

Philosophy 3100: Ethical Theory

Topic 4 - Reductionism:

1. What is Reductionism?
2. What is Naturalism?
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What is Reductionism?

Reductionism in Ethics:

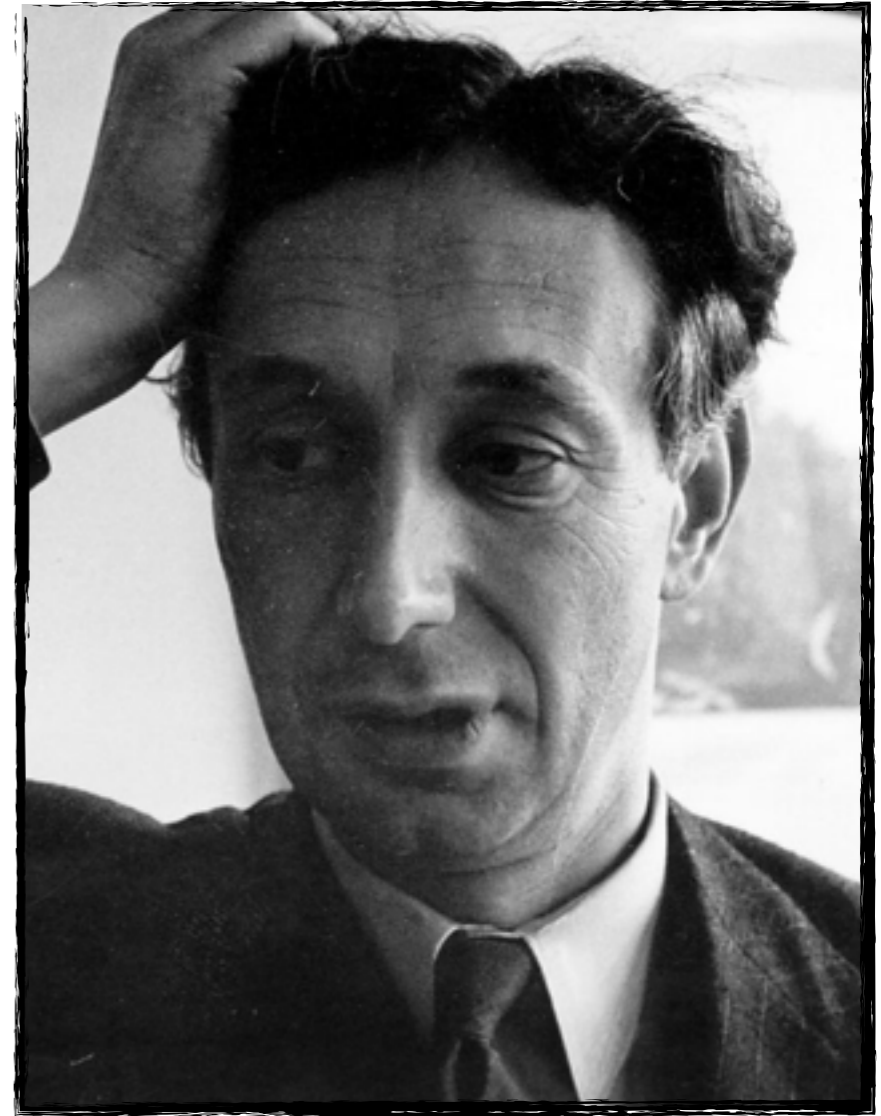
Moral properties and facts just are properties and facts from some other domain;

That is, they are identical to facts and properties that can be expressed using non-moral language.

What is Reductionism?

We have already seen this view discussed:

“What we are interested in is the possibility of reducing the whole sphere of ethical terms to non-ethical terms. We are enquiring whether statements of ethical value can be translated into statements of empirical fact. ...



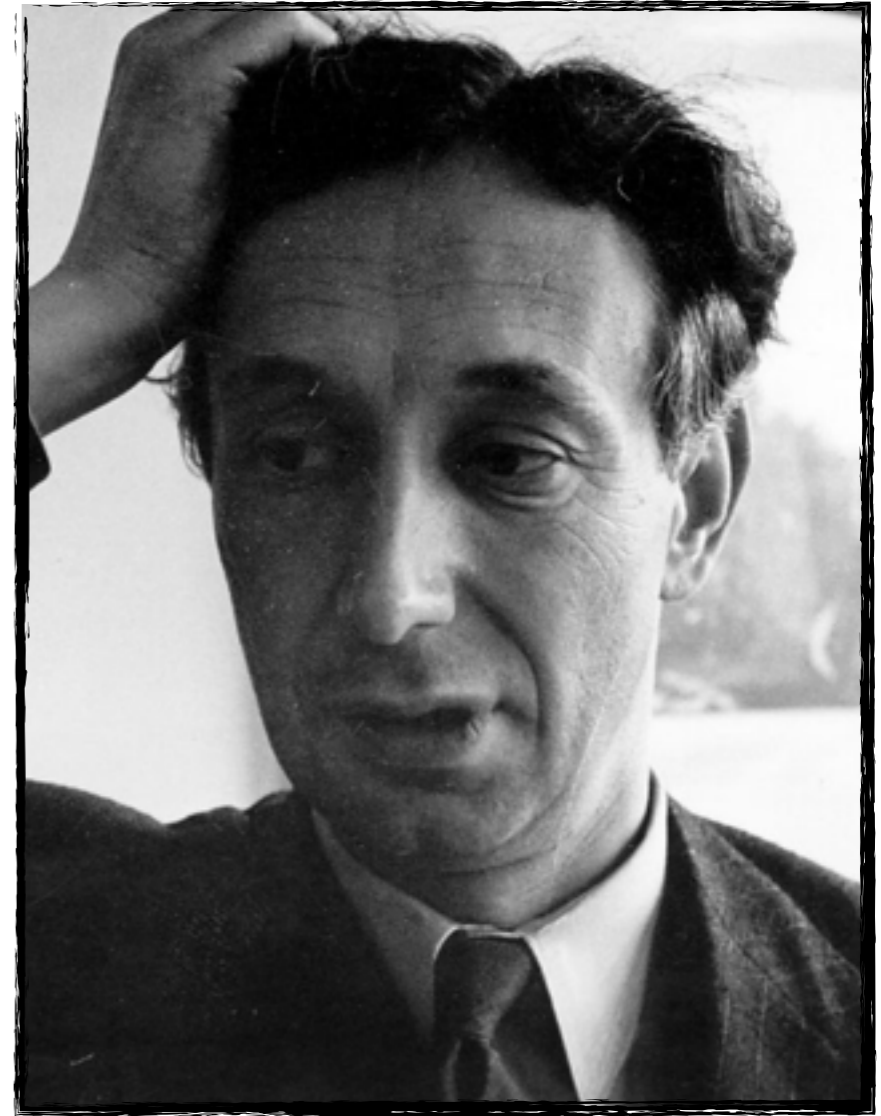
A.J. Ayer

– *Language, Truth, and Logic*, p. 104

What is Reductionism?

We have already seen this view discussed:

“That they can be so translated is the contention of those ethical philosophers who are commonly called subjectivists, and of those who are known as utilitarians. For the utilitarian defines the rightness of actions, and the goodness of ends, in terms of the pleasure, or happiness, or satisfaction, to which they give rise; the subjectivist, in terms of the feelings of approval which a certain person, or group of people, has towards them.



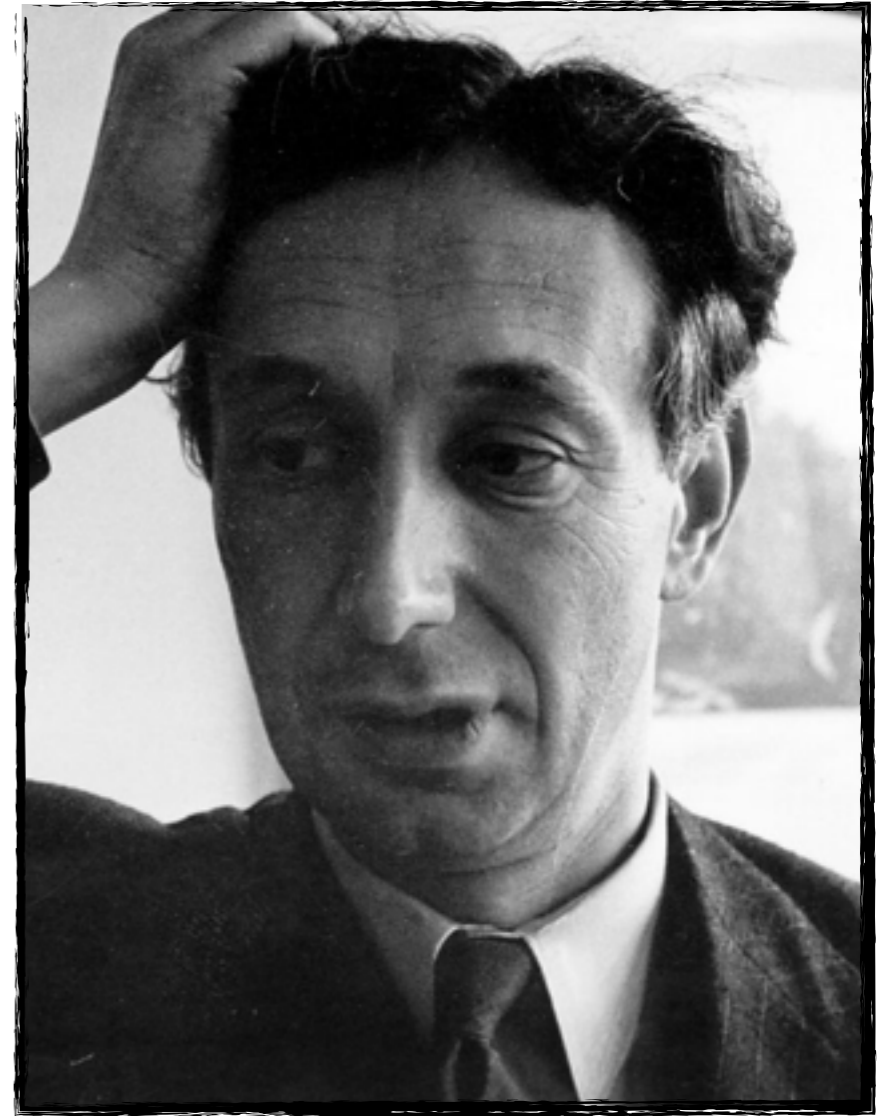
A.J. Ayer

– *Language, Truth, and Logic*, p. 104

What is Reductionism?

We have already seen this view discussed:

“Each of these types of definition makes moral judgements into a sub-class of psychological or sociological judgements; and for this reason they are very attractive to us. For, if either was correct, it would follow that ethical assertions were not generically different from the factual assertions which are ordinarily contrasted with them; and the account which we have already given of empirical hypotheses would apply to them also.”



A.J. Ayer

– *Language, Truth, and Logic*, p. 104

What is Reductionism?

Some Simple Examples of Reductionist Theories:

General Subjectivism: “to call an action right, or a thing good, is to say that it is generally approved of” (Ayer: 104).

Dolorism about Wrongness: the property of being morally wrong just is the property of causing pain.

← probably no one has ever held this view

Analytic Desire Satisfactionism about Well-Being: the fact that some life is a good life for the person living it is the very same fact as the fact that it is the life that that person wants to be living.

Perfectionism about Well-Being: the property of doing well just is the property of having one’s natural capacities developed.

What is Naturalism?

Examples of Natural Properties:

physical properties: e.g., *mass, volume, shape, charge*

biological properties: e.g., *being alive, digesting, having evolved to do such-and-such*

mental properties: e.g., *wanting something, causing pain, being happy, being in love, believing that something is the case, having made an agreement with someone, having consented to something*

social properties: e.g., *being permitted by the conventions of some society, leading to the greatest happiness for the greatest number*

What is Naturalism?

A property or fact is a **natural** property or fact just in case it is an empirical property or fact — that is, one that is discoverable wholly empirically.

And recall that:

A fact is **empirical** just in case it can be known either:

- (a) through the senses (i.e., sight, sound, touch, smell, etc.);
- (b) through introspection; or
- (c) through reasoning from facts known as in (a) or (b).

So for our class ... **NATURAL = EMPIRICAL.**

What is Naturalism?

Naturalism in Ethics:

Moral properties and facts are natural properties and facts.

Analogies for Reductionism

Mathematics:

Definition of 'circle': the property of being a circle just is the property of being a set of points equidistant from a given point.

Mind:

Reductionism about pain: to be in pain just is to have one c-fibers fire.

Science:

Reductionism about water: water just is H₂O.

Reductionism and Naturalism

Reductionism:

Moral properties are properties that also appear in some other domain.

Naturalism:

Moral properties are natural properties.

Does Reductionism entail Naturalism?

➡ No.

Does Naturalism entail Reductionism?

➡ No.

Two Kinds of Non-Reductionism

Non-Reductive Naturalism:

- (i) moral properties are “*sui generis*”: i.e., they are not identical to any properties that can be expressed using non-moral language; they are “irreducibly normative”;
- (ii) but they are also natural properties.

we won't
be studying
this view

Non-Naturalism / Intuitionism (partial statement):

- (i) moral properties are “*sui generis*”: i.e., they are not identical to any properties that can be expressed using non-moral language;
- (ii) furthermore, they are not natural properties.

Why Be a Reductionist?

Advantages of Reductionism:

- (1) Says what moral/normative/evaluative properties *are*.
- (2) Moral Knowledge: makes it easier to explain how we can come to know moral facts.
- (3) Moral Supervenience: makes it easy to explain why the doctrine of moral supervenience should be true.

The doctrine of moral supervenience:

If in two situations all the same non-moral facts hold, then all the same moral facts must also hold.

Two Kinds of Reductionism

There are two main kinds of reductionism:

Analytic or A Priori Reductionism

and

Synthetic or Empirical or A Posteriori Reductionism.

The difference between them is on the question of whether the reduction itself – that is, the identity statement saying that some moral property is identical to some non-moral property – is claimed to be (a) analytic and *a priori* or (b) synthetic and empirical.

We will be studying only Analytic or A Priori Reductionism.

Sample Reductionist Theory

Analytic Reductive Utilitarianism:

Recall Ayer's consideration of this view (Ayer: 105):

“to call an action right is to say that of all the actions possible in the circumstances it would cause, or be likely to cause, the greatest happiness, or the greatest balance of pleasure over pain, or the greatest balance of satisfied over unsatisfied desire”

To be sure, not all utilitarians are reductionists – a utilitarian can be a non-naturalist, e.g. – but let's consider an analytic reductive version of utilitarianism.

Sample Reductionist Theory

Analytic Reductive Utilitarianism:

(i) To call an action right is to say that of all the actions possible in the circumstances, it would cause the greatest happiness.

Semantic
← Thesis

(ii) The property of being a right action is same property as the property of being an action that would cause the greatest happiness of all the actions possible in the circumstances.

Metaphysical
← Thesis

(iii) (i) and (ii) are knowable *a priori*.

Epistemological
← Thesis

More on the Epistemology

You see teenagers lighting a cat on fire. You immediately judge, **So,**
“What these teenagers are doing is wrong.” ← **part empirical,
part a priori**

Suppose in fact you know that what they are doing wrong.
How can you know this, given Analytic Reductive Utilitarianism?

It's a two step process:

First, you know this:

“If an act fails cause the greatest happiness of all the actions possible in the circumstances, then it is wrong.”

You can know this *a priori*, because it is analytic.

← **a priori**

Second, you know this:

“What these teenagers are doing fails to cause the greatest happiness of all the actions possible in the circumstances.”

This you can know empirically.

← **empirical**

From these two claims the judgment at the top follows.

The Open Question Argument

as against Analytic Reductive Utilitarianism

Analytic Reductive Utilitarianism (semantic component):

(i) To call an action right is to say that of all the actions possible in the circumstances, it would cause the greatest happiness.

About Analytic Reductive Utilitarianism, Moore would ask us to consider two questions:

Q1: I see that, of all the actions possible in the circumstances, this act would cause the greatest happiness, but is this act *right*?

Q2: I see that, of all the actions possible in the circumstances, this act would cause the greatest happiness, but would it cause the greatest happiness?

The Open Question Argument

Some different definitions of 'open question':

Huemer's Definition of 'open question' (p. 67):

A Yes/No question is an **open question** just in case a person could coherently give either answer to the question; that is, neither answer would be self-contradictory (cf. Ayer).

Two other common understandings of 'open question':

A question is an **open question** just in case it is possible for someone to completely understand the question, yet not know its answer.

A question is an **open question** just in case neither answer (Yes or No) would suggest a lack of understanding of the question, or of any of the concepts involved.

The Open Question Argument

as against Analytic Reductive Utilitarianism

Moore's Open Question Argument (as against ARU):

P1. Q1 is an open question.

P2. Q2 is not an open question.

P3. If Q1 is an open question and Q2 is not an open question, then Q1 and Q2 don't mean the same thing.

P4. If Q1 and Q2 don't mean the same thing, then Analytic Reductive Utilitarianism is false.

C. Therefore, Analytic Reductive Utilitarianism is false.

The Open Question Argument as against Analytic Reductive General Subjectivism

Analytic Reductive General Subjectivism (semantic component):

(i) “to call an action right, or a thing good, is to say that it is generally approved of” (Ayer: 104).

About Analytic Reductive General Subjectivism, Moore would ask us to consider these two questions:

Q1: I see that this thing is generally approved of, but is it *good*?

Q2: I see that this thing is generally approved of, but is it generally approved of?

The Open Question Argument as against Analytic Reductive General Subjectivism

Moore's Open Question Argument (as against ARGs):

P1. Q1 is an open question.

P2. Q2 is not an open question.

P3. If Q1 is an open question and Q2 is not an open question, then Q1 and Q2 don't mean the same thing.

P4. If Q1 and Q2 don't mean the same thing, then Analytic Reductive General Subjectivism is false.

C. Therefore, Analytic Reductive General Subjectivism is false.

The Open Question Argument

Moore believes that we can construct an analogous argument against *any* reductive theory, and that we can see that we can do this by considering enough examples like these.

Moore concludes that reductionism in ethics is not true.

Evaluative and *moral* facts (assuming that there are some) are one thing.

Natural facts (and other non-evaluative/non-moral facts) are another thing.

The Open Question Argument

QUESTION:

Who among the following can (and typically will) accept the Open Question Argument? (Select all that apply.)

- (a) Non-Naturalists / Intuitionists
- (b) Non-Cognitivists
- (c) Nihilists

ANSWER: *all of the above.*

Does the Open Question Argument “Prove Too Much”?

Let’s consider a parody of the argument, as against a certain analysis of bachelorhood.

The Simple Analysis of Bachelorhood:

To be a bachelor is to be an unmarried man.

Now consider two Moorean questions:

Q1: I see that the Pope is an unmarried man, but is he
a *bachelor*?

Q2: I see that the Pope is an unmarried man, but is he
an unmarried man?

Does the Open Question Argument “Prove Too Much”?

A Parody of the Open Question Argument (as against SAB):

P1. Q1 is an open question.

P2. Q2 is not an open question.

P3. If Q1 is an open question and Q2 is not an open question, then Q1 and Q2 don't mean the same thing.

P4. If Q1 and Q2 don't mean the same thing, then the Simple Analysis of Bachelorhood is false.

C. Therefore, the Simple Analysis of Bachelorhood is false.

Does the Open Question Argument “Prove Too Much”?

Be sure you know why Moore’s Open Question Argument is in trouble is this is a good refutation of the Simple Analysis of Bachelorhood.

Does the Open Question Argument “Prove Too Much”?

A reply on Moore’s behalf:

doubts about PI.

PI of the Parody Argument is saying that both answers to this question

Q1: I see that the Pope is an unmarried man, but
is he a *bachelor*?

are coherent.

But why should we think that?

Does the Open Question Argument “Prove Too Much”?

A reply on Moore’s behalf:

doubts about PI.

PI of the Parody Argument is also saying that it is possible for someone to completely understand the question,

QI: I see that the Pope is an unmarried man, but
is he a *bachelor*?

yet not know its answer.

But why should we think that?