Naturalistic Ethics: A Logical Positivistic Approach

Sibel Oktar, Istanbul, Turkey

The view that ethical words, such as good, correspond to a natural object is generally categorised as ethical naturalism. In a wider perspective, it is a view that abandons any link to the supersensible account of ethics. Alternatively, if we recall some of the definitions of G.E. Moore's naturalistic fallacy, like 'reduction of the ethical to the non ethical' and say that this is mostly committed by the naturalists; we arrive at a narrower sense of ethical naturalism. In this sense of ethical naturalism, ethical knowledge, if any, needs to be acquired by experience. Thus, statements of ethical value judgements could be examined in the same way as empirical propositions. The logical positivists' refutation of metaphysics is based on the fundamental idea that any meaningful statement should be capable of being empirically verified. This includes value judgements.

Schlick's position, no doubt, represents such a view. He openly states, in Wittgensteinian sense, that any ethical question that has meaning can be answered, thus if there is a meaningful question then "ethics is a science" (Schlick 1959, p.247). So, before deciding whether ethics is a science or not, we need to answer the question, 'are there ethical questions that have meaning?'

First of all, looking at the fundamental nature of ethics Schlick defines it as 'theory or knowledge'. He puts it clearly that ethics 'seeks knowledge' and it 'seeks to understand' its subject matter. For Schlick, the subject matter of ethics – if we think that it is a science – must be known as clearly as the subject matter of 'biology' or 'optics.'

Schlick thinks that, as we are talking about ethics in ordinary life without difficulty, as we know the word 'light' even before there was such a science of optics, therefore we must know the meaning of the names of the objects in ethics. So restricting the subject matter of ethics to the definition of 'good' is not reasonable, it might have started with defining 'good,' but it should not end when we define it. Although Schlick allows the idea of inventing the concept of good 'quite arbitrarily', he does not accept defining the concept 'completely arbitrarily'; the person who is defining the word 'good' will be limited by some norm as a guiding principle (Schlick 1959, p.250). In this line of argument, R.M. Hare's main criticism of naturalistic ethics is that defining the word 'good' arbitrarily becomes meaningful. Hare points out that this is different from a logician's arbitrary definition of 'his own technical words' to provide clarity. Considering the nature of the study, this way of defining concepts is not acceptable for the word 'good'. As the word 'good' has a function in language, while investigating we should let it function as it is. For Hare, if we change the function of the word 'good' by an 'arbitrary definition' then we are no longer studying the same thing (Hare 2003, p.92). Schlick escapes this criticism by saying that the concept of good is already determined by norms, but whether these norms let the language function as it is depends on what he understands by these norms.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to point at 'good.' At this point, says Schlick, most philosophers develop a false hypothesis that taking the fundamental concept of good given, we possess a special 'moral sense' that point out the 'presence of good.' So we are able to say that good has an objective character. But this hypothesis falls short in explaining the variations in moral judgement. So how would 'ethics' take its place, if it could, in the realm of facts?

Schlick's mention of norms does not presuppose a normative ethics. His method is somewhat similar to Wittgenstein's, he introduces 'normative ethics' as one of the approaches that draws a connection between facts and values, but it is not what takes ethics to be. Having known that Wittgenstein has a great influence on him, it is not surprising that he follows Wittgenstein's steps.

Introducing 'norms' and/or 'standards' to define (to fix) the meaning of the word 'good', reminds us of Wittgenstein's relative sense of value. In "A Lecture on Ethics" (LE), Wittgenstein makes a distinction between relative and absolute senses of value judgements and he says that it is the absolute sense of value judgements that cannot be said. We can express value judgements if they are relative value judgements, i.e., if they correspond to a fact or predetermined standards. However, absolute value judgements do not correspond to facts thus they cannot be expressed.

Schlick's emphasis on norms does not suggest that ethics is a 'normative science,' rather it is the starting point of his quest to define whether it is a 'normative science' or a 'factual science'. As the characteristics of good must be able to point certain facts you could distinguishing the 'formal' and 'material' characteristics of 'good' (Schlick 1959, p.252). Schlick says that in the external or formal characteristic of good, "the good always appears as something that is demanded, or commanded" (Schlick 1959, p.252); as seen in Kant's moral philosophy, in which the formal characteristic is displayed in 'the categorical imperative'. This formal characteristic of good is not only seen in Kantian ethics, but also in others, as theological ethics taken to rest on God's command. Schlick appreciates the formal characteristics of good as a preliminary step, the mistake, he thinks, is considering it as the only characteristic of good. On the other hand, there are material characteristics of good which, for him, need to be considered.

The way Schlick formulates his ideas of what could be the material characteristics of good is very similar to Wittgenstein where in LE he compares substitutes for good to the Galton's composite photographs method, in which I think lies the germ of the idea of family resemblance. Schlick's suggested procedure is looking at the individual cases where we used the word good and search for common features of each case. For Schlick, within the common features of the word 'good' "must lie the reason why one and the same word, "good," is used for the several cases" (Schlick 1959, p.253). This procedure almost echoes Wittgenstein who, in *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI*), says that when we are searching for the meaning of the word 'good' we must look at the language-games where the word 'good' is used (*PI*, 77).

The critical question at this point is, 'are there any such common features?' At first sight it seems that there are more incompatibilities than similarities in various actual cases. Here the question is the universal validity of these common features. Schlick gives the example of polygamy

to point out that a discrepancy in ethical judgements is only 'apparent and not final.' He states that what is morally judged is not polygamy or monogamy rather what is morally valued is the 'peace of family' or 'order of sexual relationships'. One culture believes that these can be attained by polygamy whereas the other believes that they can be attained by monogamy. Both are trying to attain the same end by different means. What is different is the "virtue of their insight, capacity of judgement or experience" (Schlick 1959, p.254).

Applying this procedure of common features we end up having 'norms' as mentioned above. When we apply the procedure to norms it leads us to 'moral principles'. If we think that the aim of ethics is to determine the concept of good and find out that this can be accomplished by providing moral principles through norms, then we could conclude that ethics is a 'normative science'. But, for Schlick, positioning ethics as a normative science makes ethics seem something completely different from 'factual sciences' and this position is fundamentally false.

The main reason is this: Even if we accept ethics as a normative science, it does not matter whether it is normative or factual; a science can only 'explain' and cannot "establish a norm". He thinks that, if we explain 'what is good?' using norms we can only tell what it 'actually' means rather than what it should mean. For him, the search for an 'absolute justification' of 'ultimate value' is senseless. Echoing *Tractatus* (*TLP*) 6.4, which says, "All propositions are of equal value", Schlick says: "there is nothing higher to which this could be referred" (Schlick 1959, p.257). So, the justification process ends at the highest rule, on which the justification of others depends. What are we trying to attain? Absolute certainty? Schlick states that "[a]ll important attempts at establishing a theory of knowledge grow out of the problem concerning the certainty of human knowledge. And this problem in turn originates in the wish for absolute certainty" (Schlick 1959a, p.209).

Similarly for ethics, the problem turns out to be the certainty of ethical knowledge. For Schlick, theory of norms is not an answer for "the validity of valuation" (Schlick 1959, p.257).Schlick thinks that even if ethics is a normative science, you cannot escape its connection to the factual sciences, because "[t]he ultimate valuations are facts existing in human consciousness" and for him this is "the most important of the propositions which determine its task" (Schlick 1959, p.258).

Although the attempt of the theory of norms does not go beyond trying to find the 'meaning of the concept of good', Schlick appreciates it as a preliminary step into the main concern of ethics. But, he immediately adds that "only where the theory of norms ends does ethical explanation begin" (Schlick 1959, p.260).

A system of norms provides "a relative justification of the lower moral rules by the higher" (Schlick 1959, p.261). When it comes to the justification of moral rules and the universality of them, Schlick's conception of the theory of norms almost brings us to Kant's hypothetical imperative. Only through the hypothetical imperatives can we talk about the relative sense of values (cf. AK 4:428[1]).

For Kant, hypothetical imperatives do not provide strict universal validity. Here we come across with the idea of causality, which is important both for Kant and Schlick, although they reach totally different conclusions. Schlick says that scientific knowledge "refers to the cause, concerns not the justification but the explanation of moral judgements" (Schlick 1959, p.261). Kant says that moral law is a law of a special causality "just as the metaphysical law of events in the sensible world was a law of causality of sensible nature" (AK 5:47). But this is quite different from what Schlick has in mind when he says that 'ethics seeks causal explanation'. The difference is that Kant asserts that moral law is "a law of causality through freedom and hence a law of possibility of a supersensible nature" (AK 5:47), Schlick in no way could accept this. I believe, Schlick could sacrifice the idea of strict universality and he could live with the universality that experience provides. Hence his attention turns from justification to explanation.

The explanation of moral judgements takes us into the realm of observable causes and effects. For Schlick, the explanation of moral judgement and conduct is inseparable (Schlick 1959, p.261). So the question becomes 'why is it *a* standard of conduct?' rather than 'what is *the* standard of conduct?' We need to look at the behaviour of people to understand and explain because a person's "valuations must somehow appear among the motives of his acts" (Schlick 1959, p.262). Considering that language is also a kind of action Schlick states that: "What a man values, approves, and desires is finally inferred from his actions" (Schlick 1959, p.262).

Schlick suggests that instead of just focusing on moral conduct, it is better to study 'motives of conduct in general.' So first we must study the 'natural law governed behaviour' and then study moral behaviour, and find what it is that is special in moral action. And this brings us to the conclusion that "moral behaviour is purely a psychological affair" (Schlick 1959, p.263). This does not mean that 'there is no ethics' but that ethics belongs to the realm of psychology because its method is psychological.

Separating 'value judgements' into two categories, as 'relative' and 'absolute' is enforced by the fact-value distinction. We could explain certain uses of 'good' with the help of facts whereas other uses of the word good could hardly be explained by facts. That is why Schlick and Wittgenstein had the urge to introduce the relative and absolute sense of value judgements. But, at this point, the main difference between Wittgenstein and Schlick is that Wittgenstein was aware that relative value judgments are not problematic, the real issue was in the absolute sense. Schlick never attempted to approach absolute value judgements and tried to explain only relative value judgements. So we can ask, is it really only relative value judgements that we are concerned with ethics? I suppose, this is not what Wittgenstein understands by ethics. Thus, saying that ethics is psychology, is only answering the questions related to relative value judgements. Since ethical discourse related to predetermined standards was never a problematic concept in terms of fact-value distinction, Schlick's scientific approach to ethics still leaves the absolute sense of ethics as inexpressible.

---

1 References to Kant give the pages in German Academy of Sciences (AK) edition of Kant's collective works.

Literature

Kant, Immanuel 2006 *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kant, Immanuel 2006 *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. and ed. Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hare, R.M. 2003 *The Language of Morals,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schlick, Moritz 1959 "What is the Aim of Ethics?", in *Logical Positivism*, ed. Ayer, A.J, New York: The Free Press, 247-265.

Schlick, Moritz 1959a "The Foundation of Knowledge", in *Logical Positivism,* ed. A.J. Ayer, New York: The Free Press, 209-227.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 2005 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F Pears and B.F. McGuinness, London: Routledge Classics.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1965 "A Lecture on Ethics", *The Philosophical Review*, 74, 3-12.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 2005 *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell.