
PUTTING ETHICS FIRST: AN APPRAISAL OF BERTRAND RUSSELL'S
METHODS OF ESTIMATING GOODS

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Abstract

Russell's analysis in his paper titled "The Elements of Ethics" is a clear account of what scholars regarded as the philosophical basis for ethics. This is evident in his devotion of considerable attention to the project of developing a systematic account of the nature, structure as well as the rudiments of ethics. Thus, his two major accomplishments are, first, he was able to identify the most fundamental notions/elements in ethics, which are the notions of intrinsic *good* and *evil* by showing what it is, from what it is not. Second, Russell attempted a conceptual clarification of the notions of objective 'right' and 'wrong' in order to unveil the ways by which these notions are being wrongly interpreted in a misguided manner by scholars. Russell also considered the compatibility of determinism with morals, which for him, is found to consist in a limitation of the acts that are possible under any circumstances because if determinism is really true, there is a sense in which no act is possible except the one which in fact occurs. Russell believes that if the concepts: good and evil(bad), right and wrong are well explicated, we will accept that ethics is a practical study like science to which others may opposed as theoretical. In this paper, I shall agree on the one hand with Russell over both his analysis on the basic elements of ethics and his methods of estimating good and evil. Whereby supporting his claim that the best way to estimate good/evil is to see it as ends, not as means to an end. While on the other hand, I shall disagree and raise questions on his account of moral determinism.

Keywords: elements of ethics, determinism, good, evil, right, wrong

Introduction

Just like any other branch of philosophy, ethics is a subject about which there are immense amount of different opinions. Ethical theories and principles primarily focused on moral evaluation of human actions, omissions and behaviours based on "right" or "wrong" as well as "good" or "bad". Giving that the question of an inquiry into the end of human actions is a perennial issue for moral philosophers, it is thus admitted that the study of ethics is not something outside science; this for J. S. Mill is considered "the main problem of speculative thought"¹. This is because, natural sciences also face the problem of searching for the first principle of reality. But while the object of ethics tends to

discover true propositions about virtuous and vicious conduct of moral actions towards certain end, natural sciences derive their principles from generalisation of some truths. Essentially, this paper attempts a critical examination of Bertrand Russell's "The Elements of Ethics" by showing the strength of his analysis of what he referred to as the most fundamental notions in ethics.

Putting Ethics First

By creating a background for this paper, it is necessary to briefly discuss the major concerns of ethics through several definitions in order to situate the discussion on *The Elements of Ethics* in its proper context. What is ethics? Or, what is philosophical ethics? Different philosophers offer different definitions of ethics. However, such definitions are mainly different in language, not in contents. For instance, philosophers agree that the word "ethics" is derived from the Greek word "ethos" meaning character. According to Simon Blackburn, ethics is "the study of the concepts involved in practical reasoning such as: good, bad, right, duty, obligation, virtue, freedom, rationality..."²

Ted Honderich offers a similar definition of ethics. In his view, "ethics as a value theory concerns itself with the evaluation of human conduct, with how human beings ought fundamentally to behave, particularly in relation to one another."³ G. E. Moore in his *Principia Ethica* is of the view that ethics as a branch of philosophy deals with certain questions about the rightness or wrongness of human action or omissions. It deals with the evaluation of human actions.⁴ In another book of his titled *Ethics*, Moore is of the view that ethics in philosophy deals with ought to be done or ought not to be done in specific circumstances.⁵ R.M. Hare defines ethics as "the logical study of the language of morals".⁶ Meanwhile, Michael Boylan defined ethics as the science concerning the "right" and "wrong" of human action.⁷ In *The Elements of Ethics*, Bertrand Russell is of the view that ethics deals with the questions about the sort of actions ought to be performed or avoided.⁸ Thus, Russell proceeds to argue that ethics deals with human conduct, and decides what is virtuous and what is vicious among the kinds of conduct between which, in practice, people are called upon to choose.

Going by the array of definitions cited above, it should be noted that certain concepts such as good, bad, right and wrong are common to them all. Thus, in Russell's view, the first step in ethics, therefore, is to be quite clear as to what we mean by *good* and *bad*. Only then can we return to conduct, and ask how right conduct is related to the production of goods and avoidance of evils. Let us turn now to the main point on the question of the meaning of good and bad.

The Concepts of Good and Bad Clarified

As a way of conceptual clarification, Russell was quick to point out the sense in which the words; good and bad are here intended. "Good" for Russell are simple ideas that are not capable of being analyzed or built up out of other simpler ideas.⁹ It should be noted that this definition is not original with Russell, but was adopted from G. E. Moore *Principia Ethica*. Russell is of the view that when a question such as "What do you mean by Good?" or "what is good?" is asked, the answer must not consist in verbal definition as could be given when a question such as "what is pentagon?" is asked. The definition of 'good' is difficult and therefore cannot be defined like other things such as redness, pentagon, etc. In fact, he mainly supported G. E. Moore's notion of 'indefinability of

good' wholeheartedly. Russell stated two main misguided reasons why people think 'good' could be analyzed into some other notions, such as pleasure or object of desire.

The reasons are;

First, goodness is not perceived by senses, and there is less agreement as to things that are good than to things that are red.

The second is the view that they cannot understand an idea unless they can define it.

Besides, Russell made attempt to examine some common definitions of 'good' and 'bad' given by other scholars and raised some objections against them.

a.) ...a thing is good when on its own account it ought to exist and bad when it ought not to exist.¹⁰ Russell's argument against this definition is that, as a matter of fact, the notion of good is wider and more fundamental than any notion with conduct. The problem here is that we use the notion of good in explaining what right conduct is, but we do not use the notion of right conduct in explaining what good is. I want to believe that Russell argued this way because good for him is objective and independent on conduct unlike the notion of right that is parasitic on human's conduct. The problem I have with Russell on this view is that, he tends to take the notion of good beyond human realm.

b.) ...good means the same as desired; so that when we say a thing is good we mean that it is desired.¹¹ Thus, anything is good when we either hope to acquire it or fear to lose it. Yet it is commonly admitted that there are bad desires, and when people speak of bad desires they seem to mean desires for what is bad. However, Russell's argument against this view is that the sense of good and bad needed in ethics is not in this way personal; and it's quite essential in the study of ethics, to realize that there is an interpersonal sense. In this sense, when a thing is good, it ought to exist on its own account (intrinsically) not on account of its consequences, nor yet of who is going to enjoy it.

In Russell's submission, 'good' and 'bad' are qualities which belong to objects independently of our opinions, just as much as round and square do, and when two people differ as to whether a thing can be good, only one of them can be right, though it may be hard to know who is right. I actually disagree with Russell on this matter because, it is possible for the two people to be talking pass each other as to whether a thing is good, and yet be both wrong if neither of them has a proper understanding of what it is for a thing to be good. Holding to this view, Russell tends to be promoting 'moral realism'¹².

One important consequence of the indefinability of *good* identified by Russell is that knowledge as to what thing exist, have existed, or will exist, can throw absolutely no light upon the question as to what things are good. Those who defined 'good as what ought to exist' and 'evil/bad as what ought not to exist' argued from the platform of the revealed religious' perspective because they believe that the whole of creation must be traced to good and omnipotent God. Meanwhile, evil should be seen as non-existence being a mere deprivation, thus nothing that exists is evil but just a mere limitation. Russell considered the above view as false and absurd. Thus for Russell, good or bad are qualities which belong to objects independently of our opinions just as *round* and *square* do. I think Russell is correct about this.

At the same time, it may be difficult to ignore Santayana's worries on this matter completely. For George Santayana, the assertion by Russell that "Good and bad" are qualities which belong to objects independently of human's opinions cannot be maintained. The implication according to Santayana will be that good is only attached to

things for no reason and it must be seen as an absolute, not a relative thing, primary and not a secondary quality.¹³ Santayana buttresses his argument with what can be termed “argument from contradiction of propositions”¹⁴ As a response to Santayana, I am not too sure if Russell is seriously guilty of this argument from contradiction because, there is no how we want to consider a thing or an object without considering the qualities that belong to it. And more clearly, it is quite possible to separate qualities of a thing/object from the thing/object if the qualities are actually the subject of appraisal. One reason that could warrant such a misguided view for Russell is this.

In considering this question, as in most of the other problems in ethics, the moralists who has not had philosophical training appear to me to go astray, and become involved in needless complications, through supposing that right and wrong in conduct are the ultimate conception of ethics, rather than good or bad, in the *effects* of conduct and in other things. The words *good* and *bad* are used both for the sort of conduct which is *right* or *wrong*, and for the sort of effects to be expected from right and wrong conduct, respectively.¹⁵

In other words, it is Russell’s submission that people tend to see the words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ which are meant to be means to an ends as the basic elements of ethics and therefore, treat them as ends in themselves in place of the words ‘good’ or ‘bad’. The point here is that, the things that are good are the things which on their own account are good without any consideration of their effects. Russell do not wish to deny that right conduct is among the things that are good on their own account, his argument is that if this is so, it depends for its intrinsic goodness upon the goodness of those other things which it aims at producing, such as love or happiness. Thus, the rightness of conduct is not the fundamental conception upon which ethics is built up. Instead, the fundamental conception is intrinsic goodness or badness. Let us now see how and why this is so in the next section.

The notion of Right and Wrong

The related point that needs consideration here is that, the notions of good or bad are the main two elements with which ethics is concerned. Nevertheless, the notions of right and wrong conduct are often loosely used to denote good or bad. Such a narrow view and shallowness is fostered by the use of the one word *good* both for the sort of conduct which is right and for the sort of things which ought to exist on account of their intrinsic value. Russell’s argument, for the purpose of conceptual clarity, is that the double use of the word *good* is very confusing, and tends to obscure the distinction of ends and means. The problem here is that, the word “right” is very ambiguous, and it is by no means easy to distinguish the various meaning which it has in common parlance.

Russell considered variety of the meanings or senses in which the word ‘right’ is used by the moralists. The arguments for such a claim are diverse. On the one hand, the aspect of the meaning advocated by the utilitarians is that, rightness or wrongness of an act is judged by relation to the goodness or badness of its consequences. This is what David Lyons described as Utilitarian Generalization.¹⁶ On the other hand, the intuitionists judge right and wrong based on the approval or disapproval of the moral sense or consciousness of a moral agent. Russell also identified other meanings of right conduct, such as; emotion of approval (i.e.an act is right of my emotion approves it.). There is also

conception of right as the judgement of approval. (This, consist of judgment that an act is in new sense, right). For Russell, this new way of conceiving right is objective in the sense that it does not depend upon the opinion and feelings of the agent. Thus, what is right, then, is in some ways dependent on consequence in such a way that we can argue that the most fortunate act is always the one which is objectively right, in the sense that it is what a wise man will hold that he ought to do. However, the main problem with this view is that, if it is granted that the most fortunate act is always the right act, is does not guarantee that objectively right acts are always the most fortunate acts. Another notable objection is that, how can we reasonably justify a consideration which required forming an opinion as to whether some people are the wisest? This approach could lead us back to subjectivity if care is not taking.

Russell as well concluded that the objectively right act is the act which a man holds that he ought to perform when he is not mistaken. Nevertheless, I want to disagree with Russell on this point because such statement requires further explanation. The complexity of the statement is directly linked to the obvious reason that human action is purposive. Thus, the difficulty of discerning or ascertaining the fact that what a man calls a mistake is not an intentional act must first be established. For instance, Mr. X, who is a police officer, killed another person who was Mr. Y, with claim that it was an accidental discharge. Now, how do we ascertain that Mr. Y was killed intentionally or by mistake even when Mr. X. was claiming that it was a mistake? This will be a problem to the question of objective right/wrong that Russell defended here. How objective is Russell's formulation of objective rightness?

Determinism and Morals Nexus

Central to the foundation of ethics is the controversy over 'determinism'¹⁷ and 'free-will'¹⁸ in moral decision making process. One vital question that comes to mind is, is determinism really compatible with moral? Essentially, it has been urged by the advocates of free-will that the denial of free-will in moral decision making process involves the denial of merit and demerit of ethics and with this denial, ethics collapse and the question of praise or blame will be irrelevant. In other words, if human action or conduct is determined, then the question of making moral choices becomes a myth and out of place. In this parlance, the advocates of free-will contend that the denial of making free moral choices undermines ethics in general. In taking this discussion further, it is the view of the free-will advocates that unless will can foresee the consequences of our actions, it is impossible to know what course we ought to take under any given circumstances; and that if people's actions cannot be in any degree predicted, the foresight required for rational action becomes impossible.¹⁹ Thus, this buttresses the general or widely held view that moral agency presupposes rational agency. The point by implication is that, the moral agent ought to be presented with varieties of moral choices or option out of which he/she is expected to employ his/her rationality to pick whatever choice that seems right at the point of making moral decision.

Russell was quick to point out one major factor that is responsible for the controversy between the determinists and free-will advocates which for him is the question of causal explanation. Russell admitted the causal theory that predicated determinism seems to be applicable to human action just as much as other events. Russell's argument tends to favour the determinists because in his view, if causality is

doubted in the province of ethics, moral collapse, as against the position of the free-will advocates. Thus in Russell's view, a right action, as we have seen, is one of which the probable effects are possible, so that estimates of right and wrong necessarily presuppose that our actions can have effects, and therefore that the law of causality holds.²⁰ Russell raises this argument to refute the argument of the free-will advocates on the question of moral decisions because for him, the central elements of ethics are concerned not with conduct, but with the meaning of good and bad, and the things that are intrinsically good and bad, is plainly independent of free-will. However, the question is that, is Russell really correct with this defense? A deep reflection on Russell's argument here reveals is/ought controversial distinction from which the question of actual/possible actions emanates. Russell anticipated that if determinism is true, there is a sense in which no action is possible except the one actually performed which he referred to as the objectively right action. One illustration that Russell used to refute the free-will advocates argument is that

'a man who find that his house is in fire may run out of it in a panic without thinking of warning other inmates; but we feel, rightly or wrongly, that it was possible for him to think of warning them in a sense in which it is not possible for a prosaic person to think of a lyric of a poem. It may be that we are wrong in feeling this difference, and that what really distinguishes the two cases is dependence upon past decisions. That is to say, we may recognize that no different choice among alternatives thought of at any time would have turned an ordinary man into a good lyric poet; but most men by suitably choosing among alternatives actually thought of, can acquire the sort of character which will lead to remember their neighbours in a fire. And if a man engages in some useful occupation of which natural effect is to destroy his nerve, we may conceivably hold that this excuses his panic in an emergency.²¹

From the above point of view, Russell's opinion is that, every human action is caused or determined by motive. Thus, determinism does not; therefore vitiate the distinction of right and wrong, just as it does not destroy the distinction of good and bad. But, is Russell really correct with this line of reasoning? The problem I envisaged at this point is that, determinism has the tendency of destroying praise, blame or responsibility when considering human actions since we regard some people to be better than others in terms of moral assessment. Thus, there is no tenable reason to believe that the arguments in favour of determinism is overwhelmingly strong than that of the free-will advocates. Hence, I doubt whether Russell is wholly such a conclusion that he maintained. My skepticism tends towards the fact that the believers in free-will do not accept the view that no other action is possible except the one actually performed. In fact, the argument may be turned other way round. It may be argued that the act actually performed is the one that is done out of man's volition. This is because, the moral agents are usually presented with varieties of moral options which could be good or bad. Let us now turn to Russell's account of egoism and see if it bears any consequence on the elements of ethics.

Egoism and the Problem of “my Good”

The popular view or opinion of the egoists in establishing the objective rightness of moral actions becomes a matter of concern for Russell. For the egoists; a man's first duty is to himself, and that to secure his own good is more imperative than to secure other people's good.²² To this view, Russell accepts that there is a genuine problem with egoism to which he presented an objection. Essentially, egoism has several meanings which are evident in the ways different people understand or interpret the phrase “*my good*” to mean different things. However, for Russell, my good is not an easy conception to define because the phrase is capable of many/ different meanings. It could mean “good that I desire”, “my pleasure” or “any state of mind in me that is good”.

The problem that Russell has with the egoists' usage of “*my good*” is that, they tend to use it as a means instead of an ends. In Russell's analysis, there is a common confusion in people's thoughts on this subject matter that, if I desire anything, its attainment will give me more or less pain. Hence, it is inferred that I desire it on account of the pleasure it would give me, and not on its own account. But what I find disturbing is that, this is to put the cart before the horse because reverse is meant to be the case. In other words, Russell's argument that pleasure we get from things usually depends upon our having had a desire which they satisfy requires further explanation.

Methods of Estimating Goods and Evils

Bearing the proper way of estimating goods in mind, Russell basically examined the view that we can never know what is good or what is bad, and he also suggested methods to be employed and fallacies to be avoided in considering intrinsic goodness or badness. But is Russell's analysis an objective or subjective way of estimating goods? I think it is an objective one. Given the wide spread of ethical skepticism, which is based upon observation of men's differences in regard to ethical questions, Russell's critical examination of such ethical skeptical view prompted him to suggest method of estimating or evaluating what is morally good or bad which avows objectivity. For instance, if Mr. Paul thinks one thing is good, and Mr. Peter thinks another, and there is no possible way in which either can persuade the other that he is wrong, it may be concluded that the whole thing is really a matter of taste, and it is a waste of time to ask which is right when two people differ in judgement of value.

On the question of intrinsic good or bad, Russell pointed out two opposite errors which must be avoided in estimating good or bad. First, the error of the philosophers. What does that mean? Russell's simple explanation is that, the philosophers, always bent on the construction of a system that is inclined to simplify the fact unduly. This is done with the aim to giving the facts a symmetry which is fictitious, and to twist them into a form in which they can all be deduced from one or two general principle. I choose not to agree with Russell on this matter. This is premised upon Wittgenstein's emphasis on the role of analysis. According to him “science should be defined as the ‘pursuit of truth’ and philosophy the ‘pursuit of meaning’.”²³ In *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein is of the view that the problem of philosophy is about the language of philosophers. Most of the problems of philosophy will be over if only we can clarify the meaning of some of the concepts we use in philosophy.²⁴ Owing to this fact, the charge that philosophers always bent on the construction of a system that is inclined to simplify the fact unduly (error of the philosophers) is unfounded following Wittgenstein's simple explanation.

Second, the error of the moralist. The moralist, being primarily concerned with conducts, tends to become absorbed in *means*. That is, they value the actions men ought to perform more than the *ends* which such actions served. This becomes a fallacy for Russell because the immediate judgements which are required in ethics concern intrinsic goods and evils, not right or wrong conduct that the moralists tend to overemphasized. I want to agree with Russell on this view because taking the concept right/wrong as primary elements of ethics instead of good/bad amounts to putting a cart before the horse. Thus, Russell sums up that if the mistakes which are liable to be made in attempting to form an immediate judgment as to goodness or badness of a thing are avoided, it will become obvious that people probably differ very little in their judgment of intrinsic value.

Conclusion

To sum up, it is evident as it has been shown in this paper that Russell's effort in *The Elements of Ethics* basically revolves around the analysis of the two central notions in ethics which he referred to as the elements of ethics. That is, the notion of *good* and *bad*. Russell concluded that the most fundamental notions in ethics are the notions of intrinsic good and evil (bad). The reason given to support this conclusion is that, these notions are wholly independent of other notion and the goodness or badness of a thing cannot be inferred from any of its other qualities such as its existence or non-existence. This is mainly premised upon the fact that 'is' cannot possibly be drawn from 'ought'.

On a more critical mood, most modern moral philosophers will not want to accept the position of Moore and Russell that Good is absolute property, standing on its own after claiming that good is not definable. Also the idea of taking the notion of good beyond the realm of human understanding is questionable, because for Russell, 'good' is objective and stand independently alone apart from other things.

Endnotes

1. Mill J. S., *Utilitarianism*, (New York: Hackett Publishing Company Inc, 1979)p. 1
2. Blackburn Simon, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) p.121
3. Honderich Ted, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) p. 270
4. Moore G.E., *Principia Ethica* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978) p.1
5. Moore G. E., *Ethics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966) p.1
6. Hare R.M., *The Language of Morals*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1972) p.iii
7. Boylan M., *Basic Ethics* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2008) p.2
8. Bertrand Russell, "The Elements of Ethics" in Wilfrid Sellars and John Hospers ed. *Readings in Ethical Theory* (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1970) p.3
9. Bertrand Russell, "Elements of Ethics" in Wilfrid Sellars & John Hospers (eds.) *Readings in Ethical Theory*. (New Jersey: Printice-Hall INC., 1970) P.4-5

10. Bertrand Russell, "Elements of Ethics", p.5
11. Ibid ,p.5
12. Moral Realism: This is the view that there objective moral facts independently of anyone's beliefs.
13. Santayana George, "Hypostatic Ethics" in Sellars W. and Hospers J. (eds.) *Readings in Ethical Theory*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.,1970)p.131
14. Argument/fallacy of contradiction of propositions can occur if one is considering the qualities in themselves instead of the things of which those qualities belong.
15. Ibid, p.16
16. Lyons David, "Utilitarian Generalization" In Wilfrid Sellars & John Hospers (eds.) *Readings in Ethical Theory*. (New Jersey: Printice-Hall INC., 1970)p.451
17. Determinism: this is the doctrine that all volitions are determined by causes.
18. Free-will; Russell use free-will to mean the doctrine that not all volitions are determined by causes, which is the denial of determinism.
19. Ibid, p. 16
20. Ibid, p.17
21. Ibid, p.18
22. Ibid, p.20

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 24. Wittgenstein, L., *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, p.38