

# Introduction to Metaethics

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103 Ethics: Metaethics, University of Oxford, Hilary Term 2015

- 1 What is Metaethics?
- 2 A spectrum from more to less “objective” theories
- 3 Specifying Non-Cognitivism
- 4 How not to argue for Non-Cognitivism
- 5 Outline of the lectures
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# Normative Language

- A: “Should I have stayed in bed instead of coming here?”
- B: “No, if you want to succeed in your degree, then you ought to go to the lectures.”
- A: “I think I should have slept in. And I don’t think you should take things so seriously. But since you do, it only serves you right that you have a reputation for caring about nothing but your studies.”

- B: “It is regrettable that you think so. But I don’t think that you have a right to judge the lectures before giving them a try.”
- C: “Indeed, you really shouldn’t believe just anything that other students have told you about the usefulness of going to lectures.”
- B: “Yes, and I think that we have a moral duty to make the best of the opportunities we have.”
- A: “Don’t even start talking about moral duties. It’s bad enough to get up early in the morning and have to endure the likes of you.”

## Asking meta-questions

- What do “should” and “ought” mean?
- If A says that you should do something, and B says that it's not the case that you should, must one of them be right, and one wrong?
- If yes, what kind of fact makes their claims true or false?
- And how could we know who is right?

# Normativity and Morality

- “Ought” and related terms can have non-moral meaning:
  - “You should arrive early if you want to get a good seat.”
  - “Students shouldn’t just believe everything that’s on the slides.”
  - “You shouldn’t feel disappointed – you should have expected this outcome.”
- Morality is a subset of normativity.

# Moral Language

- “Eating meat is wrong!”
- “Pain is bad, pleasure is good.”
- “We need to do something about climate change!”
- “It is a bad thing if good people suffer.”
- “It is irresponsible to not be informed about politics.”
- “You have no right to say that!”
- “This would indeed be a very desirable outcome.”

- “Her behaviour is unacceptable!”
- “Young people oughtn’t complain so much. When I was young. . .”
- “You ought to clean up after your party.”
- “It only serves him right.”
- “It is inappropriate to play computer games during lectures.”



# Core metaethical questions

- Moral psychology:
  - What is it to *judge* that something is good/bad/ought to be done...?
- Moral semantics:
  - What are we saying when we *say* that something is good/bad/ought to be done...?
- Moral metaphysics:
  - What kind of *facts*, if any, do these claims refer to?
- Moral epistemology:
  - If there are such facts, do we *know* about them, and if so, how?

# Condensing moral language

- Core concepts for metaethics:
  - (moral) ought
    - right, wrong: ought to do, ought not to do
  - good, bad
  - there is / X has reason to  $\phi$
- reducing other concepts to the above:
  - “inappropriate”: ought not to be done
  - “inacceptable:” ought not to be done, can/ought not to be condoned
  - “should”: ought
  - “desirable”: good, ought to be desired
  - “irresponsible”: wrong, and it is right to blame the agent for it / hold them accountable
  - “x has a right that y  $\phi$ ”: y ought to  $\phi$ , x is permitted (it is not the case that they ought not) to demand y  $\phi$ -ing

## Why care about metaethics? (1)

Metaethical questions and claims are very common and matter to our moral practice. Suppose you think that eating meat is wrong:

- Is it wrong for anyone else? For your peers in the vegetarian society, or everyone?
- Is it OK for you tell people that it is wrong?
- How sure can you be that it is wrong?

## Why care about metaethics? (2)

Some metaethical positions can undermine your moral convictions, or at least their strength:

- “Right or wrong are just social conventions.”
- “Right and wrong is subjective. What is wrong for you need not be wrong for me.”
- “There is no such thing as right or wrong.”

## Why care about metaethics? (3)

Some metaethics claims entail further philosophical commitments you may or may not want to share:

- “Moral right and wrong is rooted in a divine will.”
  - Conversely: “If there is moral right and wrong, then there must be a divine being.”
- If moral properties are non-natural, then naturalism is false. Allowing for other non-natural properties and objects becomes more plausible.
  - e.g. numbers, logical relations, but also e.g. souls (especially if we are to have access to non-natural moral facts)

# What metaethics is not

Metaethics is not

- 1 Applied Ethics: Is research on human embryos morally permissible? (first-order ethics)
- 2 Moral Theory: What makes actions right or wrong in general? (first-order ethics)
- 3 Descriptive Ethics: What do people believe about the moral status of embryo research?

# Metaethics and first-order ethics

- Metaethics and first-order ethics are often separate:
  - Asserting that “Research on human embryos is wrong” does not commit one to a particular view of what “wrong” means, of what kind of fact that wrongness is etc.
- But they also often connect:
  - If the property of rightness just *is* the property of maximizing overall happiness, then Utilitarian ethics is necessarily true.
  - If right = permitted by God, and God would not permit embryo research, then embryo research is impermissible.

# “Fieldwork”

- Observe your and others' usage of normative language.
  - How do we use normative language?
  - What do we seem to take it our utterances to mean?
- Introspect your mental states when you make normative judgments.
- Examine what the different metaethical theories we discuss entail about those situations. Are these entailments plausible?



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# Non-Cognitivism

Moral psychology

Moral judgements are not beliefs. They are non-cognitive mental states, like desires, intentions, approval and disapproval.

Moral semantics

Moral sentences *express* the above attitudes, and do not have descriptive meaning. They cannot be true or false.

Moral metaphysics

There are no moral facts or properties.

Moral epistemology

We can not have moral knowledge or justified moral beliefs.

# Error Theory

Moral psychology

Moral semantics

Moral metaphysics

Moral epistemology

Moral judgments are beliefs.

Moral sentences have descriptive meaning. They can be true or false. But they are all false.

There are no moral facts and properties.

We can not have moral knowledge or justified moral beliefs.

## Naturalist Cognitivism: Subjectivism

Moral psychology:

Moral judgments are beliefs.

Moral semantics:

Moral sentences have descriptive meaning. They can be true or false. Some of them are true.

Moral metaphysics:

There are moral facts and properties in the world. Moral properties are natural properties, i.e. part of the empirically observable world. They are properties of agents' minds.

Moral epistemology:

We can have knowledge of these moral facts inasmuch as we have knowledge about our own and others' mental states.

## Naturalist Cognitivism: Robust Naturalist Realism

Moral psychology:

Moral judgments are beliefs.

Moral semantics:

Moral sentences have descriptive meaning. They can be true or false. Some of them are true.

Moral metaphysics:

There are moral facts and properties in the world. Moral properties are natural properties, i.e. part of the empirically observable world. Moral facts are external to and independent of agents' minds.

Moral epistemology:

We can have knowledge of these moral facts inasmuch as we have knowledge about these external natural facts.

# Non-Naturalist Cognitivism

Moral psychology:

Moral judgments are beliefs.

Moral semantics:

Moral sentences have descriptive meaning. They can be true or false. Some of them are true.

Moral metaphysics:

There are moral facts and properties in the world. Moral properties are *sui generis* (of their own kind) non-natural properties which are not part of the empirically and scientifically observable world.

Moral epistemology:

We can have knowledge of these moral facts, e.g. by a faculty of intuition.

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# Clarification of what the view is and is not

Misunderstanding: “Moral sentences are used to report attitudes.”

- Moral sentences do not *report* desires, they *express* them.
- Cf.: “I am angry at you.” and “You . . . !”
- “You ought to  $\phi$ ” expresses my desire for or approval of you  $\phi$ -ing, but does not report my desire for it, since it does not *assert* that I have a desire for you to  $\phi$ .
- “I desire that you  $\phi$ ” reports my desire, since it asserts that I have it.

## Misunderstanding: “Moral utterances voice attitudes”

- Moral sentences do not *voice* desires in the same way as shouting “ouch” voices pain: The pain simply causes me to shout “ouch”.
- You can use the utterance “you ought to  $\phi$ ” meaningfully to express a desire *even if you do not have the desire*.  
Non-cognitivism allows for insincerity in moral utterances.
  - Cf.: You can use “Open the door” without having a desire that the door is open.
- Likewise, you can have the desire and not express it in any way.

## Misunderstanding: “All moral sentences are false.”

- Mistaken inference: Non-cognitivism entails that all sentences of the form “x is right” are not true, so they are all false.
- Reply: Non-cognitivism holds that moral sentences are neither true nor false, they are “*untrue*”: They are simply not the kind of sentence that can have a truth value, because they do not purport to describe anything.

## Clarification: Untrue sentences and non-cognitivism

- Descriptive sentences, and beliefs, can also be untrue:
  - e.g. “The kitchen is dirty.” can turn out to be neither true nor false if the kitchen is in some grey area state of cleanliness.
  - likewise: “Mr X is bald.”, “This is a lot of food.”
- So it is better to characterise non-cognitivism as the claim that moral judgments are not beliefs, from which it follows that they are neither true nor false. Just saying that moral judgments are neither true nor false is not enough to characterize non-cognitivism.
  - Moral judgments could then still be beliefs, but we might perpetually live in a moral grey area where nothing is clearly right or clearly wrong.

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# The speech act fallacy

## The speech act fallacy

- Moral sentences are used to express emotions or to recommend or command actions.
- Hence the sentence does not assert any proposition about moral facts.
- Why fallacy?
  - “This dog bites” is used to recommend staying away from the dog.
  - Hence the sentence does not assert any proposition about the dog’s behaviour.
  - This is clearly false.

# Diagnosis

- The speech acts which a sentence is used to perform do not map neatly onto the semantics of the sentence.
  - One can *assert* that one does not agree to a costly request, or that some claim about one's possessions is true, *by* uttering the *question* "Am I Rockefeller?".
  - The question "Would you please come here?" *is used to* issue a command to come here.
  - The indicative sentence "I am underwhelmed by your performance" *can be used to* issue a command to do better.



# A better argument

## Non-fallacious speech acts argument

- Assuming that moral sentences describe supposed moral facts faces many theoretical problems.
- Moral sentences are used to express emotions and issue commands.
- It is hence a promising response to the above problems to assume that moral sentences *only* express emotions and issue commands.
- The speech acts for which moral sentences are used *lend support* to a move to non-cognitivism.
- But this move needs independent motivation.

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# Outline of the lectures

- 1 Introduction to metaethics; prima facie arguments for non-cognitivism.
- 2 The Humean argument for non-cognitivism; problems for non-cognitivism: The Frege-Geach Problem; quasi-realism.
- 3 Cognitivism and moral motivation: Internalism & externalism
- 4 Naturalist cognitivism: The Open Question Argument, semantic vs. metaphysical naturalism
- 5 Naturalist cognitivism: Subjectivism, cultural relativism; functionalism, and constructivism; problems for naturalism
- 6 Non-Naturalism cognitivism: The strangeness objection & the challenge to explain supervenience
- 7 Non-Naturalism cognitivism: The problem of moral knowledge, intuitionism, experimental philosophy critiques of intuition
- 8 Mixed theories: Error theory, fictionalism, hybrid expressivism; the relation between metaethics and normative ethics

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# Discussion seminar

- Fridays after the lecture in room 9 (check the notice boards in Schools for room changes).
- Question this week: “‘Non-cognitivism cannot account for the difference between moral judgments on the one hand, and judgments of aesthetics, taste, and mere preference on the other. Therefore non-cognitivism is false.’ Is this a good argument?”
- Question for week 2: “If non-cognitivism is true, are the disciplines of normative and applied ethics simply a big mistake?”

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# Introduction to Metaethics: Recommended Reading

- Brink, D. O. *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Cambridge: CUP, 1989: Chs. 1 and 2.
- Miller, A. *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003: Ch. 1.
- Smith, M. *The Moral Problem*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994: Ch. 1
- Timmons, *Morality without Foundations*, Oxford: OUP, 1999, Ch. 1

# Contact

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