Metaethics: An Introduction

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1 TAXONOMY

Some things and distinctions it’s important to be clear about:

- truth/falsity
- language/mind/world (roughly: states of the mind either represent how the world is, or say how the world ought to be; language is a tool that people use to communicate their states of mind)
- volition/cognition, desire/belief (neutral terms: judgment, opinion)
- representational/non-representational states of mind and language
- properties/predicates
- speech-acts (assertion, commanding, interrogating)
- analytic/synthetic, a priori/a posteriori

Realism about morality (or, more strictly, moral discourse and practice) endorses:

- Factualism + success. Moral claims (‘Murder is wrong’) can be true or false (they are “truth-apt,” or suitable for truth/falsity). Some moral claims are, moreover, true. Contrast: imperatives, requests, hurrahs, questions.
**Representationalism + success.** Moral judgments (being of the opinion that murder is wrong) are cognitive attitudes (a belief that murder is wrong). They aim to represent the world correctly (and some of them do!). Contrast: moral judgments express some kind of non-cognitive attitude ([dis]approval of murder).

**Assertivism + success.** Moral claims are used to make assertions (statements that purport to be about matters of fact). Contrast: commands, requests, hurrahs.

Proponents include Michael Smith, Jonathan Dancy.

**Anti-Realism/Irrealism** denies one of these things. There are many kinds of anti-realism about morality. For instance.

**Error-Theory.** This view endorses:

- **Factualism – success.** Every moral claim is false (though truth-apt).
- **Representationalism – success.** Every moral belief is false (it aims to represent the world as being a certain way, it simply represents it incorrectly).
- **Assertivism – success.** Moral claims are used to make assertions (statements that purport to be about matters of fact). Contrast: commands, requests, hurrahs.

J. L. Mackie is the primary proponent.

**Non-cognitivism.** Each view in this class endorses:

- **Non-factualism.** Moral claims aren’t either true or false.
- **Non-representationalism.** Moral judgments are some kind of non-cognitive attitude (e.g., [dis]approval of murder).
- **Non-assertivism.** Moral claims are used to do something other than make assertions or try to influence the beliefs of our interlocutors.

To make things even more complicated, there are different kinds of non-cognitivism, and different kinds of nonassertivism. A very quick overview.

**Emotivism** (A. J. Ayer, “Ethics for Logical Positivists”). Moral judgments (e.g., the judgment that murder’s wrong) involve some kind of expression of emotion (*booming murdering*!). The speech-act performed by making a moral claim is something like exclamation (or, in Ayer’s unfortunate terminology, “ejaculation”).

- This view needs to be distinguished (and Ayer does distinguish it, see pp.147-9) from a variety of realism known as speaker subjectivism (SS), according to which a speaker who says (judges) that X is wrong is asserting (believes) that she disapproves of X.
- Discussion: Why is the SS view realist?
SS isn’t very plausible. Think of someone who says “if I didn’t disapprove of murder, it wouldn’t be wrong.” According to SS, they’ve said something trivially true. Most of us tend to think we’ve said something false.

- **Prescriptivism** (R. M. Hare). Moral judgments (e.g., the judgment that A should X) involve some kind of prescriptive attitude (wanting it to be the case that A does X). The speech-act performed my making a moral claim is something like prescription (recommending or advising that A do X).


- **Expressivism** (Simon Blackburn, Allan Gibbard). Moral judgments (e.g., the judgment that A should X) involve expressing acceptance of a system of norms (in this case, norms that require A to do X). The speech-act performed my making a moral claim is open: it could be just pure expression (like Ayer’s ejaculation), or perhaps an attempt to get you to coordinate your system of norms with mine.

2 COGNITIVISM AND NON-COGNITIVISM

2.1 Why Be Non-cognitivist?

2.1.1 The Fact-Norm/Is-Ought Distinction

“Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to pour out a gallon over it.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1994, #38) suggests that, if we collect or write down all the facts in some domain of inquiry, we will find “nothing which we could call an ethical proposition.”

Facts (and situations or states of affairs or propositions more generally) are one thing, norms are another. Given some state of affairs S, there is a bunch of stuff that is the case about S (the facts about the events that are happening in S, for instance, it’s raining in S, I have an umbrella in S, I stay dry in S). But if we look at S we never literally see anything like rightness or wrongness or goodness or badness.

Worries about this argument:

- Question-begging. If a moral claim is true, then, of course, it will appear in the collection of facts about the relevant state of affairs. Wittgenstein appears to be simply assuming that no moral claim could be a fact.

But it’s possible to strengthen the argument significantly:

i. **Sensory properties** (properties that involve the physical or observational properties of objects—properties that can be identified, either directly or indirectly, via sense perception) are the only properties that our scientific theories are able to recognize. (Assumption)

ii. If a property P is not recognizable by a scientific theory, then the claim O has P is not scientific. (Assumption)
iii. Only scientific claims are factual (have truth-values). (Assumption)

iv. Moral properties (rightness, wrongness, etc.) are not accessible to any faculty of sense perception (we don’t see rightness, nor do we hear it, etc.). (Assumption)

v. So, moral properties are not natural properties. (i, iv)

vi. So, moral properties are not recognizable by scientific theories. (i, v)

vii. So, the claim that an action has a moral property is not scientific. (ii, vi)

viii. So, the claim that an action has a moral property is not factual. (iii, vii)

Some available responses to this version of the argument:

• Deny that moral properties are not accessible to any faculty of sense perception. Two ways to go with this:
  
  – **Intuitionism/Non-Naturalism.** Moral properties are non-natural, have no causal powers, accessed by some distinctive cognitive moral faculty, some “special mode of cognition” (Dancy, 1993, p.411). The epistemology of moral facts is understood analogously to the epistemology of mathematical facts. (G. E. Moore, W. D. Ross, Jonathan Dancy)

  – **Naturalism.** Moral properties are natural—identical or reducible to scientifically respectable observational properties—in the same way that the property being water reduces to the property being H₂O. We come to know that things have moral properties in the familiar way; no special epistemology for moral facts required. (Peter Railton)

• Agree that moral properties are not sensory (not accessed by direct or indirect action of the senses), deny that this makes the claim that an action has a moral property non-scientific. Non-sensory properties can appear in scientific theories.

  – Take, for instance, one view of secondary qualities, like color. What our visual system perceives as a surface’s redness is actually, we know, a property about what wavelengths of (colorless) light are reflected by the surface. Redness isn’t actually hitting our eyes—it’s colorless reflected light. What we perceive as redness is the result of a dual contribution—part coming from the external world, part coming from our visual system, and being projected onto the world. But we can still have a scientific theory of color, recognize color as a scientifically kosher property, and call color judgments factual. Perhaps moral properties are like secondary qualities. (John McDowell)

1. There are good and bad reasons to support this premise. A good reason is just the idea that every fact is part of a true, possibly unknown, scientific theory about the world. A bad reason is Ayer’s verificationism—the idea that the factual content of a sentence is identified with the sensory experiences that would verify its truth (from which it follows that if there are no such sensory experiences, the sentence doesn’t have any factual content). No one thinks verificationism is true.

2. Here we just list them. We’ll come back to many of them in more detail a bit later on in the course.

3. I.e., our account of how people come to know that certain things have moral properties (are wrong/right).
– It seems plausible that our experience of moral properties is like our experience of colors: the “raw material” of perception is processed by our brain into a morally laden perception. Wittgenstein even hints at something like this view: the philosopher confronts the paradox that “an experience, a fact, should seem to have supernatural value,” even though there is nothing intrinsic to the fact, scientifically considered, that appears to be this value (p. 145).

– There are worries for this sort of view: is the analogy between moral properties and color sound? And, even if it is, are there really facts about color, or is our visual system systematically misleading us—causing us to form beliefs about the colors of objects that just don’t match up with the world?

• Agree that moral properties are not sensory and that non-sensory properties cannot appear in scientific theories, deny that only scientific claims are factual.

– This is available, but I don’t know how plausible it is.

**2.1.2 The Argument from Queerness**

“And similarly the absolute good, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would necessarily bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a Chimera. No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge.” (Wittgenstein, p. 143)

The Argument from Queerness can be thought of supporting (i.e., as a response to any possible reply to) Wittgenstein’s non-cognitivist argument. The idea, in a nutshell, is that moral values don’t fit within a respectable scientific / naturalistic worldview. J. L. Mackie develops it best, and in two versions.

**Version 1: Metaphysical**

i. Moral judgments are categorical judgments—judgments of the form *it’s wrong for A to X* that attribute a property of categorical wrongness to A’s doing X (this means that the wrongness or normativity does not depend on A’s desires).

ii. Normativity, insofar as we can understand it as being part of the natural world, is “constituted [and generally explained] by our choosing or deciding to think a certain way” (p.160). So far as we understand the natural world, we see there is no normative “pull” for A to do something (no motive for A) that does not involve an appeal to A’s prior choices or desires. If such normativity (“authoritative prescriptivity,” p.162) is real (exists), it exists outside of the natural world.

iii. Nothing exists outside of the natural world. (*Metaphysical naturalism*)

iv. So there is no property of categorical wrongness.

v. So no moral judgment is correct (Error Theory⁴)

**Version 2: Epistemological**

The expressivist/emotivist will agree with the thrust of the argument, but deny that moral judgments involve representing some action as having some property at all.
i. If moral properties (objective values) exist, they exist outside of the natural world.

ii. So, in order to be aware of moral properties, we would need some “special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else” (p.161) that brought us into contact with these properties. (In other words, intuitionism follows on the supposition that moral properties are exist and we are aware of them.) (i)

iii. There are two kinds of faculty: sensory and non-sensory. (Assumption)

iv. Our sensory faculties are not equipped to access such properties. (Assumption)

v. Our non-sensory (intuitive, a priori) faculties only furnish us with knowledge of analytical statements (and moral statements are not analytical). (Assumption)

vi. So if we have knowledge about moral properties, that knowledge has to be synthetic a priori. (ii-v)

vii. There is no synthetic a priori knowledge. (Assumption)

viii. So, if moral properties exist, we can’t know anything about them.

2.1.3 Motivational Internalism

Michael Smith presents the argument from motivational internalism in (1994, #35):

i. Moral judgments necessarily do supply a motive (what he calls the “practicality” of moral judgment, and what’s known elsewhere as motivational internalism). Informally: judging that murder is wrong automatically gives you a motive/desire not to murder.

ii. But beliefs about matters of fact never supply a motive by themselves. (The facts are motivationally neutral—they don’t point us one way or the other.)

iii. So moral judgments are different from beliefs about matters of fact—they must actually involve some motivational state.

“Psychologically, since making a moral judgment entails having a certain desire, and no recognition of a fact about the world could rationally compel us to have one desire rather than another, this seems to imply that our [moral judgment] must really simply be an expression of that desire.”

Note that the conclusion of this argument is non-cognitivism, although it has similarities to the Argument from Queerness: “The standard picture of human psychology tells us that there are no [moral facts]. Nothing could be everything a moral judgment purports to be.”

Smith ultimately rejects motivational internalism (terminology: he embraces motivational externalism), because internalism conflates moral judgment (judging there to be a moral reason for/against some action) with actually having a motive or desire (p.173). But Smith wants to separate these:

- To say that an agent A has a moral reason to X (that X is obligatory for A) is to say that A “would desire or prefer X if [A] was in “certain idealised conditions of reflection: if, say, [A] were well informed, cool, calm and collected” (p.174).
– Why does Smith think this?
– Why does this introduce a worry about relativism? (Hint: it has to do with his discussion of ideal convergence, pp.175-6.)
– Why does Smith think it actually avoids the Argument from Queerness?

• So: judging that X is wrong = judging there’s a reason not to X = judging that I “would desire or prefer not-X if I was in “certain idealised conditions of reflection.”

• Although this rationally requires that we have the desire in our actual, non-idealized situation, we’re sometimes irrational—we don’t always desire what we’re rationally obligated to! The desire/motivation doesn’t always accompany the moral judgment.

Dancy, on the other hand, rejects the argument while accepting motivational internalism (see 1993, p.415). According to Dancy, the facts aren’t always motivationally neutral—they’re not mere “inert states of the world.” Similarly, beliefs can sometimes supply a motive all by themselves.

• For his example of such a case, see p.416. We might wonder—this seems like an odd view about motivation. Certainly not the one that economists or artificial intelligence researchers use when they model decision-making.

2.1.4 Hume’s Law

Pidgen (p.423) describes the argument.

i. A moral conclusion can never be derived from exclusively non-moral (descriptive) premises. (A.K.A. no ought from is; Hume’s Law)

ii. So, there is a basic distinction between moral and non-moral statements. (i)

iii. All and only descriptive statements are factual. (Assumption)

iv. So, no moral statements are factual. (ii, iii)

This is not a good argument.

• Premise (iii) just begs the question against the cognitivist.

• Moreover, as Pidgen notes, “we need not resort to non-cognitivism to explain this logical gulf. For there is a similar gap between conclusions about hedgehogs and premises which make no mention of them ... Yet nobody proposes a fact/hedgehog distinction or alleges that propositions about hedgehogs are not really propositions but a quaint subclass of commands” (pp.423-4).

2.2 Why Worry about Non-cognitivism?

Moral dispute. It seems like people can really disagree about moral questions. Normally we think that people disagree iff they contradict each other iff they assert contradictory propositions. If that is right, then non-cognitivism says that people never genuinely disagree about moral questions.
Imagine that A hates ice cream, and B loves ice cream. A says ‘boo ice cream!’ B says ‘yay ice cream!’ Do A and B disagree with one another? Or do they just have different preferences/desires?

Ayer responds to this by denying (pp.150-1) that people ever really disagree about moral questions. People try to persuade others that they have the facts of a case wrong, and people often disagree about such facts. But once everyone agrees about the facts, and there is still a dispute, the argument ceases—at this point “we cannot bring forward any arguments to show that our system is superior” and tend to resort to verbal “abuse.”

Smith is less thrilled. People certainly behave as if there is a standard of truth against which to assess our moral positions. We are “preoccupied” with moral arguments; we expect people to supply reasons for and against their moral opinions; good arguments—where a moral conclusion is supported by good reasons—are likelier to “get the facts right” that bad ones. In other words, the norms and behaviors that govern moral arguments seem to be precisely the norms and behaviors that govern factual arguments.

Discussion: is Ayer or Smith right? Are there no moral disagreements that don’t reduce to arguments “about a question of logic or about an empirical matter of fact”?

Objectivity. If moral judgments and claims are factual, then there is a clear standard against which to measure their “validity,” and to assess moral arguments: the truth! But if they are not factual, there is no clear standard.

Ayer freely admits this: “We can now see why it is impossible to find a criterion for determining the validity of ethical judgments. It is not because they have an ‘absolute’ validity which is mysteriously independent of ordinary sense-experience, but because they have no objective validity whasoever” (p.148).

3 NATURALISM AND NON-NATURALISM

Naturalism and non-naturalism are both varieties of realism. Naturalism says moral facts / properties reduce to natural ones (in the same way, e.g., water reduces to H₂O); what precisely they reduce to (pleasure, overall happiness, etc.) is a matter of controversy. Non-naturalism denies that moral facts / properties reduce to natural ones, although they usually agree that they supervene on natural ones.

For P to reduce to Q, there needs to be no real distinction (conceptual or otherwise) between P and Q. Supervenience is weaker (reduction implies supervenience, but not vice versa): for P to supervene on Q, it only needs to be the case that whether Q holds is determined by whether P holds.

3.1 Why be Non-naturalist?

3.1.1 Hume’s Law

A modified version of Pidgen’s argument.

i. A moral conclusion can never be derived from exclusively non-moral (descriptive) premises. (A.K.A. no ought from is; Hume’s Law)
ii. If moral fact $M$ reduced to non-moral facts $N$, then from the premise that $N$ holds, we could validly infer that $M$ holds (since $N$ is identical to $M$).

iii. So moral facts do not reduce to non-moral facts.

This argument proves too much. If $M$ supervenes on $N$, even the non-naturalist is committed to a version of (ii). So either Hume’s Law is false, or metaphysical relationships between kinds of facts (identity or supervenience) are not enough to license logical inferences.

- Plausibly it’s the latter. Most people agree that water reduces to $H_2O$, but I don’t think anyone would say that $H_2O$-facts, all by themselves, let you infer the same facts about water. You need **bridge principles** (what Pidgen calls “definitions”)—extra premises that bridge the logical/conceptual gap between $H_2O$ and water (for instance, the premise that everything that is $H_2O$ is water, and vice versa).

- This example shows that we can agree that there there is a **logical** and **conceptual** gap/distinction between $N$ and $M$ (that might need to be bridged with bridge principles), without admitting an **ontological** distinction between them. Logical and conceptual gaps are compatible with reduction.

### 3.1.2 Pluralism

Dancy claims that pluralism makes non-naturalism look plausible (see 1993, pp.413-4).

i. Many different, apparently unrelated natural properties are intrinsically valuable. (Pluralism, assumption)

ii. So, *rightness (or goodness)*, if it is a natural property, is a **disjunctive property**: it’s gotten by taking all of the intrinsically valuable, apparently dissimilar natural properties $P_1, ..., P_n$ and saying something is right (prima facie) iff it has $P_1$ or $P_2$ or ... or $P_n$.

iii. Natural properties are never disjunctive.

iv. So rightness is not a natural property: “there is no common natural feature present for us to identify rightness with” (p.413).

I’m not sure I understand this argument. Are non-natural properties any more likely to be disjunctive than natural ones?

### 3.1.3 Moore’s Open Question Argument

For discussion, see especially Pidgen (1993, sect.iii) and Ridge (Stanford Encyclopedia). We let $N$ be a natural fact, and $M$ a moral fact, and suppose that $M$ reduces to $N$ (that’s to say: suppose that naturalism is right).

**Version 1.**

i. Since $M$ reduces to $N$, the question does $N$ hold?, given that $M$ holds, is unintelligible or trivial (like the question does $M$ hold?, given that $M$ holds).
ii. This question is not trivial.

iii. So naturalism is false.

Premise (i) is false. Water reduces to H$_2$O, but the question is this water, on the supposition that it is H$_2$O, is intelligible and not at all trivial. We need to know about the reduction—know about the lack of ontological distinction between two categories of properties/facts, know that the relevant bridge principles are true—in order for this sort of question to be trivial!

• In a way, our earlier discussion of Hume’s Law showed this: ontological reductions don’t require conceptual reductions. Two things can be associated with different concepts, and nevertheless be the very same thing.

• Examples of other a posteriori identities.

Version 2.

i. Since M reduces to N, the claim whenever N holds, M does too (e.g., the claim that whatever is pleasant is good) is trivial (like the claim whenever N holds, N holds).

ii. But this claim is not trivial—in fact, it can, if true, give us a reason for promoting states of affairs in which N holds!

iii. So naturalism is false.

Premise (i) fails again, and for the very same reason. Triviality is a matter of conceptual content, not ontological distinctions (or lack thereof).

3.2 Why Worry about Non-naturalism?

3.2.1 Metaphysical Issues

The worry is the same as when Mackie voiced it: making moral properties non-natural only makes them more bizarre.

Dancy wants to resist this claim. We can say moral facts “exist in virtue of the non-moral ones.” Sometimes people say that moral facts supervene on (without reducing to) the non-moral or natural ones: the natural facts about a situation determine which moral duties there are in that situation, and if we had different natural facts, we might have a different duty in that situation. But the moral facts, although determined by the natural facts, are nevertheless different from the natural facts.

• Example (p.414): the fact that a cliff is dangerous depends on how steep and high up it is. But we wouldn’t want to say that the dangerousness of the cliff just is its steepness and highness. (For one, something can be dangerous without being either steep or high; dangerousness is multiply realizable.)

• This example is incredibly controversial. We might think that there is a natural feature that all dangerous situations have in common: being liable to harm an agent.
3.2.2 Epistemological Issues

Once again, the worry is Mackie’s: making moral properties non-natural only makes it harder to explain how we come to access/know the moral facts. We require some special cognitive faculty to enable us to access the moral facts, since our ordinary sensory faculties are only capable of accessing natural facts.

Possible responses to this problem.

- Moral facts are known, like mathematics, via reason (Kant). So we do not require a special cognitive faculty to enable access to morality.
  
  This is worrying—is the knowledge that murder is wrong intuited in the same way that the knowledge that there are no round squares is intuited?

- There is a specialized, dedicated moral sense. Someone let the psychologists know!

- Praxis (Dancy, p.416): moral knowledge (like knowing how to do some task or achieve some goal) is a kind of praxis (practical knowledge or know-how). It’s about the agent reliably responding to reasons—the natural facts that determine whether or not some action should be done—in the right way. (Think of the difference between someone who succeeds in a complicated task by accident, and someone who succeeds by skill.)
  
  But if that’s right, then moral judgments might not be really cognitive at all! It’s very controversial in contemporary philosophy whether know-how (skill) can be reduced to ordinary knowledge: whether the knowledge we have when we know how to play guitar is just a matter of knowing a bunch of truths. For this view to be cognitivist, praxis needs to just be ordinary knowledge of a bunch of truths.