

# Moral Ontology

What is the nature of moral judgments?

Realism vs Anti-Realism

Ontology = essence, being, reality

Aristotle: “first philosophy”

## 2. Moral Ontology

- Attempts to answer questions such as “**What is the nature of moral judgments?**”
- [Realism/anti-realism (and Objectivism/Subjectivism) could be said to be ontological issues – they are related – but we have already addressed them to help make sense of the semantic issues – what do moral statements mean? – when discussing cognitivism (the truth-apt nature of moral claims)]
- A key aspect in considering the nature of moral judgments is to ask **who** they apply to:
  - Moral Universalism
    - Value monism
    - Value pluralism
  - Moral Relativism
  - Moral Nihilism

## 2. Moral Ontology – Moral Universalism

- **Moral Universalism:** some system of ethics or a universal ethic applies universally (regardless of race, language or religions... and culture, gender, nationality, etc...)
  - Source or justification may be human nature, shared vulnerability to suffering, demands of universal reason (universalisability), what is shared in existing moral codes/religious injunctions
  - Generally forms of moral realism though exceptions exist: Subjectivist ideal observer and DCT, and non-cognitivist universal prescriptivism of RM Hare

## 2. Moral Ontology – Moral Universalism

- **Value monism**

- A common form of universalism, which holds that all moral goods are commensurable on a single value scale

- **Value pluralism**

- There may be two or more genuine scales of value, knowable as such, yet incommensurable, so that any prioritisation of these is either non-cognitive or subjective
- Eg: Value pluralist might agree that life as a nun and life as a mother both realise genuine values (in a universalist sense) but are incompatible (nuns may not have children), and there is no rational way to measure which is preferred, whereas a monist might say... (What do you think?)
- Isaiah Berlin is a prominent proponent.

## 2. Moral Ontology – Moral Relativism

- All moral judgments originate from societal or individual standards, no objective moral standards exist by which to assess the truth of a given moral proposition.
- Descriptive moral properties of 'good', 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong' do not stand subject to universal truth conditions, but only to societal convention and personal preference. Any norms/conventions will be societal or individual rather than universal, unlike scientific standards for assessing, say, temperature
- Some, not all, relativist theories are forms of moral subjectivism, although not all subjectivist theories are relativistic

What's the difference between  
a moral relativist and a  
universalist value pluralist?

## 2. Moral Ontology – Moral Nihilism

- Nothing is morally preferred to anything else.
- Eg: Killing someone is neither morally wrong or morally right.
  - Not subjectivism, as subset of relativism (which allows for statements to be true or false in a non-universal way) but does not assign static truth-values to moral statements.
  - Insofar as only true statements can be known, moral nihilists are moral skeptics.
- Most moral nihilists are non-cognitivist and vice versa, but there are notable exceptions (such as RM Hare's universal prescriptivist – non-cognitive, but substantially/ontologically universal)
  - E.g. Error theory entails moral nihilism.

What's the difference between  
a moral relativist and  
a moral nihilist?



## Past-Year Exam Qns

- Critically assess the view that our moral knowledge is based on intuition. [Cam 2017]
- 'All moral truths are relative to particular time and places.' Critically discuss this view. [Cam 2016]
- “We can’t make moral judgments because we don’t even know what is moral.” Discuss. [RI 2019 Y6 CT1]
- ‘Any legitimate moral rule must be adaptable to the changing needs and preferences of society.’ Critically assess this claim. [RI 2018 Y6 Prelim]

## Homework: Fill in the Blanks

	Cognitivism		Non-Cognitivism
Universalist			
Relativist			
Nihilist			