

What is metaethics?¹

We usually think of ethics as about how we should act and live. This is the approach taken by normative ethical theories, which provide an account of which actions, motives and character traits are right or good. They are intended to provide guidance on how to live. Metaethics, by contrast, does not do this. It asks about what morality is, philosophically speaking. It asks questions in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and epistemology.

1. Philosophy of language: what do statements like ‘Murder is wrong’ or ‘Courage is good’ mean? Are these statements of fact? Can ethical claims be true or false? Or are they something else, such as expressions of our approval or disapproval of certain actions or character traits?
2. Philosophy of mind: what is it to hold a particular moral view, e.g. that murder is wrong? If ‘murder is wrong’ states a truth, then moral views are factual beliefs. On the other hand, if ‘murder is wrong’ expresses a feeling, then moral views are attitudes of approval or disapproval (or something similar). Which theory is correct? One relevant issue is whether holding a moral view is a matter of being motivated to act in certain ways, e.g. not to murder. If it is, what does this imply about the nature of morality?
3. Metaphysics: suppose we think that ethical language states truths. Are these truths objective? Are there moral properties, like being right or wrong, that are part of reality?
4. Epistemology: if there are ethical truths, how do we discover what these truths are? On the other hand, suppose we deny that ethical statements are true or false, arguing that they are expressions of subjective feeling. In that case, is there such a thing as moral reasoning? Can we provide reasons that justify our actions?

THE ORIGINS OF MORAL PRINCIPLES: REASON, EMOTION/ATTITUDES, OR SOCIETY

One way to begin thinking about these questions is to ask where our views about what is right and wrong, good and bad, come from. Now, of course, in one straightforward sense, our moral principles come from the people we knew when we were children, our parents, teachers and so on. The same is true of a great many of our beliefs and preferences. The origin of my belief that the sun is 93 million miles away from the Earth is my physics teacher at school. The origin of my taste in music is the group of friends I had as a teenager. The origin of my moral principles is my parents. And so on. But this kind of answer only says what the cause of my belief is. It is particular, not general, because it only explains my belief. And it is contingent, because something else could have caused my belief.

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 345-50

Perhaps my taste in music could have come from my physics teachers and my belief about the distance of the sun from my teenage friends!

Suppose we could generalise from just my beliefs and tastes to where people's beliefs and tastes in general come from. Still, in asking about the origin of our moral principles, we aren't looking for a purely causal, particular or contingent answer - an answer that psychology or sociology might provide. We are interested in the ultimate origin of anyone's moral principles, and we want a philosophical answer that tells us something about the nature of morality. Just talking about how someone, or even most people, acquires their moral principles doesn't help for two reasons.

First, if I got my belief about the distance of the sun from my physics teacher, where did he get his belief from? If he got it, in turn, from his teacher, we can ask the question again - where did his teacher get his belief from? And so on. This is a regress and uninteresting. Much more interesting, philosophically, is what's the ultimate origin of the belief? How do people arrive at beliefs of this kind in the first place? In this case, it is a set of experiments and calculations conducted by scientists (in ancient Greece, Aristarchus; in modern times, Christiaan Huygens and Giovanni Cassini). We could, if we wanted, repeat these experiments and calculations for ourselves. This tells us that the origin of the belief is in scientific investigation - a much more informative answer than 'my teacher', and one that offers a justification of the belief, not only a causal story.

Second, our beliefs about the distance of the sun is objectively true or false, but our tastes in music aren't about truth at all - yet (let's suppose) we acquire both from people we knew in childhood. And while our beliefs about the distance of the sun originate in scientific investigation, the same is not true of our tastes in music! Saying that we also acquired our moral principles from people we knew in childhood is uninformative, because it doesn't distinguish between different kinds of psychological state. For instance, it doesn't say whether moral principles are more like beliefs about the distance of the sun or musical tastes or something else again.

Different forms of 'moral realism' argue that there are moral truths, and we can discover these truths by using reason. On some versions, the reasoning is largely empirical, so the origin of moral principles is somewhat similar to the origin of scientific beliefs in rational investigation of the natural world. On other versions of moral realism, we must use rational intuition, so the origin of moral principles is somewhat similar to the origin of mathematical beliefs in a priori reasoning.

The claim that our principles have their origins in emotions or attitudes is defended by versions of 'non-cognitivism' (see below), including 'emotivism' and 'prescriptivism'. On these views, we don't discover moral truths using reason. Our moral principles aren't about truth at all; they are expressions of how we feel and how we want ourselves and other people to act. Our moral principles originate in our emotions and attitudes (even if these emotions and attitudes are influenced by other people's emotions and attitudes).

'Moral relativism' claims that the origin of moral principles is society. We will discuss this theory only in passing, but it is important to be aware of it. Moral relativism argues that morality originates in how a society regulates the relationships between people. Moral principles are not expressions of how individuals feel, because they are essentially social, shared. But neither are they discovered by reason, because there are no truths about which moral principles societies should have. There are just the moral principles that societies in fact have. Within any society, moral principles record how that society says people should behave. They are essentially social, arising and evolving in a social context through interaction with how the society itself changes over time.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN COGNITIVISM AND NON-COGNITIVISM

Theories in metaethics fall into two broad families - cognitivism and non-cognitivism. The distinction is now understood by philosophers to depend on whether one thinks that moral judgements express beliefs or not.

Cognitivism claims that ethical language expresses beliefs. Beliefs can be true or false, so ethical claims that can be true or false. To believe that murder is wrong is to believe that the sentence 'Murder is wrong' is true. Because (usually) a claim is true because it correctly describes how the world is, cognitivists (usually) also claim that ethical language aims to describe the world.

Non-cognitivism claims that ethical language does not express beliefs, but some other, non-cognitive mental state. And so ethical claims do not try to describe the world and cannot be true or false. Different non-cognitivist theories disagree on exactly what kind of mental state is expressed by moral judgments, but it is usually an attitude or feeling. So 'Murder is wrong' is neither true nor false, but an expression of, say, the speaker's disapproval of murder.

Mental states and 'direction of fit'

In her book *Intention*, Elizabeth Anscombe explained the difference between a cognitive mental state and a non-cognitive mental state in terms of the idea of 'direction of fit'. A man goes shopping, taking his shopping list with him. When shopping, he uses his list to guide what he puts in his basket. At the end of the shop, what is in his basket should 'fit' his list. If it doesn't, the mistake is with the basket, and the basket should be changed to fit the list. Now suppose that the man is being followed by a store detective. She makes a list of each thing that the man puts in his basket. At the end of the shop, her list should 'fit' his basket. If it doesn't, the mistake is with her list, and the list should be changed to fit the basket.

The shopper's list is a list of what he wants. Desires have a 'world-to-mind' direction of fit. We seek to change the world to fit our desires and thereby satisfy them. They are not true or false, but represent how the world should be. By contrast, the detective's list is a list of what she believes is in the shopper's basket. Beliefs have a 'mind-to-world' direction of fit. We change our beliefs to fit the world, and thereby have true beliefs. They represent how the world is, not how we want it to be.

So which direction of fit do moral views have? Is the thought 'murder is wrong' a belief about how the world is, or is it like a desire to make the world a place in which there is no murder? Both answers are plausible and both answers face challenges.

Issues

Non-cognitivists argue that moral judgements are, like desires, motivating. Holding the view that murder is wrong involves being motivated not to murder. But, they continue, factual beliefs are not motivating. The sun is 93 million miles from the Earth - so what? Believing that fact inclines me to do nothing in particular at all. Because moral views are motivating, they are not beliefs, but non-cognitive attitudes.

Cognitivists can respond that some beliefs, including moral beliefs, are motivating. Or they can argue that moral beliefs aren't motivating. Instead, caring about what is morally good or right is motivating. It is possible, therefore (but perhaps psychologically very unusual), to believe that murder is wrong and not be motivated to refrain from murdering because one simply doesn't care about morality.

Cognitivism argues that what is right or wrong is something we can be mistaken about. It isn't just 'up to us' whether murder is wrong. People who think that murder is just fine are mistaken and vicious. Morality isn't simply a matter of taste. Non-cognitivism, therefore, faces the challenge of explaining why we make a distinction between morality and personal taste. Is non-cognitivism going to lead to nihilism about morality, the view that nothing is right and wrong?

Non-cognitivism can argue that it is a simpler theory. It has a simpler metaphysics and a simpler epistemology. Cognitivism needs to explain how moral claims can be objectively true or false. Are there moral properties 'in the world'? What kind of property could they be, and how can we find out about them?