Meta-ethics: An Introduction

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Meta-ethics is the area of philosophy in which thinkers explore the language and nature of moral discourse and its relations to other non-moral areas of life. In this introduction to the discipline written explicitly for novices, Leslie Allan outlines the key questions and areas of analysis in contemporary meta-ethics. In clear, tabular format, he summarizes the core concepts integral to each of the major meta-ethical positions and the strengths of each view. To prompt further thinking and reading, Allan explains briefly the major objections to each theory and lists each view's best known advocates.

1. What Is Meta-ethics?

Meta-ethics is a major field of enquiry in philosophy. The 'meta' in 'meta-ethics' signifies 'above'. Meta-ethics is the attempt to answer questions *about* ethics. Philosophers working in this area are not so much concerned with what people or acts in particular are ethical. These questions are the domain of an allied field of enquiry known as 'normative ethics'.

One way to get a feel for what meta-ethics is about is to ask yourself five key questions about morality: Where? What? Why? When? How? Each of these questions uncovers important aspects of meta-ethical enquiry. Let us look at each of these questions in turn.

Where do ethics come from? Does it originate in a divine plan for our lives or is goodness and badness part of the fabric of the universe? Or is it our efforts at negotiating mutually beneficial social relationships?

What do moral terms refer to when we make moral pronouncements? Are we simply referring to our own subjective preferences or to those of our group? Or are we appealing to something outside ourselves, such as God's commands or a realm of mind-independent moral properties?

Why do we engage in moral discourse? Are we trying to convince others of the truth of certain moral facts; to change their beliefs? Or is there something more, such as wanting to change their attitude to something or to come to some kind of mutual agreement on how to act?

When are we engaging in moral deliberation and when are we not? Is a moral preference substantively different from a culinary or an aesthetic preference? Is it different from a judgment of prudence?

How do we justify our moral judgments? How is it that we know we are right? Do we apprehend moral truths directly or only indirectly through reasoning? Or are we mistaken in thinking that there are moral facts that can be known?

Since the time of the ancient Greeks, moral philosophers have been grappling with these questions. A meta-ethical theory worth our attention attempts to answer each of these questions in a coherent and convincing way. Over the millennia, philosophical traditions have developed around the kinds of answers given. Answers have either gravitated towards either a Cognitivist or a Non-Cognitivist analysis of moral language. In addition, answers have been seen as either committing to a Realist or an Anti-realist view of moral properties. These divergent traditions are made clearer by looking at how each tradition poses solutions in three key areas of meta-ethical analysis. These three areas are:

Linguistic analysis: In this area of analysis, the meta-ethical theory gives an account of the meanings of ethical terms, such as 'good', 'right' and 'justice'. Cognitivist theories give more weight to the descriptive content of ethical utterances, treating them much like ordinary factual propositions. On this kind of theory, 'John is bad' expresses a fact in the same way as 'John is mad' expresses a true proposition. Non-cognitivist theories, on the

other hand, lend more weight to the emotive meaning of moral utterances. On these kinds of theory, 'John is bad' expresses a con-attitude or a rejection of John.

Extra-linguistic analysis: In this area, the theory tells a story about the psychological and social functions of ethics. Realist theories explain ethics in terms of some realm that is independent of individual and group preferences. Moral properties, such as 'good', may equate to natural properties, such as pleasure, or may relate to a non-natural realm. Anti-realist theories, on the other hand, view ethics as being the manifestation of the preferences of human beings or some idealized entity. On these kinds of theory, ethical systems serve human ends in guiding individual choices or in providing the social glue that binds us together.

Epistemological analysis: Here, the theory explores how we come to know which of our moral judgements are correct and which are mistaken. Cognitivist theories give a method or decision procedure for deciding the truth or falsity of moral claims. Conversely, non-cognitivist theories claim that there is no 'knowing' to be had as moral utterances do not have a truth value in the ordinary sense. The truth of 'John is bad', for the cognitivist, can be determined by reason alone or empirically. For the non-cognitivist, 'John is bad' is not an expression of a belief.

The table in the next section provides a concise classification of the major meta-ethical theories proposed throughout history. The table outlines the core ideas developed within each, the specific meta-ethical problems it deals with relatively easily and the main objections levelled against it by its key detractors. Finally, the table lists some of the most well-articulated advocates for each position.

2. Meta-ethical Theories

Type	Name	Core Concepts	Solutions	Objections	Proponents
Cognitivism/Realism	**Utilitarianism**	A naturalistic view of ethics that equates morality with facts about what promotes the welfare or interests of sentient creatures. On this view, 'good' means, for example, 'happiness' and 'right' means 'that which produces more good compared with alternative acts'.	• explains common feeling that there are moral facts • explains grounding of ethics in questions about human welfare	• commits naturalistic fallacy • commits is–ought fallacy • fails to account for motivation to act ethically • some duties do not maximize welfare	J. S. Mill
	Neo-Aristotel-ianism	A naturalistic view of ethics that grounds ethics in facts about human nature and evaluates living things as specimens of their kind. On this view, the definition of the 'good' may include that which contributes to the survival and effective functioning of the species.	• explains common feeling that there are moral facts • explains grounding of ethics in questions about human flourishing	• commits naturalistic fallacy • commits is–ought fallacy • fails to account for motivation to act ethically • living things have no evolutionary purpose	G. E. M. Anscombe, P. Foot, P. T. Geach
	Intuitionism	A non-naturalistic view of ethics that sees moral qualities and obligations as part of the fabric of the universe, but outside the empirical realm perceived by our physical senses. On this view, moral qualities and obligations are perceived or apprehended by a special moral sense.	• explains common feeling that there are moral facts • explains transcendence of ethics • explains immediacy of core moral judgements • avoids naturalistic fallacy	• commits is–ought fallacy • fails to account for motivation to act ethically • moral properties unlike all other properties in universe • fails to provide clear method for settling moral disagreements	M. Huemer, G. W. Leibniz, H. J. McCloskey, G. E. Moore, W. D. Ross, H. Sidgwick
	Rationalism	A non-naturalistic view of ethics that postulates that universalized moral rules can be deduced by reason alone. Such obligations, such as 'Do not commit suicide', apply to everyone everywhere and would be self-contradictory to deny.	• explains impartiality of ethics • explains transcendence of ethics • explains universal nature of moral judgements • avoids naturalistic fallacy	• commits is–ought fallacy • fails to justify many obligations as self-contradictory to deny	M. Huemer, I. Kant, C. Korsgaard

Type	Name	Core Concepts	Solutions	Objections	Proponents
Cognitivism/Anti-realism	Cultural Relativism	A type of relativism in ethics in which moral judgements are understood as the speaker's report of their social group's accepted norms of behaviour. On this view, 'Euthanasia is morally permissible', for example, means 'The culture to which I belong permits euthanasia'.	• explains common feeling that there are moral facts • explains dependence of moral norms on social context • avoids reliance on supernatural and non-natural properties	• commits naturalistic fallacy • commits is–ought fallacy • fails to account for possibility of moral reformers • fails to account for possibility of cross-cultural moral criticism	F. Boas, G. Harman, E. Westermarck, D. B. Wong
	Subjectivism	A type of relativism in ethics in which moral judgements are understood as the speaker's report of their psychological state of approving or preferring. On this view, 'Euthanasia is morally permissible', for example, means 'I am for euthanasia'.	• explains common feeling that there are moral facts • explains intractability of divergent moral views • avoids reliance on supernatural and non-natural properties	• commits naturalistic fallacy • commits is–ought fallacy • fails to account for moral conscience • fails to account for genuine moral disagreement	D. Hume, Protagoras
	Constructivism	The view that moral principles are determined through an idealized process of deliberation and agreement by rational agents. On this view, for example, 'Owning private property is permitted' may be seen as a liberty agreed by hypothetical rational agents kept blind of their position and status in society.	• explains common feeling that there are moral facts • explains grounding of ethics in human social concerns • explains contractual and reciprocal nature of ethics • avoids reliance on supernatural and non-natural properties	• commits naturalistic fallacy • commits is–ought fallacy • fails to account for obligations to non-contractual beings	D. Copp, T. Hobbes, J. Rawls, T. M. Scanlon
	Ideal Observer Theory	A type of relativism in ethics in which the standard for morality is equated with what an impartial ideal observer with perfect knowledge and completely free of cultural bias would prefer.	• explains common feeling that there are moral facts • explains impartiality of ethics • avoids reliance on supernatural and non-natural properties	• commits is–ought fallacy • Ideal Observers may disagree on moral norms • no common human nature • fails to provide method for avoiding socialization effects	R. B. Brandt, R. Firth, D. Hume
	Divine Command Theory	A type of relativism in ethics in which what is good is equated with what God approves and what is right is equated with what God commands. On this view, for example, 'Killing is wrong' means 'God prohibits killing'.	• explains common feeling that there are moral facts • explains transcendence of ethics • explains law-likeness of moral rules	• commits is–ought fallacy • fails to account for motivation to act ethically • moral authority not based on power • fails to escape Euthyphro dilemma	R. M. Adams, P. Copan, P. Quinn

Type	Name	Core Concepts	Solutions	Objections	Proponents
Non-cognitivism/Anti-realism	**Radical Emotivism**	A naturalistic view of ethics that interprets moral utterances as expressions of emotions, attitudes or preferences and so sees them as devoid of descriptive meaning. On this view, for example, 'Killing is wrong' means 'Killing. Boo!'	• avoids naturalistic fallacy • avoids is–ought fallacy • explains motivation to act ethically • explains intractability of divergent moral views • avoids reliance on supernatural and non-natural properties	• fails to account for logical inference in moral arguments • fails to account for use of reason and facts in moral argument • fails to explain common feeling that there are moral facts	A. J. Ayer, B. Russell
	Expressivism	A naturalistic view of ethics that interprets moral judgments as centrally expressions of attitudes, but allowing for some descriptive content. On this view, for example, 'Killing is wrong' may describe killing as harmful as well as express acceptance of a general prohibition against killing.	• avoids naturalistic fallacy • avoids is–ought fallacy • explains motivation to act ethically • explains universal nature of moral judgements • avoids reliance on supernatural and non-natural properties • allows role for reason and facts in moral argument	• fails to explain common feeling that there are moral facts • fails to account for moral conscience • fails to account for moral advice	S. Blackburn, A. Gibbard, D. H. Monro, C. L. Stevenson
	Prescriptivism	A naturalistic view of ethics that interprets moral judgments as universal imperatives to act for any agent in a similar circumstance to the one judged. On this view, for example, 'Killing is wrong' means 'Do not kill'.	• avoids naturalistic fallacy • avoids is–ought fallacy • explains motivation to act ethically • explains universal nature of moral judgements • avoids reliance on supernatural and non-natural properties • allows role for reason and facts in moral argument	• fails to explain common feeling that there are moral facts • fails to account for moral conscience • fails to account for moral judgements of dead people and past actions • fails to account for weakness of will	R. Carnap, R. M. Hare

Below is a short description of the key problems faced by certain meta-ethical theories referenced in the above table.

is–ought fallacy: This fallacy is variously known as Hume's law and Hume's guillotine and derives from David Hume's injunction that statements about what ought to be cannot be derived from descriptive premises alone, without the inclusion of a moral premise or assumption. [1739: book III, part I, sec. I]

naturalistic fallacy: This fallacy gets its name from the supposed error exposed by G. E. Moore's open question argument. Moore argued that in taking any natural property, such as 'gives pleasure' or 'produces happiness', it is always an open question whether that property is good. Moore concluded that it is therefore a fallacy to define ethical terms, such as 'good', in terms of such natural qualities. [1903: ch. 3]

Euthyphro dilemma: The name of this dilemma is inspired by Socrates' question to Plato's character, Euthyphro. Socrates asks Euthyphro, 'Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious? Or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?' [*Euthyphro* 10a] Translated into modern terminology, the horns of the dilemma are these: If God loves the good because it is good, then goodness is independent of God's preferences. This option excludes the major premise of the divine command theory. On the other hand, if the good is good because God loves it, then to say that 'God is good' is to say vacuously that 'God loves God'. This second option also makes the attribution of goodness to particular people and things the result of an arbitrary act of God.

motivation to act ethically: The problem of motivation is faced by meta-ethical theories that interpret moral utterances as propositions about speaker-independent facts. The problem arises in that such theories must explain how it is that we are inextricably motivated to want the good. It makes no sense for a speaker to say, for example, 'Charity is good' and 'I am not for charitable giving at all' at one and the same time.

logical inference in moral arguments: The problem of explaining the logic of moral discourse is faced by non-cognitivist meta-ethical theories. This problem is well-articulated by P. T. Geach [1965: 463] by pointing to the following type of logical argument:

(Premise 1) If killing is wrong, then killing James is wrong.
(Premise 2) Killing is wrong.
(Conclusion) Killing James is wrong.

The problem arises in that the phrase, 'Killing is wrong', must have a different meaning in Premise 1 compared with its meaning in Premise 2 as the con-attitude to killing is hypothetical in Premise 1 and categorical in Premise 2.

moral facts: The problem of the propositional form of moral utterances is faced by non-cognitivist meta-ethical theories. For example, when a speaker asserts that 'Hitler is evil', they appear to be stating a fact about Hitler and not simply expressing a like or dislike of Hitler.

moral conscience: The problem of moral quandary and guilt is faced by meta-ethical theories that interpret moral utterances as principally expressions of the speaker's attitudes or preferences. If moral utterances are essentially expressions of the speaker's positive or negative attitude to something, then how is it that a speaker can be morally uncertain or concerned about one or more of their attitudes? The occurrence of moral indecision that conflicts with a desire (e.g., 'I want to go to the dance, but should I stay and look after my sick father?') requires some explanation.

In considering the merits of each meta-ethical theory, evaluate how well the theory explains the core features of morality, such as impartiality, motivation and disagreement. Also assess how effectively it deals with the main objections raised by its critics. In recent years, moral philosophers from opposing traditions in meta-ethics have converged somewhat to form new hybrid theories. When you are ready, explore a more detailed and nuanced landscape of meta-ethical positions in A Taxonomy of Meta-ethical Theories [Allan 2015b].

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