

# RECAP

In one sentence, characterize the following theories:

**Cognitivism / Non-Cognitivism / Moral Realism / Moral Anti-Realism /  
Moral Universalism / Moral Relativism / Moral Nihilism**

# Moral Epistemology

How may moral judgments be supported or defended?

Why should I be moral?

### 3. Moral Epistemology

- Attempts answers to questions like “**How may moral judgments be supported or defended?**” or “**Why should I be moral?**”
- Generally, those with cognitivist presuppositions about moral claims believe morality is justified by moral facts, and so their theories to justify moral judgments are epistemological theories.

# 3. Moral Epistemology

- Major Positions
  - Theories that moral knowledge can be gained inferentially from non-moral epistemic processes (as opposed to intuitionism)
    - Empiricism
    - Ethical Rationalism
  - Ethical intuitionism
- Moral Scepticism is the position that no one has any moral knowledge.
  - Moral sceptics make a strong claim that moral knowledge is impossible.
  - Examples:
    - Error Theory
    - Most forms of non-cognitivism

### 3. Moral Epistemology – Empiricism

- Ethical knowledge gained through observation and experience, such as ethical naturalism (moral facts reducible to non-moral facts), ethical subjectivism (since they are conventional, conventions can be observed)
- Exceptions: Ideal observer Theory (Subjectivist, but rationalist rather than empiricist because appeals to hypothetical ideal observer) and Individualist subjectivism (known only through introspection)
- Empirical arguments for ethics runs into is-ought problem: What is does not entail (we cannot infer) what ought to be.

### 3. Moral Epistemology – Ethical Rationalism

- Moral truths are known *a priori* [do not confuse with Moore's teleological intuitionism cited in slide 13] by reason alone
- Proponents: Plato, Kant, more recently Hare (universal prescriptivism: imperatives, so non-cognitivist, but universalisable, hence prescriptive/rationalist)
- Critics: Hume
- Compatible with: moral realism, ideal observer theory (a form of subjectivism) and prescriptivism (a form on non-cognitivism)

### 3. Moral Epistemology – Ethical Intuitionism

- Moral truths can be known without inference.
- Moral beliefs have propositional content.
- A different kind of foundationalism about moral belief.
- Compatible with ethical non-naturalism (one subset of moral realism), but ethical non-natural (nor moral realism) necessary for intuitionism; they just happen to be correlated for a number of ethical philosophers

## 4. Position to Explore? – Evolutionary Ethics

- Can be observed in descriptive ethics
- Fails in normative ethics because of is-ought gap/naturalistic fallacy
- In metaethics (project rather than position), offers decent account (explanation) of why we have certain views on right and wrong: the origins are in our evolutionary history
  - (Social) Darwinism and hedonistic connection with Bentham (severely discredited in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as some form of apology for Nazi genocide)
  - Sociobiology: the biological basis for social behavior
    - Ethics evolved under pressure of natural selection: sociability, altruism, cooperation, mutual aid, are all explicable in terms of biological roots of human social behavior.
    - Moral conduct aids long term survival of species.
    - Prevalence of egoistic individuals make community vulnerable, leading to extinction.
    - Avoids naturalistic fallacy by not attempting to define good in hedonistic terms, but offers an answer to why we should be moral, except answer is not that we **should** but that it is our genetic heritage.



## Past-Year Exam Qns

- Sound ethical judgements require that we step back from our feelings and make an objective and rational assessment. Critically assess this view. [Cam 2019]
- 'Being moral is solely a matter of obeying the moral law.' Critically assess this view. [Cam 2014]
- Critically assess the view that morality is just a matter of convention. [Cam 2011]
- 'We do not have the right to punish someone, because we do not know what is wrong.' Discuss. [Cam 2010]
- Critically assess the view that our moral knowledge is simply the consensus of the society in which live. [RI 2018 Y6 CT1]
- To what extent can ethical inquiry give us knowledge? [RI 2015 Y6 Prelim]

What Now?

# Understanding Metaethics

- Understand the three 'categories' separately (semantics, ontology, epistemology)
- **How do they intersect, and why?**
- Which positions cohere better? Which positions surprise?
  - E.g.: DCT as an ethical subjectivist position is surprising
  - E.g.: If X position is non-cognitivist but non-nihilist, what does it need to have or assume in order to remain a viable metaethical position?
- Remember: we ask these questions and look at what philosophers think of the semantics/ontology/epistemology **because we're interested in the nature and construction of knowledge in ethics**

## How to link to KI?

- **You are NOT required to memorise all the theories or to memorise how the different philosophers arrived at their positions.**
  - Please do not write an essay about the pros and cons of each theory!
- Use the theories to understand how ethical discourse proceeds, and what issues are addressed, and how do they arise?
- Why do people disagree on different planes (on semantic grounds, on questions of ontology, etc.)?
- How is moral/ethical knowledge constructed (or discovered)?
- What does moral/ethical discourse reveal about the nature of moral/ethical knowledge?
- What is the role of moral intuition in the NaCoK? (it might be helpful to compare to other AOKs e.g., intuition in math/ science)

# Links

- Good introduction to Metaethics:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qe5tjcDVJK4>
- YouTube videos on Metaethics:  
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLXKKIUdnOESH7mWijTiv4tTFAcQnEkFDJ>