

SCIENCE AND METAPHYSICS PART IV SCIENTIFIC ETHICS?

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Abstract

The following six controversies, which form a basic set of ethical issues, are used as basis for testing the applicability of science to ethics.

Hedonism(Epicurus) v. Nonhedonism(Plato)
Absolutism(Thomas Hobbes) v.
Relativism(Thomas Aquinas)
Deontology(Kant) v. Teleology(Aristotle)
Nonconsequentialism v. Consequentialism
Free Will(St.Augustine) v. Determinism
Egoism v. Utilitarianism (John Stuart Mill)

1. INTRODUCTION

This is the final paper in a series of four papers, which contend that science is incapable of resolving arguments in metaphysics. Ethics is the philosophy of morality. It is concerned with morally

good and bad character (virtue and vice) and moral decision-making. Behavior is involved. Since all actions have mind as their precursor, the mind is the primary factor in ethics. Science has generally ignored the mind aspect and concentrated on the material aspect of things. Hence science is probably inapplicable to ethics.

The following six controversies, which form a fundamental set of ethical issues, are used as basis for testing the applicability of science to ethics.

Hedonism v. Nonhedonism
Absolutism v. Relativism
Deontology v. Teleology
Nonconsequentialism v. Con-
sequentialism
Free Will v. Determinism
Egoism v. Utilitarianism

2. APPLICABILITY

2.1 Hedonism v. Nonhedonism

There are two views concerning hedonism: Plato's four arguments against hedonism¹ and Epicurus' defense for hedonism².

Hedonism says all acts that ultimately or finally give pleasure (Greek= "*hedon*") are good moral acts; all acts that ultimately result in pain or suffering are bad moral acts. But some cases may not fit into this. For example, pleasurable acts, like getting high on drugs, can be immoral. In this case, although the act gives pleasure the act is immoral. This leads to the nonhedonism statement that says the pleasurable or painful effects of an act need not be connected to the morality of the act (as in the above "high on drugs" case).

As shown by the two current moral issues of animal rights, and euthanasia or mercy killing, hedonism exists in modern times. Animal rights activists argue that it is morally wrong to eat, hunt, use hides or fur, and experiment on animals, as these acts cause animals to suffer.

Many support euthanasia because it stops suffering. If suffering (pain) is automatically evil, then stopping it is automatically good. Thus stopping suffering by euthanasia is good. This is the hedonist position. But it is not always clear-cut that euthanasia is

justified. And animal abuse is wrong only when the animal feels the pain. Thus criteria other than pain and pleasure are needed for deciding when and if, euthanasia is justified. An example of such a criterion may be a certain *degree* or *context* of suffering, how much or how the suffering is. Similarly, a criterion for wrong animal treatment may be *inhuman acts* or acting beneath *human dignity*. Acts that cause suffering without any reason or *purpose*.

Hedonism is concerned with activities that result in pleasure or pain. This cause-effect series is the "**response series**" of mind activity, described in the first paper of the series: Science and Metaphysics Part I, Scientific Art Appreciation – Is It Possible? Clearly mind is involved whether one is for or against hedonism. Science does not know the workings of the mind. Hence science is not applicable in deciding for or against hedonism.

2.2 Absolutism v. Relativism.

(a) Absolutism, defended by Thomas Hobbes³, says there is one moral absolute, such as God's will, which is the most basic foundation of morality. All morality comes from it. But there are moral absolutes, such as the evil of child abuse and the evil of gluttony that cannot be reduced to one such absolute. Also there is too much disagreement about values. For example Western, Asian and African values differ - premarital sex is permissible in

the West, but most Asians consider it immoral; and there can be individual differences also. Thus no one foundation can be absolute. However examples like rape and genocide are absolute evil and therefore support the idea of one moral absolute. But again it may be argued that the terms themselves are relative.

(b) Relativism, defended by Thomas Aquinas⁴, says all of morality is either *cultural relativism* (relative to a place) or *historical relativism* (relative to time). But judgments about other cultures or times cannot be made. For example, once you know there is slavery in Sudan, either you are against it (condemn) or for it (condone, maybe by default). Another example is the evil holocaust in Nazi Germany. The case for premarital sex is also a good example – judgment in the West will be different to judgment in Asia.

Objectivism and Subjectivism were also discussed. Objectivism says moral value is in the object being judged. But how can moral value be shown to someone who does not “see” it? For example, in arguing that capital punishment is wrong, which part of it is wrong? The execution? The punishment or something else? Which part contains the moral evil? A definite answer cannot be found.

Subjectivism says moral value is in the mind of the person doing the judgment. For example, “Murder is morally bad” means only “I do not

approve of murder.” Then morality is just a matter of taste, and depends on the person. Hence moral dispute, judging good or bad, becomes meaningless. So objectivism may be the stronger view.

The absolutism / relativism debate is often confused with the objectivism / subjectivism debate. Absolutism seems to be the same as objectivism and Relativism seems to be the same as subjectivism.

The two must not be confused. The absolutism/relativism debate is about time: How long does the value last? The objectivism/subjectivism debate is about location. Where is the moral value located - in the object being judged or in the mind of the person doing the judgment?

Logically one cannot be an absolutist and relativist at the same time, or an objectivist and subjectivist at the same time. But one can logically be absolutist and subjectivist at the same time: E.g., “*I always* disapprove of capital punishment”. Or one can be relativist and objectivist at the same time: E.g., “*Sometimes* capital punishment *in itself* is morally acceptable, sometimes it is not.” And one can logically be absolutist and objectivist: E.g., “Capital punishment *in itself* is *always* wrong.” Or relativist and subjectivist: E.g., “*Sometimes I* disapprove of capital punishment, sometimes I don’t.”

Thus here too mind plays a crucial role and science again is at a disadvantage and is not applicable.

2.3 Free Will v. Determinism.

Free will, defended by St. Augustine⁵, says there are acts done in preference to other alternatives. The main objection was the difficulty of proving the existence of free will. Being unable to identify an external cause does not mean there is no such cause. Determinism says things such as God, fate, society, and biology - something other than free will, determines every act. If this is so then moral responsibility does not have any meaning.

Free will implies some mental activity and thus mind is involved. Hence science is inapplicable in this too.

2.4 Deontology v. Teleology.

When making a moral judgment on an action, should attention be more on the motive or reason for doing the action or should it be more on the consequences or results of the action? Deontologists, like Kant⁶ hold the view that the motive behind the action should be focused upon. Teleologists, like Aristotle⁷, argue that the consequences of the action should be focused upon. They subscribe to the idea that “The end justifies the means.” **Motive** or **reason** develops in the mind. Science is

thus prevented from participating in this argument.

2.5 Nonconsequentialism v. Consequentialism.

Deontology is referred to as “nonconsequentialism in contemporary ethics texts. Teleology is referred to as “consequentialism.” in contemporary ethics texts. The above argument also applies here.

2.6 Egoism v. Utilitarianism.

The teleological view that claims “The consequences that matter are the consequences for *me*” is egoism. There are two forms of egoism: *Psychological Egoism* [As humans we can’t help being egoists] and *Ethical or Rational Egoism* [We can help it, but we should be egoists anyway].

Utilitarianism, defended by John Stuart Mill⁸, says that “the consequences that matter are the consequences for the greatest number of people affected by the action”. “Act Utilitarianism: An act is good if it promotes the greatest good for the greatest number”. “Rule Utilitarianism: A rule is good if it promotes the greatest good for the greatest number”.

Egoism certainly involves the concept of “I”, called soul or **atman** or **atta**. Thus the mental aspect is present. Hence science is precluded here too.

3. CONCLUSION

All the six controversies, which form a basic set of ethical issues, used as basis for testing the applicability of science to ethics, were found to involve the mind. The mental aspect of the living entity was present in all cases. Thus science that has neglected the mind is inapplicable in ethics or the philosophy of morality. There can be no such thing as scientific ethics.

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