

Phil. 4830
Notes on Ethical naturalism & 'Objectivism'

Ethical naturalism: Any theory that claims that evaluative properties ('good', 'right', etc.) can be reduced to objective, non-evaluative (or 'natural') properties.

- Rand puts forward one form of ethical naturalism.

Rand's theory:

Central thesis: x is good (for me) = x furthers my life. (The rest explains and/or defends this idea.)

Basic concepts:

- *Morality*: A code of values to guide one's choices.
- *Value*: Something one acts to gain/keep. (Distinguish: "benefit" vs. "value".)

Source of 'value' and 'morality':

Premise: *Life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated actions.* Comments:

- Life depends upon the actions of the living things themselves. Failure to act leads to death.
- All organisms (normally) take these required actions, to sustain themselves.

Premise: Human beings do not *automatically* take the self-sustaining actions, and most *possible* actions are *not* life-sustaining.

Conclusions:

- a. Life is a value for all organisms. (See def. of "value".)
- b. In order to survive, humans must learn what sorts of actions are life-promoting.

Hypothesis: the purpose of evaluative concepts:

- Concept of value: arises from need to distinguish life-promoting things from life-destroying things.
- Morality: arises from the need for a set of general rules about what's good. It tells us what sorts of actions are life-promoting.
- The meaning of "good": things are good or bad for the organism depending on whether they promote the organism's life.
 - Some plausibility in this: consider what is "good for" your plants, what is "bad for" your cat, and so on.

Consequence of the theory: An immortal being could have no values.

- It wouldn't matter what you did, because no opportunity costs. In real life, we have to choose carefully because we have limited time & opportunities.
- Immortal beings could not be sick or healthy.
- Immortal beings could not experience pleasure or pain. Pleasure/pain are just mechanisms for detecting things that further or inhibit our lives.

How the theory applies to normative ethics:

- Things we think of as good: health, wealth, friendship, pleasure.

These things can all be tied to life.

- Things we think are virtues: courage, honesty, and justice are virtues. Similarly, these things are tied to promoting life.
- The most important virtue (for Rand): rationality. Reason is our basic tool of survival.

Why this is a form of realism/objectivism:

- Value is agent-relative, but:
- Human needs are objective, factual. Requirements of survival exist independent of our recognition of them.
- Hence, the correct values are objective.

Questions/problems about this theory:

1. Does “value” mean “something one acts to gain and/or keep,” or “something one *ought to* act to gain and/or keep”?
2. What shows that life itself is valuable? And what shows that nothing else is valuable?
3. Notice that this theory is *egoistic*: Everyone should do what promotes his own life. (Does this mean “maximize life expectancy”?) Does this mean it would be morally correct to murder 4 million people, if doing so increased your life expectancy by 5 minutes?
4. Recall G. E. Moore’s ‘open question argument.’

Phil. 4830
Notes on Alan Gewirth

What kind of theory is it?

- Realist
- Not really intuitionist or naturalist, but some things in common with each:
 - Apparently non-reductionist
 - But claims to bridge the is-ought gap
 - Claims that immoral actions are inconsistent; hence, morality derives from logic.
- Central thesis: All rational agents, just by virtue of their being rational agents, are logically committed to accepting that all rational agents have general rights to freedom and well-being.

A central idea: *The Principle of Generic Consistency (PGC)*:

- Apply to your recipient the same generic features of action that you apply to yourself. (“The Is-Ought Problem Resolved,” 57)

or:

- Act in accordance with the generic rights of your recipient as well as yourself. (“The Golden Rule Rationalized,” 140)
- Gewirth wants to show what this means and how you are logically committed to it by being a purposive agent.

The derivation:

1. Assume S is a rational agent. Then S performs some action X for purpose E.

Comment: This is what it is to be a rational agent.

2. Then S is committed to holding: X and E are good.

Comment: The agent must value both the action and the purpose. But this need not be a moral sense of “good.”

3. So S is committed to holding: S’s freedom and well-being as good.

Comment: Because freedom and well-being are necessary conditions for all purposive actions.

4. S is, further, committed to holding: S has rights to freedom & well-being.

Comment: Because S holds himself to be justified in taking action X, he must also hold himself to be justified in having the necessary conditions for all action.

5. S is committed to holding: All purposive agents have rights to freedom & well-being. For:

(a) In the light of (4), S must answer the question: what is it about you that gives you such rights?

“[E]very right-claim is made on behalf of some person or group with an at least implicit recognition of the description or sufficient reason which is held to ground the right.” (“The Is-Ought Problem Resolved,” 54)

(b) The only answer S can give is: because I am a purposive agent.

Why? Suppose S adduces some other, more specific property of himself. This implies that, if he did not have that property, while still being a purposive agent, he would *not* claim rights to freedom & well-being. But this is false.

(c) This commits S to: All purposive agents have such rights.

“[I]f some predicate P belongs to some subject S because S has the property Q ..., then P must also belong to all other subjects ... which have Q.” (“The Is-Ought Problem Resolved,” 54)

6. S is committed to: I ought to refrain from coercing or inflicting basic harm on other agents.

Comment: This follows from (5).

In summary:

“Because actions are conative and value-pursuing, they commit the agent to advocate or endorse for himself the rights of freedom and basic well-being which are the proximate necessary prerequisites of all his acting Because the agent must advocate these rights for general reasons stemming from his simply being a prospective purposive agent, his advocacy must logically be extended to all other persons....” (“The Is-Ought Problem Resolved,” 61)

Some issues:

- a. In (2): the agent must value E before he takes the action. How does he know X and E to be good? (Not by means of this argument.)
- b. In (3): perhaps S is only committed to holding as good the *minimal* amounts of freedom and well-being necessary for him to perform action X.
- c. A Humean would reject the inference from (1) to (2).
- d. I don't see how you get to (4).

- e. In (5b): (Perhaps) S must agree that, as long as he was a purposive agent, he would claim rights, etc. It does not follow that S must agree that, as long as he was a purposive agent, he would *have* rights, etc.