Metaethics and applied ethics[1]

Metaethics is the branch of philosophy that asks about what morality is, philosophically speaking. It asks questions in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and epistemology. For example, can ethical claims be true or false? If so, are these truths objective? Are there moral properties, like being right or wrong, that are part of reality? And if there are ethical truths, how do we discover what these truths are? What difference, if any, do metaethical theories make when discussing questions in applied ethics, questions such as whether stealing is wrong, whether eating animals is permissible, or whether we should ever lie?

MORAL REALISM

Moral realism claims that there are moral properties (of right, wrong, good, bad, etc.), and some actions have moral properties. Thus there is a true answer to any question in applied ethics. Whether stealing is wrong depends on whether stealing has the property of being wrong – or if stealing in general is not always wrong, then we can ask whether this or that particular act of stealing is right or wrong. And the same applies to other issues in applied ethics.

However, moral realism doesn't tell us *what* property wrongness is, e.g. whether it is failing to bring about the greatest happiness (utilitarianism) or acting on a maxim you can't universalise (Kantianism) or something else. So in this sense, moral realism doesn't make any difference to applied ethics. It simply supports the thought that what we are doing when we do applied ethics is trying to discover the truth in answer to the question.

Moral realism in the last 150 years has focused on trying to clarify the precise nature of the relation between moral properties and natural properties. This has led to two positions: moral naturalism and moral non-naturalism. Moral naturalism claims that moral properties are natural properties; moral non-naturalism claims that they are a distinct, non-natural kind of property.

If moral non-naturalism is true, this doesn't provide any answers in applied ethics. You can be an moral non-naturalist and be a utilitarian or a Kantian deontologist or an Aristotelian virtue theorist! A non-naturalist utilitarian holds that actions that maximise happiness have the non-natural property of being right; a non-naturalist Aristotelian holds that certain character traits have the non-natural property of being good; a non-naturalist Kantian holds that actions whose maxims can be universalised have the non-natural property of being right.

Moral naturalism has more complicated implications for applied ethics, as it conflicts with Kantian deontological ethics. According to moral naturalism, moral properties are natural properties, i.e. they can be discovered empirically through the senses and scientific investigation. But according to Kantian deontological ethics, whether an act is right or wrong depends on whether the maxim can be universalised. And whether a maxim can be universalised is a question answered by a priori reason, not something that we can discover empirically. So if moral naturalism is correct, then Kantian deontological ethics is incorrect. Moral naturalism doesn't tell us whether, say, lying is right or wrong, because it doesn't tell us *which* natural properties are moral properties (you can still believe in utilitarianism or Aristotelian virtue ethics, for instance). But it does tell us that we won't discover the answer by a priori reasoning, e.g. by investigating whether the maxim 'to tell a lie' can be universalised.

NON-COGNITIVISM

Non-cognitivist theories, such as emotivism and prescriptivism, say that moral judgments, such as 'Stealing is wrong', are neither true nor false. It is tempting, therefore, to say that if non-cognitivism is correct, then there is no 'right answer' to questions in applied ethics. But this is a mistake (unless expressed very carefully).

Non-cognitivists do *not* claim that whether stealing is wrong is subjective in the sense of 'up to the individual choice'. Nor do they say that stealing is wrong 'for' some people and not for others. If, when asked 'Is stealing wrong?', you say 'Some people think it is and other people think it isn't, and that is all that can be said', you haven't answered the question (even if what you say is true!). Instead, according to the non-cognitivist, if you are asked 'is stealing wrong?', you are being asked to express your emotion about stealing or to lay down a prescription. If you respond 'Do not steal' or 'Of course you mustn't steal!', you have answered the question.

Thus, according to non-cognitivism, just because there is no truth in ethics, this doesn't mean that all we can say in applied ethics 'people have different views' or 'it is subjective'. The view that 'morality is subjective because there aren't any moral values' is nihilism, and non-cognitivism argues that it is not nihilism. So, forget about what other people think – you can't answer the question by thinking about them. Do *you* think that stealing is wrong? Why or why not? Both emotivism and prescriptivism claim that we can still give reasons that support our moral views, even if our views aren't true or false, but expressions of how we want people to behave.

ERROR THEORY

By contrast to the metaethical theories above, which make little or no difference to how we answer questions in applied ethics, error theory completely undermines applied ethics. Error theory claims that the way we use ethical language is to make objective claims about a moral reality. Moral judgments express beliefs about mind-independent moral properties. However, there is no such moral reality. And

so all moral judgements are false. It is false to say that stealing is wrong, and it is false to say that stealing is right. This does not mean that whether stealing is wrong is 'subjective' (for instance, error theory doesn't say that 'stealing is wrong' is true for some people but false for others – it's always false). Subjectivism misunderstands the logic of our moral language, which aims to state objective truths.

In order to discuss applied ethics meaningfully, we first need to develop moral language so that it has new meaning. As long as moral language remains objective, we will only state falsehoods. If, however, we can accept that morality is not objective and learn to use moral language in some other way – subjectively or non-cognitively – then we can start doing applied ethics meaningfully. But error theory, on its own, doesn't tell us what the new meaning of moral language should be.