

Knowledge and Ethics

Metaethics, Normative Ethics, Applied Ethics

META ETHICS

- The **second-order** activity of investigating the concepts & methods of ethics
- Attempts to tell us what **moral properties** are
- Metaphysical issues
 - Moral semantics
 - Moral epistemology

NORMATIVE ETHICS

- First-order activity
- Attempts to tell us **what things can have what moral properties**
- Theoretical Concepts
 - Virtue Ethics
 - Deontology, etc

APPLIED ETHICS

- Application of normative principles/ concepts
- Attempts to inform us on **which specific things have moral properties**
 - Deal with real-life examples e.g. war, abortion, euthanasia

MetaEthics

Explores the status, foundations,
and scope of moral values, properties, and words

Focuses on what morality itself is

Disclaimer

- Different sources treat some specifics a little differently
- This lesson is intended to introduce the basic issues and the relevant cases to explain them
- Remember that our interest is in the **nature and construction of knowledge** in ethics

3 Key Questions

1. What is the **meaning** of moral terms/judgments?

Moral Semantics

2. What is the **nature** of moral judgments?

Moral Ontology

3. How may moral judgments be **supported** or defended?

Moral Epistemology

4. What is the significance of disagreement about moral values and practices, and how do these affect us **psychologically**?

Moral Psychology

Moral Semantics

What is the meaning of moral terms/judgments?

Cognitivism vs Non-Cognitivism

1. Moral Semantics

- Semantics => concerned with meaning
- As metaethical question:
 - What is going on when people make moral judgments like “Abortion is wrong” or “Going to war is never morally justified”?
- Issue: Not so much concerned with whether moral statements (such as the ones above) are true or false *per se*, but whether moral statements are capable of being true or false (are they **truth-apt**). [cf: propositions]
 - *On the surface* (looking at the claims), such statements contain descriptive content that an individual can either hold to be true, or not. (Cf. A cat is on the mat.)

1. Moral Semantics

Cognitivism vs Non-Cognitivism

- Cognitivism: The metaethical view that moral statements express truth-apt beliefs about the world.
 - Seems to be default view of moral discourse because of observed structure of moral discourse.
 - If cognitivism were not true (non-Cognitivism) how can we make logical inferences from one statement to another?
- Non-Cognitivism: moral statements are neither true nor false because they do not express genuine propositions.

1. Moral Semantics

Frege-Geach Problem

- P1: It is wrong to lie.
- P2: If it is wrong to lie, then it is wrong to get one's sibling to lie.
- C: Therefore, it is wrong to get one's sibling to lie.
- If moral cognitivism were not true, is the inference valid?
 - Would the above be an example of Modus Ponens? (Depends on propositions being truth-apt)
 - Rejecting cognitivism entails showing the sentence "it is wrong to lie" in P1 and P2 to be some kind of equivocation (expressing, say, sentiment in P1, but something else in P2).
- Primarily a response to Expressivism/Emotivism

1. Moral Semantics – Non Cognitivism

- **Hume**: Moral distinctions not derived from reason, but represent emotional responses; so, moral claims do not express beliefs which can be true or false, but desires, which are neither true nor false.
- **Logical Positivists** (Vienna Circle): Anything not empirically verifiable is semantically 'meaningless'.
 - AJ Ayer (**Emotivism**): Moral expressions express speaker's affective state.
 - "Abortion is wrong" ultimately means "I do not approve of abortion".
- Alan Gibbard (**Norm-expressivism**): Moral statements do not express commitments to idiosyncratic personal feelings, but to the particular (and evolutionarily adaptive) cultural mores that enable communication and social coordination

1. Moral Semantics – Non Cognitivism

- *JL Austin (linguistics – speech acts)
- RM Hare ([Universal Prescriptivism](#))
 - Drawing on Austin's work, Hare finds that emotional utterances contains both descriptive (truth-apt) as well as *ineliminably* prescriptive elements.
 - There is a difference between **act of making a statement** (Austin's 'illocutionary force' of the statement) from **other acts performed concomitantly** (Austin's 'perlocutionary force')
 - "Killing is wrong" possesses both the conveyance of a truth apt-claim, and *at the same time* involves the perlocutionary force of recommending a negative attitude to killing => "Killing is wrong!" really means "Don't kill!".
 - [Eg: of speech act with perlocutionary force: saying "I do" in a wedding ceremony effects an actual legal reality]
 - The prescriptive dimension must be constrained by universalisability

1. Moral Semantics – Non Cognitivism

- RM Hare (Universal Prescriptivism)
 - In other words, this position assimilates moral commitment to the giving or accepting of a **command**.
 - Ethical judgments differ from simple prescriptions by the **commitment to universality** that they embody: thus whilst I may command you to smoke and someone else not to smoke, if I go into the ethical mode and say that you ought not to smoke, I am committed to supposing that anybody else in a relevantly similar position ought not to smoke.
- Problem:
 - Whilst accepting a command seems tantamount to setting oneself to obey it, accepting an ethical verdict is, unfortunately, consistent with refusing to be bound by it.

1. Moral Semantics – Non Cognitivism

- Simon Blackburn (**Quasi-Realism**)
 - Moral claims behave *linguistically* like factual claims and can appropriately be called “true” or “false” even if there were no such facts to correspond with.
 - An expressivist or projectivist account of ethics can explain and make sense of the realist-sounding discourse within which we promote/debate moral views.
 - **Projectivist** Account: The talk of the value or beauty of things is a projection of the attitudes we take towards them and the pleasure we take in them.
 - Not so much a philosophical position as a *program*
 - A position that endorses anti-realist *non-cognitivist* metaphysical stance but which seeks through philosophical maneuvering to earn the right for moral discourse to enjoy the trapping of realist talk (as if moral claims are true-apt).

1. Moral Semantics – Cognitivism

- Most forms of cognitivism hold that some moral claims are truth-apt. Indeed that some such claims *are* true, as opposed to Error Theory, which asserts that *all* are erroneous.
 1. Moral Realism:
 1. Ethical Naturalism
 2. Ethical Non-naturalism
 2. Anti-Realism:
 1. Ethical Subjectivism
 - Ideal Observer Theory
 - Divine Command Theory
 2. Error Theory
- We covered non-cognitivism earlier, and non-cognitivism happens to be anti-realist

1. Moral Semantics – Cognitivism

- **Moral Realism:** Moral claims are *robust* or mind-independent facts about objective features of the world.
 - **Ethical Naturalism:**
 - There are objective moral properties that are reducible to non-ethical properties. Most ethical naturalists hold that we have empirical knowledge of moral truths. Ethical naturalism was implicitly assumed by many modern ethical theorists, particularly utilitarians.
 - What is good can be reduced to:
 - Aquinas – What is natural
 - Kant – Duty (Motive)
 - Bentham – Pleasure
 - Mill – Happiness

1. Moral Semantics – Cognitivism

- GE Moore and the Open Question => Irreducibility of moral properties. Good is a *simple* idea. Cannot be reduced any further.
 - Open Question Test: Take any supposed definition of 'good' and ask if this is a fully adequate/complete definition. If the answer remains open, then the definition fails the test (because it has not satisfactorily or adequately defined good).
 - Aquinas – What about cyanide?
 - Bentham – Is bloodsport good? If people derive pleasure from that?
 - These definitions are not **sufficient** without qualification
 - Good is a simple idea, that cannot be reduced further. Like “red” or any other colour, but unlike, say, “horse” which can be reduced to ‘quadruped’, “vegetarian”, “mammal” etc...

1. Moral Semantics – Cognitivism

- Hence...
 - **Ethical Non-Naturalism** (GE Moore):
 - There are objective and irreducible moral properties (such as the property of “goodness”) and we sometimes have **intuitive** or *a priori* awareness of such properties or of moral truths.
 - Irreducible because they **cannot be defined** (hence non-cognitivist), but they **can be recognised** (intuition).
 - *However, Moore not a **deontological intuitionist**
 - Source of morality not in human intuitions about which acts are right/wrong (we don’t know what our duties are)
 - but a **teleological intuitionist**
 - In that ethical outcomes can be recognised as good

1. Moral Semantics – Cognitivism

- **Moral Anti-Realism**

- **Ethical Subjectivism**: Moral statements are made true or false by attitudes/convictions of people, either those of each society, or of each individual, or of some particular individual. Most are relativist, but two notable forms are universalist:

- Ideal Observer Theory

- What is right is determined by characteristics of an *ideal observer* (perfectly rational, imaginative, informed, etc...)
- Considered subjectivist because of reference to a particular subject (the hypothetical Ideal Observer) but purports to provide universal answers to moral questions.

1. Moral Semantics – Cognitivism

- **Moral Anti-Realism**

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 - Divine Command Theory
 - What is right is for a divine being to approve of (criticised in Euthyphro Problem)
 - Euthyphro Problem: Do the gods love the pious because it is the pious, or is the pious pious because it is loved by the gods
 - Implication: the good is independent of the gods

1. Moral Semantics – Cognitivism

- JL Mackie (**Error Theory**) – Anti realist. Holds that although moral claims do express propositions, all such propositions are false. So, “Murder is morally wrong” and “Murder is morally permissible” are false.
 - Semantically, moral claims are truth-apt, but because error theorists are anti-realists, they must be false.
 - i.e. moral claims are propositions that reflect moral properties, but these moral properties do not exist in the real world.
 - Entails nihilism and moral skepticism.

Past-Year Exam Qns

- Ethics is really just rhetoric in which language can be manipulated to suit one's desired outcome.' Discuss. [RI 2019 Y6 CT2]