

# What is meta-ethics



Meta-ethics is a branch of moral philosophy, which looks at the ways in which people use ethical language. Meta-ethical philosophers try to work out what we are doing when we use moral language, because if there is no agreement about the meaning of ethical language, then ethical debate is useless and will never accomplish anything. We all use ethical language when we talk about what is right or wrong, but are we all using it in the same way? What do we mean when we call an action 'right'? This essay will establish different views about Meta-ethics and how we should or shouldn't use ethical language.

A name which is often used in discussions about Meta-ethics is David Hume. He was an eighteenth century Scottish philosopher, who was keen to show the potentiality and boundaries of logical argument. Hume asked whether there could be such a thing as moral Knowledge. He was a radical empiricist and a sceptic; he believed that all knowledge had to come through our senses.

In his book 'a treatise of human nature' Hume asked what a statement like 'murder is wrong' actually means. He concludes that this statement can not be a fact, although we may be able to see a victim's blood and hear their cries for help, we can't just see the wrongness of the murder. Hume's most famous argument is that 'an ought can't be derived from an is'<sup>1</sup>. In other words, a statement of evaluation or value cannot be derived from a statement of fact. For example: the factual statement 'all cats have fleas, Tom is a cat' cannot lead onto an evaluation of 'therefore we should ban him from all of the bedrooms. The only thing that can be proven in this argument

is that Tom has fleas. The gap between the facts to the belief is called the naturalistic fallacy.

A group that thinks you can get an ought from an is, are Naturalists. The Naturalists approach to ethical language is to treat moral statements as propositions. For example if we make a statement like 'acid turns litmus paper red' we can find out if this is true by looking at the evidence. They believe that you can also do this with moral language. If we want to establish whether stealing is right or wrong, we look at the evidence of what happens when people steal: it causes people unhappiness so therefore stealing is wrong. This makes Naturalists become cognitivists because they believe that moral language is about facts, everything is verifiable and it is either true or false.

But there are also other groups who agree with Hume and say that you can't jump from an ought to an is. One of the groups is Intuitionism. An important intuitionist is G. E Moore; he agreed with Hume's idea and took it further. In his famous book 'Principia Ethica', he argued that ethical naturalism makes a mistake, and that moral statements can not be verified simply by looking at the evidence, using the five senses. He called this mistake the 'Naturalistic Fallacy'. Moore argued that no matter how good is defined, it can always be asked 'but is that good?'<sup>2</sup> For example, if we say 'Mother Teresa rescued abandoned babies' we can still ask 'and were her actions good?'. There is still room for people's opinions. But Moore believed that we could make moral judgements, even though we could not do it by using our senses, he believed that we could by using our intuition.

Another group who agree with Hume and Moore are emotivists. Emotivists like Ayer believe that when we make moral statements such as 'stealing is wrong' we are merely expressing our emotions about the matter. This view is sometimes described as the 'Boo- Hurrah theory'<sup>3</sup> because all we are saying is Boo to stealing and Hurrah to respect for people's property. But emotivism has many criticisms.

They say that it does not have enough substance to it because our uses of ethical language could change from one day to the next according to how we are feeling. This makes a statement such as 'murder is wrong' no more important than 'eating too many sweets is wrong'. C. L Stevenson modified Ayer's ideas. He took a similar view but he went on to argue that our ethical statements are not just random, based on the mood of the day, they are based on our beliefs about the world and how it should work. For example, we do not agree with the Holocaust murders not just because they were not to our taste but because we have firm beliefs about human dignity and worth.

Prescriptivism is another viewpoint which is related to emotivism. It was developed by R. M Hare, and he agreed with Ayer; that moral statements are just expressions of our feelings towards certain issues. But Hare went further than Ayer. He believed that when we make moral statements, we are not just expressing our opinions; we are prescribing them to other people. We are encouraging others to share the same attitudes and views as us. For example: when a teacher tells children 'be kind to one and other' this is not just making them aware of the teacher's preferences, but is guiding them to

do the right thing. So when we say 'murder is wrong' we are really saying 'you ought not to murder, and neither will I'

So Many people disagree about whether ethical language is about actual facts or whether it is about opinions and values. Emotivists, Prescriptivists and Intuitionists are all non- cognitive and say an ought cannot be derived from an is, whereas naturalists are cognitive and believe it can.

Intuitionists and Naturalists both believe that goodness can be known.

From this essay we can see what the main arguments are and hopefully make up our own minds on what meta- ethics is and how we should use it in daily situations.

You can never get an 'ought' from as 'is' discuss.

I agree with this statement. I believe that when we make a moral announcement, it is possible to establish whether it is good/bad, right/wrong etc... by looking at the proof. For example, we can determine if murder is right or wrong by looking at the evidence: murder causes unhappiness, therefore it is wrong. So I believe that moral statements can be verified; they can be tested to see if they are true or false. Also, ethical conclusions can be drawn from non- ethical statements; e. g. 'abortion ends the life of a foetus, therefore it is wrong.

But not everyone agrees with this, some may say that moral statements cannot be verified simply by looking at the evidence available to the five senses. David Hume (Scottish philosopher) believed that you could never get an ought from an is, he said that sometimes instead of moving from one step to the next, people often made a great leap and claimed to have proved a

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point. He called this mistake the 'Naturalistic Fallacy'<sup>4</sup>, and this comes from the viewpoint of all Intuitionists. Another Intuitionist; Moore, believed that it is still possible for us to decide whether a moral statement is true or false, even if we cannot use our five senses. He believed that we could use our 'moral intuition' and said " If I am asked 'what is good?' my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter".<sup>5</sup>

So Ethical Naturalists and Intuitionists both believe that goodness is something that can be known. It is not just a matter of opinion, but something which we can be certain about which I agree with. However, emotivists and prescriptivists both disagree with this and say that we cannot have certain knowledge about good and bad things. They argue that moral language is not objective; it goes no further than expressing the preferences and feelings of the person making the statement, or recommending that other people follow their advice.

I think that prescriptivism and emotivism have several faults. First of all I believe emotivism doesn't have enough substance to it. Our uses of moral language, according to emotivism could change from one day to the next, depending on our mood or preferences. So when we say 'the Holocaust was evil' we are merely expressing our feelings, no actual facts.

I believe that moral statements go much further than expressing our own approval or disapproval so I do not agree with the emotivist's theories. Second of all I don't agree with prescriptivism because I don't think our moral judgements are founded on prescriptions, and do not have any claim on

objective truth. Also it rules out the possibility of moral language and does not tell us why we should follow one person's prescriptions to another.