

### **Meta-Ethical Thinking**

While normative ethics is concerned with moral principles, meta-ethical thinking is about understanding the logic underneath concepts like morals and ethics. Meta-ethical thinking is about the analysis and study of concepts. It involves asking questions to gather information about what is morally right or morally wrong. (Frankena, 1973, 95) Through questioning and gathering of information, meta-ethicists can answer logical questions. These answers serve to help them imply moral principles rather than make decisions about moral principles. Meta-ethical thinking can be applied in different areas of human endeavor, including business, economics, and science. The nature of meta-ethical thinking is to ask questions in order to gather knowledge. Exercising this part of ethics allows of moral reasoning to happen, which is a process. (Rfilly, 1994, 159) One form of meta-ethical thinking is intuitionism, which includes people of the persuasion that moral terms cannot be effectively defined. Another type of meta-ethical thinking, which contrasts with intuitionism, is the idea of Definist theories. With Definist theories, the idea is to set definitions for ethical and moral terms, as these terms carry meaning and properties. (Frankena, 1973, 97) In addition to Definist theories and intuitionism, noncognitive theories exist to hold that certain ethical judgments exist. However, some proponents of noncognitive theories relate that ethical judgments are merely a reflection of emotions. Within the realm of noncognitive theories, another view prefers to see ethical judgments as something more like suggestions or reminders to individuals who need them.

Case #1 of the Warner case studies can serve as an example where meta-ethical thinking would be helpful. This case involves a letter written to a

friend about a potential nepotism problem at a corporation. (Warner, 1984, 29) Meta-ethical thinking can be used to understand the basic situation prior to judging what should be done. Instead of simply deciding what should be done about the brother-in-law based on moral rules, the situation can be assisted by careful questioning.

Like Case #1, Case #6 of the Warner case studies describes a moral dilemma. While a judgment on the moral basis of the case could be made using normative ethics, it might be helpful to use meta-ethical thinking to gain perspective on the deal that is being presented by Marty Ackerman. (Warner, 1984, 37) Jack Hill should take the time to ask questions about the situation. He could logically question himself about what would happen if he agreed to work with Marty Ackerman versus the consequences that would come from declining the deal.

Case #7 of the Warner case studies is another instance where meta-ethical thinking can be employed. In this situation, Campbell Soup rewards elementary schools with audio-visual equipment in exchange for Campbell Soup can labels. (Warner, 1984, 41) Despite the benefits received on both sides of the deal, an ethical issue was raised. The issue was whether or not Campbell Soup was really mostly interested in pushing more products onto children with the cover of a goodwill program. Before determining whether or not Campbell Soup was acting immorally, it helps to gather information about what actually transpired. By using meta-ethical thinking, an ethical case can be built from the ground up rather than simply assigning blame. Questions need to be asked, such as: Were children being forced to eat Campbell Soup products? If so, is this the fault of Campbell Soup or the fault of school faculty who were eager to acquire the audio-visual equipment? If children were not being forced to consume Campbell Soup, then what harm was done? Children were provided with healthy meals and audio-visual

equipment, while Campbell Soup made a profit. This line of questioning serves to imply what moral principles are at stake in this situation.

Another Warner case study, Case #14, serves as an example where meta-ethical thinking can be effective. In this case study, an ethical issue is raised as to whether Sears used a "bait and switch" tactic on consumers to increase sales. Sears advertised low-price sewing machines only to, allegedly, have salespeople attempt to get people to buy more expensive merchandise. (Warner, 1984, 52) Again, in this situation, a series of questions are practical for building a moral basis rather than simply accusing Sears of wrongdoing. A meta-ethicist might ask, "What exactly did the sales ad show?" Another question might be: how much pressure did sales personnel put on customers? Did customers resist the sales tactics and refuse to make any purchases altogether? Before judgment is cast on Sears, these questions and more must be answered and analyzed to gain a better perspective on the situation.

## References

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- Frankena, William K. Ethics. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973.
- Rfilly, Bernard J. Kyj, Myron J. "Meta-Ethical Reasoning: Applied to Economics and Business Principles." American Journal of Economics & Sociology (1994). Academic Search Premier. EBSCO. Amberton U, Remote Research Access, Toledo, OH. 24 Mar. 2009  
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