

History of Philosophy

79 Ethics Since Logical Positivism

By Dr. Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College

Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes explores the **evolution of ethical theory** following the decline of **logical positivism**. It details how philosophers moved away from **A.J. Ayer's emotivism**, which dismissed moral statements as mere expressions of feeling, toward more **robust metaethical and normative frameworks**. Holmes highlights the return of **intuitionism**, the rise of **prescriptivism**, and the development of **divine command theory** as ways to restore cognitive meaning to moral language. The text also examines influential modern figures like **John Rawls and Robert Nozick**, who shifted the focus toward **social contracts and individual rights**. Finally, it discusses **Alasdair MacIntyre's** pivotal role in reviving **virtue ethics**, emphasizing the importance of moral character over rule-based decision-making. Through these transitions, Holmes illustrates how contemporary philosophy successfully **reclaimed ethics as a serious field of rational inquiry**.

Briefing Document:

The Evolution of Ethical Theory Since Logical Positivism

Executive Summary

The landscape of ethical theory underwent a profound transformation in the mid-20th century, moving from the restrictive empiricism of logical positivism to a diverse resurgence of normative ethics and metaethical inquiry. Initially, logical positivism—spearheaded by figures like A.J. Ayer—relegated moral judgments to mere emotive expressions, stripping them of cognitive meaning. However, the emergence of ordinary language analysis and the work of philosophers like Elizabeth Anscombe broke this "stranglehold," restoring the validity of moral discourse.

The subsequent decades saw a revival of diverse frameworks, including:

- **Metaethical Developments:** Prescriptivism, descriptivism, and the "moral point of view" approach challenged the positivist verification criterion.
- **Divine Command Theory:** A renewal of the relationship between a moral law-giver and the meaningfulness of moral law.
- **Normative Ethics:** The rise of comprehensive systems such as John Rawls's contractarianism, Robert Nozick's rights-based individualism, and Alan Gewirth's Kantian respect for persons.
- **Virtue Ethics:** A significant shift led by Alasdair MacIntyre from rule-governed ethics to a focus on character and historical traditions.

The Post-Positivist Shift in Metaethics

In the early 20th century, logical positivism asserted that all meaningful statements were either tautologies or empirically verifiable. This led to the **Emotivist Theory of Ethics**, most notably articulated by A.J. Ayer.

The Emotivist Challenge (A.J. Ayer)

- **Cognitive Meaninglessness:** Ayer argued that moral judgments are not statements of fact or even descriptions of subjective states. They are "emotive expressions" lacking any predicate.
- **Psychological Reference:** Saying "stealing is wrong" is viewed merely as an expression of a psychological state or an exhortation, rather than a moral judgment that can be true or false.

Responses to the Naturalistic Fallacy

The debate was framed by G.E. Moore's "naturalistic fallacy," which argued that "the good" is a non-natural property that cannot be reduced to empirical definitions like pleasure or utility.

- **Intuitionism:** Moore maintained an intuitive recognition of the good. W.D. Ross expanded this, focusing on the intuitive recognition of "the right" (duty-based) rather than "the good" (consequence-based).

- **The Moral Point of View (William Frankena):** Frankena argued that moral terms depend on taking a "moral point of view"—a non-cognitive attitude that allows for cognitive moral judgments. He famously noted that while one cannot deduce an "ought" from an "is" alone, the addition of a theological premise (e.g., God exists) allows for such a deduction.

Ordinary Language Analysis

Ordinary language analysis loosened scientific empiricism by examining how moral language is actually used.

- **Prescriptivism (R.M. Hare):** In *The Language of Morals*, Hare argued that moral language is primarily **imperative** rather than indicative. It prescribes actions ("Don't do it!") rather than describing facts, thereby evading the positivist verification requirement.
- **Descriptivism (John Searle and Philippa Foot):** Searle argued that one can derive an "ought" from an "is" through "speech acts." For example, the factual act of making a promise inherently involves placing oneself under a moral obligation.

The Resurgence of Divine Command Theory

A critical turning point occurred with Elizabeth Anscombe's 1955 article, "Modern Moral Philosophy."

The Necessity of a Law-Giver

- **The Conspiracy of Silence:** Anscombe argued that modern ethics had attempted to eliminate the concept of "law" while retaining legalistic moral language.
- **The Foundation of Meaning:** She asserted that the concept of "moral law" is factually meaningless without a moral law-giver. To restore meaning to universal and unchanging moral law, one must acknowledge the Judeo-Christian or Stoic roots of a law-giver.
- **Integration:** Anscombe proposed a combination of Divine Command Theory (to provide the basis for obligation and meaning) and Natural Law (to provide the means of knowing moral obligations).

Contemporary Proponents

- **Robert and Marilyn Adams:** Leaders in the renewal of Divine Command Theory at UCLA.
- **Philip Quinn:** A key voice at Notre Dame and editor of *Faith and Philosophy*, focusing on the philosophical rigor of divine command.

Major Schools of Modern Normative Ethics

The decline of positivism allowed for a "vigorous activity" in normative ethics over the last twenty years. This era is defined by five influential thinkers:

Philosopher	Key Work	Core Philosophy
John Rawls	<i>A Theory of Justice</i>	Contractarianism: Morality based on social agreement reached behind a "veil of ignorance" to ensure equity.
Robert Nozick	<i>Anarchy, the State, and Utopia</i>	Ethical Egoism/Individualism: Focus on acquisition rights and minimal legal regulation.
Alan Gewirth	<i>Reason and Morality</i>	Kantianism: The "Principle of Generic Consistency" requiring respect for others' freedom and life projects.
Alan Donegan	<i>The Theory of Morality</i>	Kantian/Judeo-Christian: Argued that the principles of Judeo-Christian ethics are rationally true.
Alasdair MacIntyre	<i>After Virtue</i>	Virtue Ethics: A shift from rule-governed decisions to the cultivation of moral character and soul.

Comparative Frameworks

- **Rawls vs. Nozick:** Rawls emphasizes the equitable distribution of benefits and costs, particularly favoring the "least advantaged." In contrast, Nozick advocates for individual acquisition rights, viewing morality through the lens of individual initiative and respect for property.
- **Gewirth's Consistency:** Gewirth's approach is a "respect for persons" model. He argues that since every individual desires the freedom to pursue

their own goals, logical consistency requires them to respect that same freedom in others.

The Virtue Ethics Tradition: Alasdair MacIntyre

Alasdair MacIntyre represents a significant departure from the Enlightenment's "rule-governed" ethics.

The Historical Critique

MacIntyre argues that from the Greeks through the Middle Ages, ethics was focused on **virtue** (the growth of the soul). The 18th-century Enlightenment shifted this focus to a science of rules and utilitarianism, which is indifferent to character.

Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry

MacIntyre identifies three incommensurable traditions (meaning they cannot be translated into or evaluated by the norms of the others):

1. **Aristotelian/Thomist:** Centered on wisdom, prudence, and "human flourishing" (actualizing human potential).
2. **Enlightenment (Encyclopedic):** A rationalistic, scientific approach seeking a universal science of ethics.
3. **Nietzschean (Genealogical):** An ethic of power and voluntaristic desires where reason is merely a servant to emotion.

Moral Development and Tradition

MacIntyre suggests that moral values are interiorized by participating in the "narrative" of a tradition or community. This approach has influenced theological ethicists like Stanley Hauerwas, who ties virtue ethics to the life of the community and the adoption of its story.

Study Guide:

Ethics Since Logical Positivism: A Study Guide

This study guide examines the shift in ethical theory from the rigid scientific empiricism of early 20th-century logical positivism to the resurgence of normative ethics and virtue-based approaches. It explores meta-ethical debates regarding the meaning of moral language and the contributions of influential modern philosophers.

Section 1: Review Quiz

Instructions: Provide short-answer responses (2–3 sentences each) for the following questions based on the source material.

1. How did A.J. Ayer view the nature of moral judgments within the framework of logical positivism?
2. What distinction did W.D. Ross make between "the good" and "the right" in his intuitionist theory?
3. According to the source, how did William Frankena argue that an "ought" could be derived from an "is"?
4. What is the core argument of R.M. Hare's "prescriptivism"?
5. How does John Searle use the example of a "speech act" to support descriptivism?
6. In what three ways can Divine Command Theory be applied to ethical inquiry?
7. What was Elizabeth Anscombe's primary critique of modern moral philosophy in her 1958 article?
8. What is the function of the "veil of ignorance" in John Rawls's contractarian approach to justice?
9. How does Alan Gewirth's "principle of generic consistency" function as a rebirth of Kantian ethics?
10. What is the central focus of Alasdair MacIntyre's "virtue ethics" compared to 18th-century Enlightenment ethics?

Section 2: Answer Key

1. **A.J. Ayer's View:** Ayer argued that moral judgments are cognitively meaningless because they cannot be empirically verified. He maintained that statements like "stealing is wrong" are merely emotive expressions or psychological descriptions of a speaker's state, rather than factual predicates.
2. **Ross's Distinction:** Ross distinguished "the good" as the concern of consequentialists like Mill who focus on outcomes, whereas "the right" refers to the intrinsic quality of an act or motive. For Ross, "the right" is an intuitive recognition of obligations—such as fulfilling a promise—that arise from specific relationships or contracts.
3. **Frankena's "Ought" from "Is":** Frankena argued that while a factual "is" does not logically imply an "ought" on its own, the addition of a theological premise (such as the existence of a personal moral God) provides a basis for value. By introducing a source of moral obligation into the initial premises, one can logically deduce a moral conclusion from factual situations.
4. **Hare's Prescriptivism:** Hare concluded that moral language is primarily imperative rather than indicative, meaning its root significance is "Don't do it!" rather than "A is B." In this view, moral assertions are prescriptions that command action, allowing them to evade the positivist requirement for factual verification.
5. **Searle's Speech Act:** Searle demonstrated that the act of saying "I hereby promise to pay Smith \$5" is a factual, empirically verifiable situation that contains an inherent commitment. By following a logical chain from the act of promising to the resulting obligation, he argued that a moral "ought" can be derived directly from a described "is."
6. **Three Applications of Divine Command Theory:** It can be used to establish the basis of moral obligation (answering "why be good?"), as a source of moral knowledge (revelation of what is right), or to define the meaning of moral terms (stating that "right" refers to the will of God).
7. **Anscombe's Critique:** Anscombe complained that modern ethics had attempted to eliminate the conception of "law" from the field. She argued that

without a moral law-giver, the concept of a universal or unchanging moral law becomes factually and empirically meaningless.

8. **The Veil of Ignorance:** This is a hypothetical stance where individuals designing a society know nothing about their future outcomes or status. Rawls argued that behind this veil, people would choose principles that equitably distribute benefits and costs, particularly favoring the least advantaged.
9. **Principle of Generic Consistency:** Gewirth argued that because every individual desires the freedom to pursue their own life projects, logical consistency requires them to respect the same freedom in others. This mirrors Kant's universalizability principle by treating people as ends in themselves rather than mere means.
10. **MacIntyre's Virtue Ethics:** MacIntyre shifted the focus from a rule-governed ethic of individual decisions and actions to an emphasis on moral character and the growth of the soul. He argued that the Enlightenment focused on utility and rules, whereas the earlier tradition focused on cultivating virtues within a community.

Section 3: Essay Questions

Instructions: The following questions are designed for more in-depth analysis. Answers are not provided.

1. **The Decline of Emotivism:** Trace the transition from A.J. Ayer's claim that moral language is meaningless to the "ordinary language analysis" that allowed for a broader understanding of ethical terms.
2. **Descriptivism vs. Prescriptivism:** Compare and contrast R.M. Hare's view of moral language as a command with John Searle's view of moral language as an empirical description of value-laden facts.
3. **Law and the Law-Giver:** Evaluate Elizabeth Anscombe's assertion that the Judeo-Christian and Stoic traditions are essential for maintaining a meaningful concept of moral law.

4. **The Great Harvard Debate:** Compare the contractarian, liberal principles of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* with the conservative, acquisition-based ethical egoism of Robert Nozick.
5. **Incommensurability of Traditions:** Analyze Alasdair MacIntyre's argument regarding the three rival versions of moral inquiry (Aristotelian, Enlightenment, and Nietzschean) and how they differ in their conceptions of rationality.

Section 4: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Cognitive Meaninglessness	The logical positivist claim that moral terminology refers to nothing and cannot be verified, thus conveying no factual information.
Contractarianism	An ethical approach, such as that of John Rawls, that bases morality and social obligation on a social agreement or contract.
Descriptivism	The theory (associated with Searle and Foot) that moral obligations can be derived from descriptions of value-laden empirical facts.
Divine Command Theory	The view that moral obligations, the meaning of "right," or the source of moral knowledge are rooted in the will or commands of God.
Emotivism	A theory popularized by A.J. Ayer stating that moral judgments are merely expressions of feelings or attitudes rather than factual statements.
Human Flourishing	A term often used for the goal of virtue ethics, referring to the full actualization or flowering of human potential.

Incommensurability	The idea that different philosophical or moral traditions cannot be evaluated or translated by the norms of one another.
Intuitionism	The belief (held by Moore and Ross) that humans have a direct recognition of moral truths, such as "the good" or "the right," which cannot be reduced to natural properties.
Metaethics	A branch of philosophy concerned with the meaning and nature of ethical language rather than specific moral judgments.
Naturalistic Fallacy	G.E. Moore's argument that "the good" cannot be defined by or reduced to any natural or empirical property like pleasure or utility.
Ordinary Language Analysis	A philosophical movement that broadened the narrow scientific empiricism of logical positivism by looking at how language is used in common parlance.
Prescriptivism	R.M. Hare's theory that moral language functions as an imperative or command (a prescription) rather than a factual description.
Principle of Generic Consistency	Alan Gewirth's principle that one should act in accordance with the generic rights of others to ensure logical consistency in claiming one's own rights.
Virtue Ethics	An approach to ethics, emphasized by MacIntyre, that focuses on the cultivation of moral character and internal qualities rather than just rules for action.