

Meta-Ethics, Naturalism, Intuitionism, Emotivism and Prescriptivism

Meta-ethics

Meta-ethics is the term used for discussion about the nature and validity of ethical statements. If an ethical statement is about what is right and wrong (good or bad, moral or immoral etc.), a meta-ethical statement is about what it means to claim that something is right or wrong. How to define 'good' is a meta-ethical question. Possible answers:

- "x is good" means "I like x"
- "x is good" means "x agrees with my beliefs"
- "x is good" means "I think everyone should do x"
- "x is good" is a statement of fact about the world
- "x is good" is only ever an opinion
- "x is good" is something we just know instinctively
- "x is good" means "x agrees with the moral rules"
- "x is good" means "x has good consequences"

Naturalism

As science attempted to explain all aspects of life from the 17th century onwards, many philosophers believed that morality could be explained in a similar way. **Naturalism** held that ethical terms could be explained in the same 'natural' terms as science or maths. Ethics, they said, was about observation and analysis.

Intuitionism

GE Moore, in *Principia Ethica* (1903) famously refuted naturalism. He said that you can't move from is to ought. In other words, any observation of how people actually behave cannot tell us about how people SHOULD behave. He called this the '**naturalistic fallacy**'.

Moore went on to say that '**good**' is **indefinable**. In the same way as yellow is just, well, yellow, 'good' is not a complex term that can be broken down further, you just recognise that something is good by intuition. If 'good' was a complex idea, we could ask of it whether it was itself good. For example, Bentham defined good as pleasure (the greatest pleasure for the greatest number). But you can ask "Is pleasure good?" Because the question makes sense, pleasure can't mean the same as good.

HA Prichard said there were two kinds of thinking: **reason** brought together the facts about a situation, and **intuition** perceived the right thing to do.

WD Ross argued that **moral principles can't be absolute**. He said that we have **prima facie** (at first appearance) **duties**: keeping promises, making up for harm done, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement and non-maleficence. Intuition identifies our prima facie duties, but our actions are down to our judgement.

Emotivism

AJ Ayer agreed with Moore that you can't get values or moral judgements from descriptions. 'Argument is possible on moral questions only if some system of values is presupposed'. Therefore **to say that something is wrong is to say** that I disapprove of it or that **it goes against my values**. In other words, "Abortion is wrong" is the same as saying "I don't like abortion". Ayer argued that **moral statements are merely subjective, sentimental statements** based on personal values (personal values because there is no absolute, objective value in the world – we decide what we value). Statements of fact are either logically necessary (true by definition) or observable – moral statements are neither analytically or synthetically verifiable, so there are no moral facts.

CL Stevenson said the purpose of a moral statement was to persuade someone of the rightness or wrongness of an action. '**Good**' is a **persuasive definition**. He said that when we talk about moral issues, we express **approval** or disapproval. Unlike Ayer, he said moral statements were not merely expressions of emotion, but were based on deeply held beliefs. This gives a better explanation of why people disagree strongly about morality – their ideas are based on fundamental social, political or religious beliefs. However, Stevenson is an emotivist because he believes **moral statements are the result of subjective opinions, views or beliefs**.

Prescriptivism

RM Hare argued that moral statements weren't merely descriptive (describing our beliefs) and persuasive, he said they were prescriptive and universal. When I say "Murder is wrong", I am writing a law which I believe others should follow. Hare thinks that reason plays an important role in ethics. He agrees with Kant that moral rules should be universalisable, and that we should 'do unto others as you would have done unto yourself'.