premises can entail a moral (or evaluative) conclusion".

The inference from our discussion so far points unambiguously to the conclusion that the second implication of the ethical naturalistic thesis that an "ought" is derivable from "is" cannot be substantially validated. To have a naturalistic account of value experience it would require that the non-evaluative and the evaluative gap be crossed.

Also if the ethical naturalist position that moral cognition does not differ from scientific cognition is true, then we must recognize moral experts who are entitled to impose their view on others. This would amount to a complete departure from

what the task of ethics and consequently the role of the ethicist or the moral philosopher has always been.

Ethical naturalism in the light of present day ethical reality is besieged with numerous problems. Underlying these problems is the ethical naturalist conception of nature which is in itself problematic, since 'nature' includes more than what the ethical naturalist construes it. This incidentally has influenced the ethical naturalist conception of facts, such that it is limited to scientific facts. The economic, the concrete human situations, and in-fact human experience as a whole could also be naturalistic. This perhaps explains Woodbridge's position that,

looking through a telescope is not the only valid experience which nature allows. Spiritual experience is also an experience of nature, and it is this experience alone which quickens and inspires living. So should naturalism teach when it tries to be a philosophical guide to mankind.
(206)

One other implication of ethical naturalism is worth noting and perhaps deserves some comment. And that is the possible implications of ethical naturalism to some philosophical trends and attitudes namely, skepticism and existentialism.

Skepticism in its philosophical understanding is a matter of doubt rather than absolute denial. Thus the mark of the skeptic is that, rather than deny the validity of certain kinds of belief, the skeptic questions the adequacy of the grounds for holding such belief. Rather than deny, he only expresses doubt and is prepared to be convinced that his doubt is unnecessary. The existence of the external world, the justification of induction and the reality of the past are some of the traditional frontiers of philosophic doubt. Apart from the traditional attempt at rebutting skepticism, namely; by rational argument drawing on common sense or quasi-scientific consideration as G. E. Moore did, or by showing that it is unintelligible in some special sense as was done by Rudolf Carnap, naturalism has been viewed and presented as another way of refuting skepticism. David Hume, for instance, argued in Book II of *The Treaties* against total skepticism which, arguing from the fallibility of human judgment, would tend to undermine all belief and opinion. In Hume's view:

whoever has taken the pains to refute the cavils of this total skepticism has really disputed without an antagonist and endeavoured by arguments to establish a faculty which nature has antecedently implanted in the mind and rendered unavoidable. (183)

He then proceeds to argue that what holds for total skepticism holds equally for skepticism about the existence of body. Hence to Hume, it is in vain to ask whether there be body or not. That is a point which we must take for granted in all our reasoning. Thus skeptical doubts are not to be met by arguments. They are simply to be ignored because they are idle and powerless against the force of nature. We must, therefore, take for granted the existence of body and the general reliability of the inductive belief formation.

The naturalist attitude as exemplified by Hume, is simply a rejection of the skeptics' challenge as idle and unreal. But does this attitude eliminate the skeptical doubts? Definitely not, since it would not be unreasonable to doubt the ethical naturalist claims. A rejection is no answer, neither is it a necessary proof of the untenability of the skeptic's position.

In regards to existentialism ethical naturalism does not appear to be more convincing. For the central existentialist theme that "existence precedes essence" implies that man has no fixed essence or telos, but rather man is free to determine his essence and it is man that gives meaning and value to the world. This freedom, the existentialist insists, places man above the past, the dialectics of history and everything else. If the claim that man has no fixed nature is true, then it would imply that ethical naturalism in so far as it appeals to human nature cannot be true and consequently no universal predications can validly be made about human beings. It is perhaps in recognition of this problem that Cottingham wrote that:

any supposed feature which allegedly defines man's essence is subject to counter-examples. Man is a social animal; but there are hermits who lived in total isolation: man is philoprogenitive: but there are voluntary celibates. Man is rational: yet much human behaviour can be capricious, purposeless, absurd. (465)

It follows from the foregoing considerations that irrespective of what can be said about ethical naturalism and consequently naturalism in general, naturalism is not the only philosophy of life. If existentialism can be labelled as "unsatisfactory philosophy of life" because of its exaggerated notion of human freedom which militates against its wholesome acceptance, ethical naturalism is no better since it is plagued both by its over-emphasis on scientific facts as the sole constituents of experience and by its insistence that values have no ontological existence outside these facts.

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

The underlying implications of our discussion so far is that science is no more revelatory of nature's possibilities than any other aspect of human experience as ethical naturalists would want us to believe. This is not to deny the indispensability of science as a method of solving human problems, but that "justice" and "beauty" are as important to man as any scientific experience. Hence Woodbridge (260) wrote that "nature is what events together disclose in their natural relations to one another...". Thus the challenge that faces ethical naturalism presently is to provide for the ordering of nature, such that man's moral and spiritual life is not alien to her. The world is moved not only by chemical laws but also by logical, spiritual and moral laws.

This inadequacy explains Romanell's (74) assertion that an ethical naturalism "based on scientific experience alone gains intellectual security at the expense of losing cosmic perspective". Ethical naturalism, therefore, must bring together or incorporate the three components of knowledge, namely, science, formal logic and metaphysics. For any account of experience that isolates any of these contributing activities of the mind cannot be true. It is perhaps in recognition of this fact that Woodbridge maintained that,

... an enlightened naturalism will call upon reasons constantly to illuminate our path with fresh glimpses of the light of nature, so that human life may at once be natural, rational and joyous. Such a philosophy would also be an enlightened humanism. (50)

CONCLUSION

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The main issue involved in the discussion is the contention by ethical naturalism that there are certain universal qualities of the human make-up; and that only an ethics founded upon this and anchored in science is true. It has been shown that this position cannot be validated. It is simply not true. On the basis of this, solution for a more tenable version of ethical naturalism is proffered. This kind of ethical naturalism will consider all experiences as being part of one indivisible reality. Values and facts will in the proposed version of naturalism, both be acknowledged as equal products of nature, and that both spring from the same root, namely our experience, as existent beings. As a final remark I wish to emphasize once more that "the comprehensive world-view is thus at once a criterion of factual truth and of evaluation, both of "Is" and of "ought" to use the words of Errol Harris (120). This comprehensive world-view embraces scientific facts and all other non-scientific truth or facts.

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THEORY AND VALUE OF REALITY

Below we move on a brief procedural note is necessary. What is to be understood to be a description of a subject matter (Akan and Eke 2011). This problem is the reason that emphasis in our own time has shifted from realism and other kinds of philosophies which maintain the possibility of defining, locating and describing the world in terms of certain features to that of the types or purposes of the world. Existentialism, another strong philosophical attitude to life in modern times subscribes to a metaphysics of undisturbed, one-ended and a certain condition of existence in which itself and other works of art are observed in the global self-expressional way through the instrument of choice. It is all experiential and existentialism then, a competent individual will know that there is an overlap between our view of things really and our attempt of what we find in the world with respect to things. Our theory, therefore, is to show that experientialism and existentialism can and should be used as a paradigm case for the value theory of reality.

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