

THE MEANING OF 'WRONG'

What is meant when we call an act 'wrong'? I will examine the ways in which G.E. Moore, A.J. Ayer, and R.M. Hare answer this question. Then, I will argue for an answer to the question that utilizes elements from all three theories, and maintains that there is no one thing we mean when we call an act 'wrong'.

In the article in our anthology, Moore does not explicitly address the question of what it means to call an act 'wrong', though he talks at great length about goodness. Goodness the non-natural "quality which we assert to belong to a thing, when we say that the thing is good."¹ Intuition is the way in which we become aware of goodness, and badness as well, since badness is the same sort of property as goodness. In the excerpt, Moore does not discuss how right and wrong are to be determined, so I will have to trust the introductory remarks to the excerpt: "Moore thinks that what is right must be defined in terms of the 'good'."² From this, it is safe to assume that he thinks the wrong must be defined in terms of the 'bad'. I take this to mean that acts are wrong if they possess the property of 'badness'. So, on Moore's theory, to call an act wrong is to say that the act possesses the property of badness, where badness is non-natural and accessible through intuition.

Ayer, on the other hand, thinks something quite different. To say an act is wrong is merely to express a feeling about that act: "For in saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making any factual statement, not even a statement about my own state of mind: I am merely expressing certain moral

¹ Moore, G.E. "Non-Naturalism." Ethical Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings, 4th Ed. Ed. Louis P. Pojman. Australia: Wadsworth-Thomson, 2001. 415.

² Pojman, Louis P., ed. Ethical Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings, 4th Ed. Australia: Wadsworth-Thomson, 2001. 413.

sentiments.”³ To use Ayer’s example, if I tell you that you were wrong to steal some money, I am just expressing my moral disapproval of the act. The statement ‘You were wrong to steal some money’ says nothing more about the act than does the statement ‘You stole some money’. (421) An additional observation about Ayer’s theory should be made. Words such as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are used to express our feelings, not assert that we have those feelings. Ayer likens the use of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to a cry of pain. Therefore, statements containing those words cannot be true or false, since “they do not express genuine propositions.” (422) According to Ayer, to call an act wrong is to express disapproval or similar feelings towards that act (but not assert that one disapproves of the act).

Like Ayer, Hare believes that moral statements are neither true nor false, but Hare thinks that when we use moral language we are doing more than merely expressing our feelings toward acts.⁴ To say that I ought to do something means that I really shall do that something. To use Hare’s example, if I say that I ought to join the army—and I mean ‘ought’ in the ‘full-blooded’ sense—then I will join the army. This is what he calls the prescriptivity feature of moral statements. There is also the universalizability element, which means that when I say that I ought to do something, say, join the army, I think that anyone in my exact (relevant) circumstances ought to join the army as well. Hare chooses to discuss the word ‘ought’, rather than ‘wrong’, but he says that he “could have spoken

³ Ayer, A.J. “Emotivism.” *Ethical Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 4th Ed. Ed. Louis P. Pojman. Australia: Wadsworth-Thomson, 2001. 422. Hereafter, cited, parenthetically, by page number.

⁴ Pojman, Louis P., ed. *Ethical Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 4th Ed. Australia: Wadsworth-Thomson, 2001. 425.

instead about other words, such as 'right' and 'good'." ⁵ I take it that to call an act 'wrong' is to say that it ought not to be done. If I were to say that you ought not to have stolen that money, then what I mean is that you should not have stolen that money, and that anyone in similar circumstances (myself included) should not steal money. If someone calls an act wrong, then, it means that she believes she should not (and will not) do the act, nor should anyone in similar circumstances.

At this point, I would like to leave the discussion of Moore's, Ayer's, and Hare's theories, and turn to my own. When most people say that an act is wrong, I believe they mean several things. The first has to do with whether or not the act should be done, and by whom. If the moral statement is subject specific ('It was wrong for me to steal that money.'), then what is generally meant is that I ought not to have stolen the money, and that if I were to do it over again, I would not steal the money. Also, if I were ever in that position again, I would not steal the money. It does not necessarily mean that I believe that no one in similar circumstances should steal the money, as Hare thinks. It could be that the things I think are wrong for me to do, I do not think are not necessarily wrong for someone else in my circumstances to do.

If an act is wrong, most people believe that those acts ought not to be done, and they will not do those acts. However, it could be that although I believe it was wrong for me to steal that money, I would do it again. In this case, I would say that the person who thinks this either does not truly believe that wrong acts

⁵ Hare, R.M. "Prescriptivism: The Structure of Ethics and Morals." Ethical Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings, 4th Ed. Ed. Louis P. Pojman. Australia: Wadsworth-Thomson, 2001. 427.

ought never to be done, or that the act, in her special circumstances, was not *really* that wrong, perhaps not even wrong at all. I believe that most people are of the sorts who believe that the wrongness of an act is somehow lessened in their particular circumstances. When a moral statement is not subject specific ('Stealing is wrong.'), then what is meant is either that stealing for everyone, at all times, in all circumstances ought not to be done, or that generally stealing ought not to be done, but there are special circumstances in which it is acceptable to steal.

It could be objected that it is not consistent to say that I should not do something, but that I cannot say anything about whether someone else should or should not do that something. To this I would reply that we are often not consistent in our judgments and actions, and that, in fact, it may not be inconsistent to say this. Suppose I say that it is wrong for me to steal some money, by which I mean I ought not (and will not) steal some money. I then say that while it is wrong for me to steal some money, it might not be wrong for someone else to steal it, because I do not know what sort of circumstances apply to his situation. What counts as similar enough circumstances? When all relevant characteristics, psychological and otherwise, are the same? Can that ever be the case, and how would I know? How do I know what relevant circumstances are? I *could* say that no one in relevantly similar circumstances should steal some money, but it might not be that there is ever anyone in similar enough circumstances for me to make that judgment. I might also hold that I do not know what the relevant circumstances would be, or if they ever obtain. For

these reasons, I do not think that it need be inconsistent for me say that I ought not do a thing, while saying nothing about whether others in my circumstances ought not do that thing as well.

Let us turn back to the question of what people mean by 'wrong'. When people call an act 'wrong', it is generally taken to mean that the act ought not to be done, but also that the act possesses the property of wrongness or badness. If I say that stealing is wrong, I mean that there is some quality (i.e. badness) that belongs to stealing that makes stealing wrong. 'Stealing is wrong' can be read to mean 'Stealing possesses the property of badness, which makes stealing wrong,' or 'I believe that stealing possess the property of badness, which makes stealing wrong.' I am asserting what I take to be a factual statement about the world, or my state of mind, when I make moral statements. Now, I am not going to discuss what sort of property 'badness' is, or whether it exists, because I do not believe that is important to the issue of what people mean when they make moral statements. When I say that stealing is wrong, what I mean is that stealing has the property of badness. I could be wrong about this, or my statement could be unverifiable, but in any case I mean to assert that stealing has the property of 'badness.'

Another thing we sometimes mean when we say an act is wrong is that we disapprove of the act or, as Ayer suggests, that we are just expressing our disapproval. In most cases, though, I believe we are doing more than merely *expressing* our feelings; we are also asserting that we have those feelings.

Saying that stealing is wrong can be the equivalent of saying that I disapprove of

stealing, which is an assertion or feeling, not just an expression of it. There may be cases in which I say it is wrong for you to steal that money, but do not actually disapprove of it. In this case it would be false to read my statement as either an expression of my disapproval, or as an assertion of it. These are cases in which people label acts as 'technically' wrong, but still acceptable to do. For example, we are inclined to say that while it was 'technically' wrong for Jean Valjean to steal a loaf of bread, we do not disapprove of his action. This is similar to the discussion above of people who believe that the wrongness of an act is lessened in their particular circumstances.

Ayer, of course, would disagree with my suggestion that moral statements are not merely expressions of feelings, but are often assertions of those feelings as well. But I believe that most people would not be content to have their moral statements reduced to mere expressions of feeling, akin to a cry of pain. By saying an act is 'wrong', people mean to do more than express disapproval. They mean either to assert that they do disapprove, or to assert (whether the assertion be true or false) that the property of 'badness' belongs to the act, or something similar. When not stated explicitly, these assertions are taken to be implied by the moral statement.

There is great variance in what we mean when we call an act 'wrong', and I believe that none of the three theories surveyed above adequately captures what we mean. Judging by what the theories have to say, I am not so sure that we can arrive at a neat, accurate, philosophically acceptable definition of what we mean when we call acts 'wrong'.