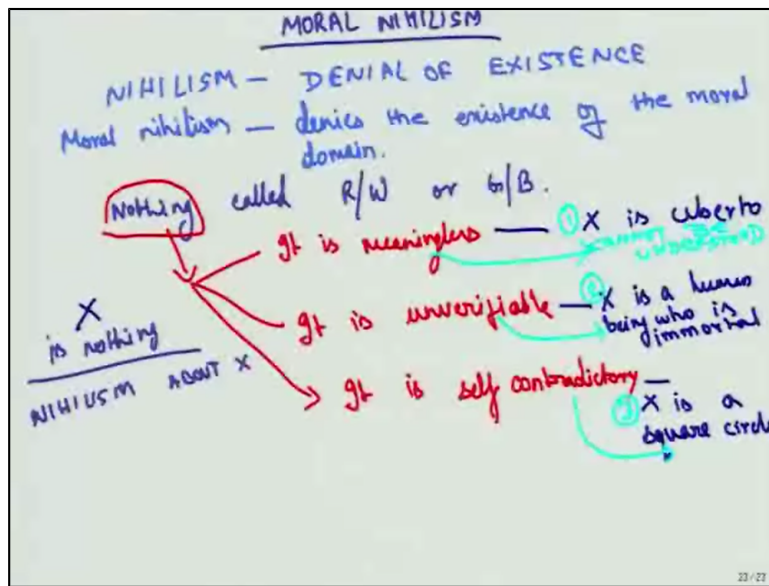


**Ethics**  
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**Module No. #01**  
**Lecture No. #19**  
**Non-Cognitive or Non-Descriptivist Theories Intuitionism Nihilism**

Today, we have our concluding talk on, Metaethics. And, we would talk about, Moral Nihilism. Now, what does Moral Nihilism mean?

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If you take a look at the slide, well, Nihilism means, a denial of existence, or what is said to be absent. Well. Let us briefly talk about, what we mean by Nihilism, and Moral Nihilism. Now, Nihilism is a more general Metaphysical or a Philosophical Theory, which talks about the absence of any particular postulated entity or mentioned entity. So, Nihilism, simplistically put, means that, there is nothing. So, if I am a Nihilist about God, so I am denying, that there is anything called God.

If I am Metaphysical Nihilist, I am denying that there are any metaphysical entities. If I am a Physical Nihilist, and I am denying that there are any physical entities, so, various versions of Nihilism are about, denying the existence of certain entities. Now, by the very meaning of it,

Moral Nihilism comes out to mean, that well, something that denies the possibility of moral, of the moral domain, of the moral agent, of the entire moral drama, if in so, is so.

Now, what does this mean? Now, many of us would be having an impression, or would be wondering, that well, perhaps there is nothing really right and wrong. And, everything is a figment of imagination. Everything is, as a proposition, or as a truth claim, is unverifiable. And perhaps, that is why, it is false, now, in such a theory, definitely is not unheard of in philosophy. In fact, Nihilism has been a standard denial, of many positive discourses.

But, let us say, what does Moral Nihilism claim. Now, if you look at the slide, well, a Moral Nihilism denies the existence of the moral domain. Now, what does this mean? Does it mean, that say, nothing called right and wrong, or good and bad. Well. Now, this term that we use, nothing is not an insignificant term. In fact, it is a having a lot of meaning. What exactly do we mean by nothing? Do we mean, that well, it is meaningless, or that it is unverifiable, or that say it is self-contradictory.

Let us take examples of these, that would perhaps further clarify. Let us talk about something called an entity X. Now, if I say X is Uberto, it does not mean anything. If I say that, X is a human being, who is immortal. And, the third entity we use that, X is a square circle. Now, there are these three possibilities, that we are considering. That, of these three, which is an example of, what is it for X to be nothing, or Nihilism about X. So, does it mean, that well, X cannot be comprehended. Or, does it mean that, it is unverifiable. Or, does it mean that, it is self-contradictory.

Well. This is how, the word nothing used, can have various meanings. Now, what exactly do we mean by Moral Nihilism. Well. Moral Nihilism would have different strains, which could mean either of the examples, that have been listed. Now, if I say that well, the moral claim is meaningless. Let us say, now if the moral claim is meaningless, it would mean that well, when somebody makes a claim, that such and such act is right or good or wrong or bad, it does not register any meaning with the listener.

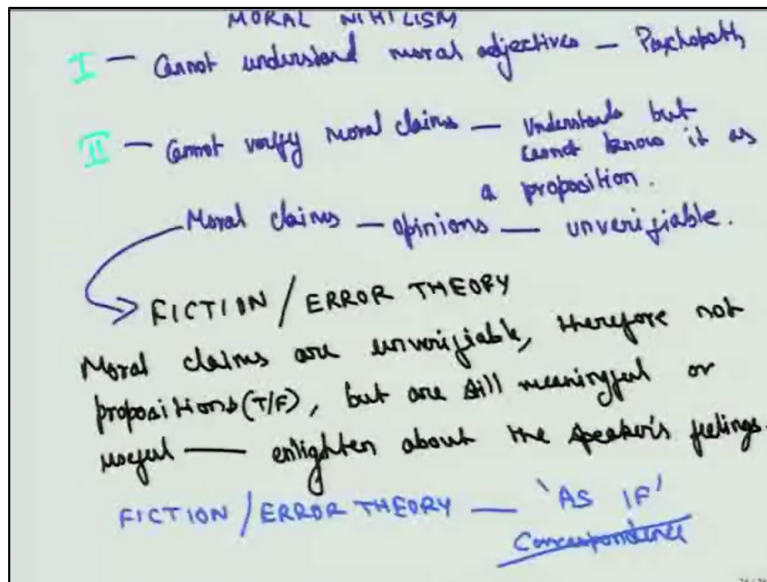
Now, if the speaker says, that well, torture is wrong. The listener cannot comprehend, what does the speaker mean. But, when it is being said as meaningless. When the speaker says, that well, torture is wrong. The listener understands, that well, the speaker does not approve of torture. That, the speaker has a belief, that torture is a wrong, or incorrect, or should be avoided. But, how does he know, that it is true, that it is just a matter of the speaker's belief.

And, third would be, when it is self-contradictory. Or, when I say torture is wrong, that well, there is something right in torture, which is being contradicted by this claim, that torture is wrong. Well. Most of the strains of Nihilism, that we are familiar with is, when we talk about the first and the second. Now, first is, who is a psychopath, when one does not register with the moral domain.

So, moral sentiments like remorse, guilt, or a pride, or judgement of right and wrong, are simply absent. So, when a policeman is trying to explain, to a psychopath, that well, what you did is wrong. Psychopath perhaps does not understand, that what he is done is right or wrong. Whenever the terms right, wrong, good, bad, or moral adjectives are used, it seems to be in another language, it seems to be meaningless, to the psychopath.

Well. I did, what I wanted to do. And, I do not know, what you mean by saying that, it is right or wrong, or good or bad, or whatever other moral adjective, you use. Now, this is a case of a psychopathic Moral Nihilists, who is complete denial of the moral domain. That, imagine going through the world, without having any moral domain. Now, the second strain, or which I may call the lighter strain of Moral Nihilism. Right. Let me list it down, for your convenience.

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First is, these are all strains of Moral Nihilism. Cannot understand, moral terms or moral adjectives. The example would be the, psychopath. Now, second is one, who cannot verify the moral claims, and is therefore understands, but cannot know it, as a proposition. Let us see the example of, what is meant by the second. We just talked about the first one. The second one is, somebody who is talking about, when comes across moral claims, can make sense.

The Emotivist being to a certain extent, one of such a kind. That well, I understand, when you say that, X is wrong. But, I do not know, if there is a way, I can verify that X is really wrong, or X is wrong independent of your opinion, that X is wrong is just your opinion, it is not objectively verifiable. Now, if this is also a strain of Moral Nihilism, where moral claims are understood as opinions. So, moral claims come out to be as opinions, and therefore unverifiable.

So, if you say that torture is wrong, and somebody else says that torture is right, it does not make a difference. Because, none of it can be verified, and therefore we cannot know, what is true. Now, let us look at it, this way. A Moral Nihilist is denying, what is the claim of the entire moral domain, that there is anything called morality, that exists. Well. Whatever exists, first the first version of it is denying, that there is nothing called morality. The second, or the weaker, or the lighter version of it, sees it as storytelling, or as a fiction, as an Error Theory.

So, let us consider this as fiction, on which in technical terms in philosophy, has been known as Error Theory. That well, moral claims are unverifiable, therefore not propositions. Now, what is a proposition? A proposition is something, that can be either classified as, true or false. And therefore, not propositions, but are still meaningful, or useful. Useful for what? Useful to enlighten, about the speaker's feelings towards the act.

Let us say, so now, when we talk about Fictionalism, or the moral domain as a fiction, it is something, which is frequently refer in philosophy as the, As if version. So, let us say the stories, that we come across. Let us say, the talk of Santa Claus, or mythological characters. We start believing that, them as real entity. That is, the existence dependent of our perceptions, they are not a creation of our imagination, as children.

And, as we grow up, we perhaps learn and realise, that well, these are fictional characters. And, this is a work of fiction, and therefore it is not true. But, yet a fiction of a useful kind, because it conveys something useful. So, in that way, because there have been strains of Moral Nihilism, which can be debated, whether they could be put into the, domain of Moral Nihilism at all.

Because, they subscribe to another Metaethical foundation, which could claim some moral rules, but yet deny the utility of any moral domain at all. They would fuse with the, borderlines of naturalism. Let us take an example. Let us say, we are playing a game. Now, as soon as you are playing a game, you see that well, there is a set of rules.

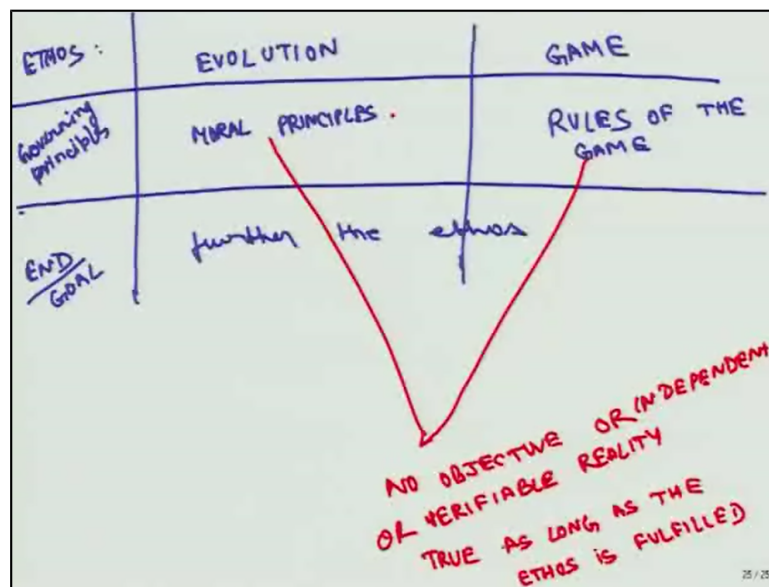
Now, unless and until there is a set of rules, we cannot play the game. Now, these set of rules are nothing absolute or valid, beyond the game. But, when within the game, it is absolutely meaningful, and it is valid. Now, moral rules could perhaps be, to a certain extent, like that. Now, these are not strictly Moral Nihilism, but this is what in philosophy people have called, Fictionalism, or Error Theory, of various kinds.

Now, as if, is very important over here. When we talk about fictional theory, we talk about something called, As if. So, it does not matter, whether that is the case, that there is correspondence. But, it is a claim of a useful kind, just like we talk about the game. That, there

are rules, only as long as you are in the game. So, when the game is over, the rules are over. And, the game is the greater Metaethical foundation. Let us take an example.

Now, let us say, evolution is the foundation or the fundamental ethos, that well, survival or the propagation of one species, and betterment of the same. Now, if this is the fundamental ethos, which is analogical to the game. The rules of the game, which is analogical to moral principles of the society, is to further the survival, and the propagation, and the evolution of the species. Now, let us take a look at it, how does it seem, figuratively.

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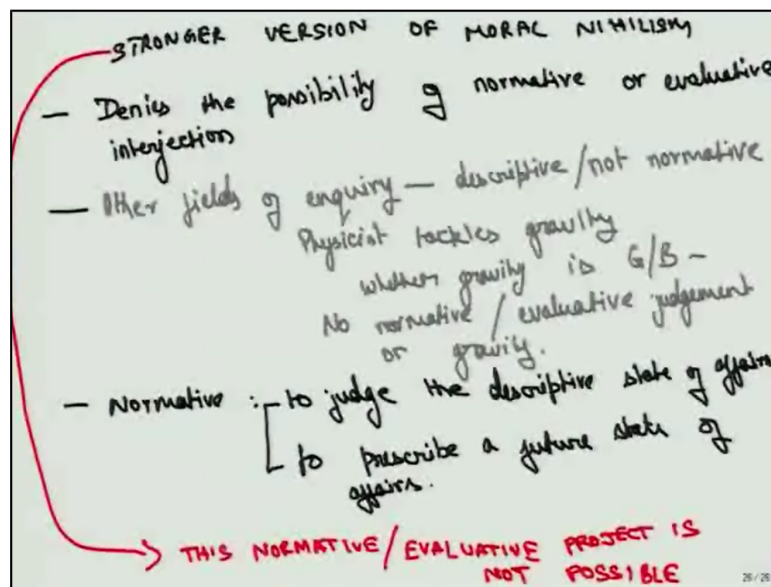
Now, figuratively, if this is the evolution, and this is the game, let this be the ethos. Now, we take a look at the, rules of the game, are the moral principles. So, the rules of the game, are equivalent to the analogical to the moral principles. The end of the game, this can be called as the governing principles. And, the end or goal, is further the ethos, in either cases. So, here we see this, well then, there is no objective or verifiable reality.

Everything is just true, as long as the game lasts. Right. If we see the moral principles, they are only true, as long as, they further the cause of evolution. There is no objective, or independent, or verifiable reality about it. So, this kind of fiction is something, which goes on, without the need for verification. So, this comes close to ethical naturalism, where moral principles are reduced to

understandable, in terms of non-moral principles. Here, which in this case, is the ethos of the projects.

So, the ethos of the game, and the ethos as evolutions, so whatever is the ethos, we choose. The utilitarian chooses, pleasure and pain as the ethos. The Evolutionary Theorist would choose, evolution as the ethos. So, it is a non-moral ethos, which can explain the moral principles, which are just mere constructs, to forward the non-moral ethos. Now, let us look at the, stronger version of Moral Nihilism

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Now, the stronger version of Moral Nihilism, denies the possibility of Normative or evaluative interjection. Now, if other disciplines are to be considered, or other fields of enquiry are to be considered, or the majority of the enquiry in other fields is descriptive, are definitely not Normative. What does it mean? It means that well, as a physicist, suppose I am trying to study gravity.

So, when the physicist tackles gravity, the physicist is actually trying to understand gravity, and does not make the question, whether gravity is good or bad, does not arise. So, there is no Normative, or evaluative judgement on gravity. So, it is just a description. So, suppose some sociologist talking about, the description of a society, and the characteristics and the features of a

society. Well. Sociologist is well required to enumerate the same, find out the same, but not judge the same.

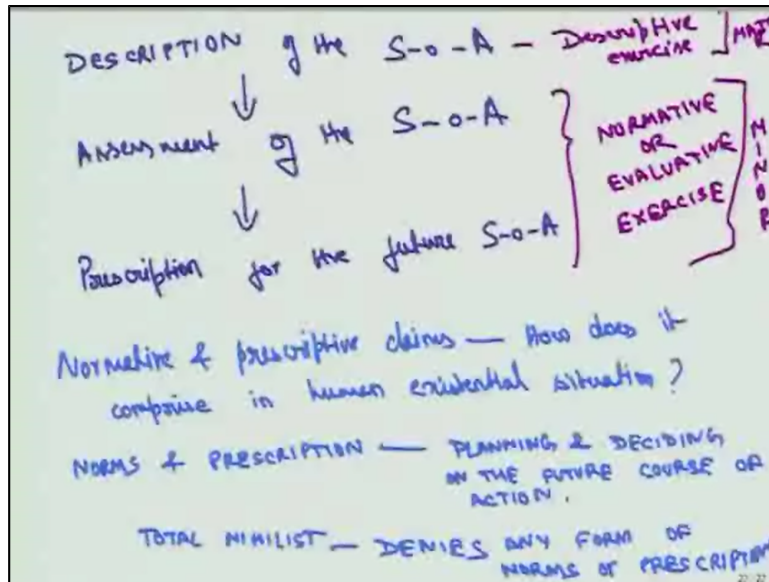
So, the Anthropologist is trying to study, various tribes, their practices, but is not trying to settle on norms, or sit on a judgement seat. Now, every discipline has a Normative part too. A Normative part, which makes a judgement, on the descriptive practices, and suggests a future course of actions. So, what is it to be Normative? To be Normative, is to judge the descriptive state of affairs, and to prescribe a future state of affairs.

So, the stronger version of Moral Nihilism claims that well, this Normative exercise in Ethics, this Normative or evaluative project is not possible. That is, we cannot assess, and we cannot go beyond, the description of a state of affairs. Because, the very moment that we have a moral domain, we are making a Normative or an evaluative claim. A claim, that is not a part, or written in the description of the state of affairs. Now, let us look at this.

What does the Moral Nihilist mean? Now, if the stronger version of Moral Nihilism is talking about well, that there is no Normative field possible. That, one cannot, first, assess or evaluate the descriptive state of affairs. And second, thereof cannot prescribe the future course of action. So, if you look at it, it is a very classic case of two sequences.

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First, we have descriptive state of affairs, or description of the state of affairs. From here, we go to the assessment of the state of affairs. And finally, we come to the prescription for the future state of affairs. Now, this is the Normative or evaluative exercise. And, this is the descriptive exercise. This portion, this is the major subject area of, most of the disciplines, with a minor area for, Normative or evaluative exercise.

Now, let us look at an example, something very trivial, and something very simple. So simple as, suppose one is making a general prescription, like well, exercising is good for you. So, exercising contributes to one's health, and therefore it is good for one. Now, what is the difference between a clinical Doctor, who is making a descriptive diagnosis, and a medical counsellor, who is making a Prescriptive suggestion.

Let us build it, in a form of a story. Let us say, this patient X, or person X, has certain cardiological problems. And, this person goes to a Cardiologist. The Cardiologist makes a clinical description of the state of affairs. The clinical description includes, well, 2 of the 3 arteries have been with block. And therefore, the heart is not functioning normally. What is the remedy? The crucial main arteries have to be opened up, or a bypass surgery has to be done.

Now, this is purely perhaps a descriptive approach to the problem. So, this is a description of the state of affair. Now, after the description of the state of affair, the patient goes to a medical

counsellor. Now, the counsellor tries to tell the patient, that well, this is the situation. And, more desirable situation is, when there is no blockage in the artery.

And, to reach that, one must have, say, reduce the content of cholesterol in one's food, do a little more exercises, and take less stress, or whatever the suggestions that they come about. Now, these are the Prescriptive component of the evaluation. The Doctor or the Cardiologist, who did the assessment, is just giving a description of, what condition the heart is in. And, the first stage of prescription, there was a surgery.

But, the medical counsellor goes ahead, with more cases of prescription saying, that well, surgery is a cure, but there are some things in your lifestyle, that is contributing to this. So, perhaps you have to eradicate these things, in your lifestyle, to get a better health. And here, fundamental ethos is that, health is desirable over ill-health. Now, this is the foundational claim. And, how does one promote health. Now, that depends. That is how, the medical counsellor gives this prescriptions, how it is to be done.

Now, if this is an example of a prescription description claim, can we work, or can we go through our lives, without Normative and Prescriptive claims. So, Normative and Prescriptive claims, is it possible. How does it comprise in the, human existential situation? Because, now whenever we are talking about norms and prescription, we are talking about planning and deciding on the future course of action. So, a Total Nihilist, not just a Moral Nihilist, totally denies any form of norms or prescription.

If you look at the Nihilist, who is totally denying the possibility of norms and prescription, will also not be able to say, that well, why exercise is good for health, or one ought to exercise more. Because, here the foundational claim is that well, health is more desirable than ill-health. And, it has been inductively seen mostly, and deductive to a minor extent that, exercise leads to better health. Now, these kind of claims are also, Normative in a sense.

Because, one is assessing that, health is better than ill-health. That, when one makes a judgement, one is making a Normative claim. So, I will leave you with certain things, to explore

and think for yourself. That well, can we go about life, without making Normative judgements, without making Prescriptive claims. Or, creation of norms, a part of how we make sense of the world around us. Or, creation of judgement, or creation of standards, is how we make sense of the world around us.

So, if we are judging something as right and wrong, apart from the moral domain, even say in the physical domain, the aesthetic domain, that well, why do I want to look better than worse, or what is it to look better than worse. So, these are all judgements, that we have been making about. In fact, from one angle I may argue, that the way we proceed forward in life, or the human agent continues is, because of these norms, that are found.

In fact, this is also the reason, why decision-making is, many times a generalist paradigm. That well, ultimately the decisions to be taken are simple. Perhaps, this is a reason, why there is a justification for leadership in democracy, to have more of the trust of people, than to be meritorious, or technically knowledgeable. So, this task of the specialist in a democratic leadership, is to bring forward the technical dilemma, in general terms to the leadership.

And, the leadership thereof has to decide, what is the right thing to do. So in fact, the leader's norms are, trusted by the people. And, that is why, perhaps the leader is elected. Whereas, the specialists, their norms are not trusted by the people, or their norms are not put to the test of trust by the people. That, norms are just, are kept independent. The specialists are in the position, in which they are, because of their detailed knowledge, of the technical details.

But, that does not make the judgement enough. If you look at it, this way. That well, no matter, how much a technical details of a situation can be provided, that is not sufficient to make a decision. A decision has to be always made and simplified in to, what in general conditions, or in general situations about norms. So, as long as, the leadership on top, does not have to be a genius, or a specialist in any particular trait, to take a decision at the highest echelons about that.

Rather, the leadership has to be trustable, or has to have a displayed, or has to have a set of norms, that are trusted by the people. So, as long as, just because, taking the example of a

standard scenario, that a good Doctor, does not automatically become a good Health Minister. A good, or a sharp, or a knowledgeable, or an accomplished Scientist, does not necessarily become a good Minister of Science and Technology.

So, these are issues, and points, and directions, that point out, that well, there is a difference between having the technical knowledge, or the details of the specialised knowledge, vis-à-vis, the Normative or Prescriptive claims. So, the Normative claims are, what makes the leadership trustworthy. So, the Normative framework of an aspiring leader, would in principle determine, whether he is elected or not, by the people.

So, trust is a function of once Normative claim. So, this is just by the way exploration of, which you are free to assess and evaluate for your own self, that well, what is it that makes leadership, so non-specialised, that it cannot be learnt, or it cannot be decoded, or it cannot be algorithmized. So, this is an example of, well, power, and the necessity of norms and prescription, in governing our future action. Because, we are looking for norms. We are trying to have universally acceptable norms, to decide on the future course of action.

So, this set of norms, gives the future course of action. Because, if we strictly rely on a descriptive state of affair, then how do we decide, or how are the norms, for taking the course of action, decided. When a decision is being taken? Decision is being taken, not in retrospective, but in anticipation. That well, this is a desirable state of affairs, that we plan to bring about. This is the current state of affairs, which the descriptive or the specialised detailed wing, would bring in.

But, that by itself, is not sufficient to determine, what is it that, we would seek to bring forth in the future. So, that link, between a specialised current description, and how we would like to. And, the future course of action is, where there is the human agency, and this section of Normative inquiries in various disciplines, that determines, that well, how you would like the future course of action to be. That, there is a moral consensus, that say, we need to eradicate poverty.

The specialist job is perhaps, how best we can do it. But, whether we need to eradicate poverty, whether the poverty is a good thing or a bad thing, that is a Normative claim. It seems trivial, because most of us have an agreement about, poverty being unacceptable, or very much avoidable state of human existence. But, that is because, there is perhaps a universal human agreement. Now, let us take more tenacious issue, say whether, prostitution should be legal or not.

Now, this is a certain question, which perhaps has less concurrence, than a question, that poverty eradication is a requirement, or health is desirable over ill-health. So, these are where the norms of the leaders, or norms of the decision-makers, are crucial in describing the future course of action. Because, what the descriptive disciplines, or inquiries, or subjects, give us is a, current state of affairs. But, how we would like the future to be is, depends on the norms, that we have.

So, we would in the later sections be talking about, what is taking up certain course of actions, certain applied ethical problems, we should be quite interesting and relevant. If the section on Metaethics has been singing, too abstract and theoretical. But, let me assure you that, it is a grounding, or a foundation, for the applied ethical problems, we disagree. In fact, if I see it as a reverse pyramid structure, that the foundation of Metaethics is small.

But, that variation in foundation, or variation in once Metaethical positions across agents, determines one's variation in the applied ethical problems. So, if somebody concurrence in Metaethical foundations, is likely to have a concurrence in, the applied ethical problems. So, we will be talking about applied ethical problems. Before that, we will be talking about, the moral frame work, in the Indian tradition also. And, we look forward to talking more theoretical and applied Moral Ethics claims.