

10

ON THE ANALYSIS OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS

'MOST of us would agree', said F. P. Ramsey, addressing a society in Cambridge in 1925, 'that the objectivity of good was a thing we had settled and dismissed with the existence of God. Theology and Absolute Ethics are two famous subjects which we have realized to have no real objects.' There are many, however, who still think that these questions have not been settled; and in the meantime philosophers of Ramsey's persuasion have grown more circumspect. Theological and ethical statements are no longer stigmatized as false or meaningless. They are merely said to be different from scientific statements. They are differently related to their evidence; or rather, a different meaning is attached to 'evidence' in their case. 'Every kind of statement', we are told, 'has its own kind of logic.'

What this comes to, so far as moral philosophy is concerned, is that ethical statements are *sui generis*; and this may very well be true. Certainly, the view, which I still wish to hold, that what are called ethical statements are not really statements at all, that they are not descriptive of anything, that they cannot be either true or false, is in an obvious sense incorrect. For, as the English language is currently used -- and what else, it may be asked, is here in question? -- it is by no means improper to refer to ethical utterances as statements;

-231-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 231.

when someone characterizes an action by the use of an ethical predicate, it is quite good usage to say that he is thereby describing it; when someone wishes to assent to an ethical verdict, it is perfectly legitimate for him to say that it is true, or that it is a fact, just as, if he wished to dissent from it, it would be perfectly legitimate for him to say that it was false. We should know what he meant and we should not consider that he was using words in an unconventional way. What is unconventional, rather, is the usage of the philosopher who tells us that ethical statements are not really statements at all but something else, ejaculations perhaps or commands, and that they cannot be either true or false.

Now when a philosopher asserts that something 'really' is not what it really is, or 'really' is what it really is not, that we do not, for example, 'really' see chairs and tables, whereas there is a perfectly good and familiar sense in which we really do, or that we cannot 'really' step into the same river twice, whereas in fact we really can, it should not always be assumed that he is merely making a mistake. Very often what he is doing, although he may not know it, is to recommend a new way of speaking, not just for amusement, but because he thinks that the old, the socially correct, way of speaking is logically misleading, or that his own proposal brings out certain points more clearly. Thus, in the present instance, it is no doubt correct to say that the moralist does make statements, and, what is more, statements of fact, statements of ethical fact. It is correct in the sense that if a vote were taken on the point, those who objected to this way of speaking would probably be in the minority. But when one considers how these ethical statements are actually used, it may be found that they function so very differently from

-232-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 232.

other types of statement that it is advisable to put them into a separate category altogether; either to say that they are not to be counted as statements at all, or, if this proves inconvenient, at least to say that they do not express propositions, and consequently that there are no ethical facts. This does not mean that all ethical statements are held to be false. It is merely a matter of laying down a usage of the words 'proposition' and 'fact', according to which only propositions express facts and ethical statements fall outside the class of propositions. This may seem to be an arbitrary procedure, but I hope to show that there are good reasons for adopting it. And once these reasons are admitted the purely verbal point is not of any great importance. If someone still wishes to say that ethical statements are statements of fact, only it is a queer sort of fact, he is welcome to do so. So long as he accepts our grounds for saying that they are not statements of fact, it is simply a question of how widely or loosely we want to use the word 'fact'. My own view is that it is preferable so to use it as to exclude ethical judgements, but it must not be inferred from this that I am treating them with disrespect. The only relevant consideration is that of clarity.

The distinctions that I wish to make can best be brought out by an example. Suppose that someone has committed a murder. Then part of the story consists of what we may call the police-court details; where and when and how the killing was effected; the identity of the murderer and of his victim; the relationship in which they stood to one another. Next there are the questions of motive: the murderer may have been suffering from jealousy, or he may have been anxious to obtain money; he may have been avenging

-233-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 233.

a private injury, or pursuing some political end. These questions of motive are, on one level, a matter of the agent's reflections before the act; and these may very well take the form of moral judgements. Thus he may tell himself that his victim is a bad man and that the world would be better for his removal, or, in a different case, that it is his duty to rid his country of a tyrant, or, like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, that he is a superior being who has in these circumstances the right to kill. A psycho-analyst who examines the case may, however, tell a different story. He may say that the political assassin is really revenging himself upon his father, or that the man who persuades himself that he is a social benefactor is really exhibiting a lust for power, or, in a case like that of Raskolnikov, that the murderer does not really believe that he has the right to kill.

All these are statements of fact; not indeed that the man has, or has not, the right to kill, but that this is what he tells himself. They are verified or confuted, as the case may be, by observation. It is a matter of fact, in my usage of the term, that the victim was killed at such and such a place and at such and such a time and in such and such a manner. It is also a matter of fact that the murderer had certain conscious motives. To himself they are known primarily by introspection; to others by various features of his overt behaviour, including what he says. As regards his unconscious motives the only criterion is his overt behaviour. It can indeed plausibly be argued that to talk about the unconscious is always equivalent to talking about overt behaviour, though often in a very complicated way. Now there seems to me to be a very good sense in which to tell a story of this kind, that this is what the

-234-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 234.

man did and that these were his reasons for doing it, is to give a complete description of the facts. Or rather, since one can never be in a position to say that any such description is complete, what will be missing from it will be further information of the same type; what we obtain when this information is added is a more elaborate account of the circumstances of the action, and of its antecedents and consequences. But now suppose that instead of developing the story in this circumstantial way, one applies an ethical predicate to it. Suppose that instead of asking what it was that really happened, or what the agent's motives really were, we ask whether he was justified in acting as he did. Did he have the right to kill? Is it true that he had the right? Is it a fact that he acted rightly? It does not matter in this connection what answer we give. The question for moral philosophy is not whether a certain action is right or wrong, but what is implied by saying that it is right, or saying that it is wrong. Suppose then that we say that the man acted rightly. The point that I wish to make is that in saying this we are not elaborating or modifying our description of the situation in the way that we should be elaborating it if we gave further police-court details, or in the way that we should be modifying it if we showed that the agent's motives were different from what they had been thought to be. To say that his motives were good, or that they were bad, is not to say what they were. To say that the man acted rightly, or that he acted wrongly, is not to say what he did. And when one has said what he did, when one has described the situation in the way that I have outlined, then to add that he was justified, or alternatively that he was not, is not to say any more about what he did; it does not add a further detail to the story. It

-235-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 235.

is for this reason that these ethical predicates are not factual; they do not describe any features of the situation to which they are applied. But they do, someone may object, they describe its ethical features. But what are these ethical features? And how are they related to the other features of the situation, to what we may provisionally call its 'natural' features? Let us consider this.

To begin with, it is, or should be, clear that the connection is not logical. Let us assume that two observers agree about all the circumstances of the case, including the agent's motives, but that they disagree in their evaluation of it. Then neither of them is contradicting himself. Otherwise the use of the ethical term would add nothing to the circumstantial description; it would serve merely as a repetition, or partial repetition, of it. But neither, as I hope to show, is the connection factual. There is nothing that counts as observing the *designata* of the ethical predicates, apart from observing the natural features of the situation. But what alternative is left? Certainly it can be said that the ethical features in some way depend upon the natural. We can and do give reasons for our moral judgements, just as we do for our aesthetic judgements, where the same argument applies. We fasten on motives, point to consequences, ask what would happen if everyone were to behave in such a way, and so forth. But the question is: In what way do these reasons support the judgements? Not in a logical sense. Ethical argument is not formal demonstration. And not in a scientific sense either. For then the goodness or badness of the situation, the rightness or wrongness of the action, would have to be something apart from the situation, something independently verifiable,

-236-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 236.

for which the facts adduced as the reasons for the moral judgement were evidence. But in these moral cases the two coincide. There is no procedure of examining the value of the facts, as distinct from examining the facts themselves. We may say that we have evidence for our moral judgements, but we cannot distinguish between pointing to the evidence itself and pointing to that for which it is supposed to be evidence. Which means that in the scientific sense it is not evidence at all.

My own answer to this question is that what are accounted reasons for our moral judgements are reasons only in the sense that they determine attitudes. One attempts to influence another person morally by calling his attention to certain natural features of the situation, which are such as will be likely to evoke from him the desired response. Or again one may give reasons to oneself as a means of settling on an attitude or, more importantly, as a means of coming to some practical decision. Of course there are many cases in which one applies an ethical term without there being any question of one's having to act oneself, or even to persuade others to act, in any present situation. Moral judgements passed upon the behaviour of historical or fictitious characters provide obvious examples. But an action or a situation is morally evaluated always as an action or a situation of a certain kind. What is approved or disapproved is something repeatable. In saying that Brutus or Raskolnikov acted rightly, I am giving myself and others leave to imitate them should similar circumstances arise. I show myself to be favourably disposed in either case towards actions of that type. Similarly, in saying that they acted wrongly, I express a resolution not to imitate them, and endeavour also to discourage

-237-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 237.

others. It may be thought that the mere use of the dyslogistic word 'wrongly' is not much of a discouragement, although it does have some emotive force. But that is where the reasons come in. I discourage others, or at any rate hope to discourage them, by telling them why I think the action wrong; and here the argument may take various forms. One method is to appeal to some moral principle, as, for example, that human life is sacred, and show that it applies to the given case. It is assumed that the principle is one that already has some influence upon those to whom the argument is addressed. Alternatively, one may try to establish certain facts, as, for example, that the act in question caused, or was such as would be likely to cause, a great deal of unhappiness; and here it is assumed that the consideration of these facts will modify the hearer's attitude. It is assumed that he regards the increase of human misery as something undesirable, something if possible to be avoided. As for the moral judgement itself, it may be regarded as expressing the attitude which the reasons given for it are calculated to evoke. To say, as I once did, that these moral judgements are merely expressive of certain feelings, feelings of approval or disapproval, is an oversimplification. The fact is rather that what may be described as moral attitudes consist in certain patterns of behaviour, and that the expression of a moral judgement is an element in the pattern. The moral judgement expresses the attitude in the sense that it contributes to defining it. Why people respond favourably to certain facts and unfavourably to others is a question for the sociologist, into which I do not here propose to enter. I should imagine that the utilitarians had gone some way towards answering this question,

-238-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 238.

although theirs is almost certainly not the whole answer. But my concern at present is only to analyse the use of ethical terms, not scientifically to explain it.

At this point it may be objected that I have been excessively dogmatic. What about the people who claim that they do observe ethical properties, non-natural properties, as G. E. Moore once put it, ¹not indeed through their senses, but by means of intellectual intuition? What of those who claim that they have a moral sense, and mean by this not merely that they have feelings of approval and disapproval, or whatever else may go to define a moral attitude, but that they experience such things as goodness or beauty in a way somehow analogous to that in which they experience sounds or colours? What are we to say to them? I may not have any experiences of this sort myself, but that, it may be said, is just my shortcoming. I am surely not entitled to assume that all these honest and intelligent persons do not have the experiences that they say they do. It may be, indeed, that the differences between us lie not so much in the nature of our respective experiences as in our fashion of describing them. I do in fact suspect that the experiences which some philosophers want to describe as intuitions, or as quasi-sensory apprehensions, of good are not significantly different from those that I want to describe as feelings of approval. But whether this be so or not, it does not in any way affect my argument. For let it be granted that someone who contemplates some natural situation detects in it something which he describes as 'goodness' or 'beauty' or 'fittingness' or 'worthiness to be approved'. How this experience of goodness, or whatever it may be, is supposed to be related to the

¹*Vide his Principia Ethica*, chap I.

experiences which reveal the natural features of the situation has not yet been made clear, but I take it that it is not regarded merely as their effect. Rather, the situation is supposed to look good, or fitting, in much the same way as a face may be said to look friendly. But then to say that this experience is an experience of good will be to say no more than that it is this type of experience. The word 'good', or whatever other value term may be used, simply comes to be descriptive of experiences of this type, and here it makes no difference whether they are regarded as intuitions or as moral sensations. In neither case does anything whatsoever follow as regards conduct. That a situation has this peculiar property, the property whose presence is established by people's having such experiences, does not entail that it is preferable to other situations, or that it is anyone's duty to bring it into existence. To say that such a situation ought to be created, or that it deserves to exist, will be to say something different from merely saying that it has this property. This point is obscured by the use of an ethical term to describe the property, just because the ethical term is tacitly understood to be normative. It continues to fulfil its function of prescribing the attitude that people are to take. But if the ethical term is understood to be normative, then it does not merely describe the alleged non-natural property, and if it does merely describe this property, then it is not normative and so no longer does the work that ethical terms are supposed to do.

This argument may become clearer if, instead of designating the supposed property from the outset as 'good', we refer to it simply as 'X'. The question then arises whether X is identical with good. How is this question to be interpreted? If it is interpreted as

-240-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 240.

merely asking whether *X* is of a certain quality, whether it exhibits the character for which the word 'good' is being made to stand, then the answer may very well be that the two are identical; but all that this amounts to is that we have decided to use the word 'good' to designate what is also designated by '*X*'. And from this no normative conclusion follows. It does not follow that the situation characterized by *X* has any value, if its having value is understood as implying not merely that it answers to a certain description but that it has some claim upon us, that it is something that we ought to foster or desire. Having appropriated the word 'good' to do duty for *X*, to serve as a mere description of a special tone or colouring of the situation, we shall need some other word to do the normative work that the word 'good' did before. But if 'good' is allowed to keep its normative sense, then goodness may indeed be attributed to *X*, but the two cannot be identified. For then to say that *X* is good is not just to say that '*X*' stands for a certain property. It is to say that whatever has this property is to be valued, sought, approved of, brought into existence in preference to other things, and so on. Those who talk of non-natural qualities, moral intuitions, and all the rest of it, may be giving peculiar descriptions of commonplace experiences, or they may be giving suggestive descriptions of peculiar experiences; it does not matter which view we take. In either case we are left with the further question whether what is so described is to be valued; and this is not simply equivalent to asking what character it has, whether natural, or non-natural, whatever that may mean. Thus even if an intuitionist does have experiences that others do not have, it makes no difference to the argument. We

-241-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 241.

are still entitled to say that it is misleading for him to use a value-term to designate the content of such experiences; for in this way he contrives to smuggle a normative judgement into what purports to be a statement of fact. A valuation is not a description of something very peculiar; it is not a description at all. Consequently, the familiar subjective-objective anti-thesis is out of place in moral philosophy. The problem is not that the subjectivist denies that certain wild, or domesticated, animals, 'objective values', exist and the objectivist triumphantly produces them; or that the objectivist returns like an explorer with tales from the kingdom of values and the subjectivist says he is a liar. It does not matter what the explorer finds or does not find. For talking about values is not a matter of describing what may or may not be there, the problem being whether it really is there. There is no such problem. The moral problem is: What am I to do? What attitude am I to take? And moral judgements are directives in this sense.

We can now see that the whole dispute about the objectivity of values, as it is ordinarily conducted, is pointless and idle. I suppose that what underlies it is the question: Are the things that I value really valuable, and how can I know that they are? Then one party gives the answer: They are really valuable if they reflect, or participate in, or are in some other mysterious way related to an objective world of values; and you can know that they are by inspecting this world. To which their opponents reply that there is no such world, and can therefore be no such inspection. But this sort of argument, setting aside the question whether it is even intelligible, is nothing to the purpose. For suppose that someone did succeed in carrying out

-242-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 242.

such an inspection. Suppose that he had an experience which we allowed him to describe in these terms. He can still raise the questions: Are these values the real ones? Are the objects that I am inspecting themselves really valuable, and how can I know that they are? And how are these questions to be answered? They do not arise, it may be said. These objective values carry the stamp of authenticity upon their faces. You have only to look at them to know that they are genuine. But, in this sense, any natural situation to which we attach value can carry the stamp of authenticity upon its face. That is to say, the value which is attached to it may be something that it does not occur to us to question. But in neither case is it inconceivable that the value should be questioned. Thus, these alleged objective values perform no function. The hypothesis of their existence does no work; or rather, it does no work that is not equally well done without it. Its effect is to answer the question: Are the things that I value really valuable? by Yes, if you have a certain sort of experience in connection with them. Let us assume that these experiences can be identified and even that there is some method for deciding between them when they appear to yield contradictory results. Even so, that someone does or does not have them is itself a 'natural' fact. Moreover, this answer merely lays down one of many possible standards. It is on a par with saying: 'The things that you value are really valuable if they increase human happiness, or they are really valuable if certain persons, your pastors and masters, approve of them'. Then either one accepts the standard, or one raises the question again. Why should I value human happiness? Why should I be swayed by my pastors and masters? Why should I

-243-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 243.

attach such great importance just to these experiences? In the end there must come a point where one gets no further answer, but only a repetition of the injunction: Value this because it is valuable.

In conducting this argument, I have put the most favourable interpretation upon my opponents' claims; for I have assumed that what is described as the apprehension of objective values may be a different experience from the everyday experience of attaching value to some natural situation; but, in fact, I am fairly confident that what we have here are two different ways of describing the same experience. And in that case the answer that the 'objectivists' give to the question: Are the things that I value really valuable? is the 'subjective' answer that they are really valuable if you value them, or perhaps that they are really valuable if certain other people value them. What we are given is an injunction not to worry, which may or may not satisfy us. If it does not, perhaps something else will. But in any case there is nothing to be done about it, except look at the facts, look at them harder, look at more of them, and then come to a moral decision. Then, asking whether the attitude that one has adopted is the right attitude comes down to asking whether one is prepared to stand by it. There can be no guarantee of its correctness, because nothing counts as a guarantee. Or rather, something may count for someone as a guarantee, but counting something as a guarantee is itself taking up a moral standpoint.

All this applies equally to 'naturalistic' theories of ethics, like Utilitarianism. By defining 'right', in the way that Bentham does, as 'conducive to the greatest happiness of the greatest number', one does give it a descriptive meaning; but just for that reason one takes

-244-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 244.

it out of the list of ethical terms. So long as the word 'right' keeps its current emotive force, the implication remains that what is right ought to be done, but this by no means follows from Bentham's definition. Nevertheless, it is clearly intended that the definition should somehow carry this implication; otherwise it would not fulfil its purpose. For the point of such a definition, as Professor Stevenson has well brought out in his *Ethics and Language*, is not that it gives precision to the use of a word, but that it covertly lays down a standard of conduct. The moral judgement is that happiness is to be maximized, and that actions are to be evaluated, praised or blamed, imitated or avoided, in proportion as they militate for or against this end. Now this is not a statement of fact, but a recommendation; and in the ordinary way the sense of such a recommendation is contained in some ethical term. These ethical terms can also be given a descriptive meaning, but it is not qua descriptive that they are ethical. If, for example, the word 'wrong' is simply equated with 'not conducive to human happiness', some other term will be needed to carry the normative implication that conduct of this sort is to be avoided; and it is terms of this kind, which are not descriptive, that I am treating as distinctively ethical.

I hope that I have gone some way towards making clear what the theory which I am advocating is. Let me now say what it is not. In the first place, I am not saying that morals are trivial or unimportant, or that people ought not to bother with them. For this would itself be a judgement of value, which I have not made and do not wish to make. And even if I did wish to make it it would have no logical connection with my theory. For the theory is entirely on the level of

-245-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: *Philosophical Essays*. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 245.

analysis; it is an attempt to show what people are doing when they make moral judgements; it is not a set of suggestions as to what moral judgements they are to make. And this is true of all moral philosophy, as I understand it. All moral theories, intuitionist, naturalistic, objectivist, emotive, and the rest, in so far as they are philosophical theories, are neutral as regards actual conduct. To speak technically, they belong to the field of meta-ethics, not ethics proper. That is why it is silly, as well as presumptuous, for any one type of philosopher to pose as the champion of virtue. And it is also one reason why many people find moral philosophy an unsatisfying subject. For they mistakenly look to the moral philosopher for guidance.

Again, when I say that moral judgements are emotive rather than descriptive, that they are persuasive expressions of attitudes and not statements of fact, and consequently that they cannot be either true or false, or at least that it would make for clarity if the categories of truth and falsehood were not applied to them, I am not saying that nothing is good or bad, right or wrong, or that it does not matter what we do. For once more such a statement would itself be the expression of a moral attitude. This attitude is not entailed by the theory, nor do I in fact adopt it. It would indeed be a difficult position to maintain. It would exclude even egotism as a policy, for the decision to consult nothing but one's own pleasure is itself a value judgement. What it requires is that one should live without any policy at all. This may or may not be feasible. My point is simply that I am not recommending it. Neither, in expounding my meta-ethical theory, am I recommending the opposite. It is indeed to be expected that a moral philosopher, even in my sense of the term,

-246-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 246.

will have his moral standards and that he will sometimes make moral judgements; but these moral judgements cannot be a logical consequence of his philosophy. To analyse moral judgements is not itself to moralize.

Finally, I am not saying that anything that anybody thinks right is right; that putting people into concentration camps is preferable to allowing them free speech if somebody happens to think so, and that the contrary is also preferable if somebody thinks that it is. If my theory did entail this, it would be contradictory; for two different courses of action cannot each be preferable to the other. But it does not entail anything of the sort. On my analysis, to say that something which somebody thinks right really is right is to range oneself on his side, to adhere to that particular standpoint, and certainly I do not adhere to every standpoint whatsoever. I adhere to some, and not to others, like everybody else who has any moral views at all. It is, indeed, true that in a case where one person *A* approves of *X*, and another person *B* approves of not-*X*, *A* may correctly express his attitude towards *X* by saying that it is good, or right, and that *B* may correctly use the same term to express his attitude towards not-*X*. But there is no contradiction here. There would be a contradiction if from the fact that *A* was using words honestly and correctly when he said that *X* was good, and that *B* was using words honestly and correctly when he said that not-*X* was good, it followed that both *X* and not-*X* were good, or that *X* was both good and bad. But this does not follow, inasmuch as the conclusion that *X* is good, or that not-*X* is good, itself expresses the attitude of a third party, the speaker, who is by no means bound to agree with both *A* and *B*. In this example, indeed, he cannot

-247-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 247.

consistently agree with both, though he may disagree with both if he regards both *X* and not-*X* as ethically neutral, or as contraries rather than contradictories in respect of value. It is easy to miss this point, which is essential for the understanding of our position. To say that anything is right if someone thinks so is unobjectionable if it means no more than that anyone is entitled to use the word 'right' to refer to something of which he morally approves. But this is not the way in which it is ordinarily taken. It is ordinarily taken as the enunciation of a moral principle. As a moral principle it does appear contradictory; it is at least doubtful whether to say of a man that he commits himself morally both to *X* and not-*X* is to describe a possible attitude. But it may perhaps be construed as a principle of universal moral tolerance. As such, it may appeal to some; it does not, in fact, to me. But the important point is that it is not entailed by the theory, which is neutral as regards all moral principles. And here I may repeat that in saying that it is neutral as regards all moral principles I am not saying that it recommends them all alike, nor that it condemns them all alike. It is not that sort of theory. No philosophical theory is.

But even if there is no logical connection between this meta-ethical theory and any particular type of conduct, may there not be a psychological connection? Does not the promulgation of such a theory encourage moral laxity? Has not its effect been to destroy people's confidence in accepted moral standards? And will not the result of this be that something mischievous will take their place? Such charges have, indeed, been made, but I do not know upon what evidence. The question how people's conduct is

-248-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 248.

actually affected by their acceptance of a meta-ethical theory is one for empirical investigation; and in this case, so far as I know, no serious investigation has yet been carried out. My own observations, for what they are worth, do not suggest that those who accept the 'positivist' analysis of moral judgements conduct themselves very differently as a class from those who reject it; and, indeed, I doubt if the study of moral philosophy does, in general, have any very marked effect upon people's conduct. The way to test the point would be to convert a sufficiently large number of people from one meta-ethical view to another and make careful observations of their behaviour before and after their conversions. Assuming that their behaviour changed in some significant way, it would then have to be decided by further experiment whether this was due to the change in their philosophical beliefs or to some other factor. If it could be shown, as I believe it could not, that the general acceptance of the sort of analysis of moral judgements that I have been putting forward would have unhappy social consequences, the conclusion drawn by illiberal persons might be that the doctrine ought to be kept secret. For my part I think that I should dispute this conclusion on moral grounds, but this is a question which I am not now concerned to argue. What I have tried to show is not that the theory I am defending is expedient, but that it is true.

-249-

Questia Media America, Inc. www.questia.com

Publication Information: Book Title: Philosophical Essays. Contributors: A. J. Ayer - author. Publisher: Macmillan. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1954. Page Number: 249.