METAETHICS

Meta-ethics analyses ethical language. It seeks to answer the question: What do we mean by good/bad/right/wrong etc. (when used in moral debates)?

It is concerned with the meaning of moral language, not with developing ethical theories (the area of *normative* ethics).

Meta-ethics was the 'growth industry' in ethical studies throughout the 20th Century. **Why?**

Ethical Naturalism

'Naturalism' here refers to that which can be examined/analysed/tested.) The various theories that together make up ethical naturalism all attempt to do one thing: to explain **moral** terms (good/bad/ right/wrong/ ...) in a **non-moral** (factual) way.

For example, one branch of ethical naturalism seeks to explain good/bad/right/wrong in terms of psychological states of approval or disapproval.

Telling lies is <u>bad</u> = <u>I/we disapprove of</u> lying

Other branches of ethical naturalism might define the moral term 'good' as 'in accordance with the line of evolutionary development' or as 'conducive to social stability'.

Telling lies is <u>bad</u> = Lies are <u>not conducive to social stability</u>

The *advantage* of ethics explained in this naturalist way is that it provides a scientific basis for ethics and seeks to avoid any appeal to intuition in ethics.

Think of as many versions of Ethical Naturalism as you can. In other words, try to find non-moral ways of describing moral terms.

'IS/OUGHT' CONTROVERSY

Finish the following with an ending that makes sense to you.

1   Children nearby are starving therefore …

2   Many of the poorest countries are heavily indebted therefore …

3   You recognise the man opposite as the one who brutally assaulted a woman the other night therefore …

4   A politician has uttered viciously anti-Semitic views on live TV therefore …

5   You see a young man in the gutter bleeding heavily from a throat gash therefore …

A big debate in meta-ethics is over the 'is/ought' controversy.

David Hume (1711-76) pointed out what he thought was a fundamental mistake in ethical debate: the attempt to go from matters of fact (what is) to matters of moral behaviour (what ought to be). The two, he says, are entirely separate categories.

So the statement: 'Children are starving' and 'You ought to feed them' are in two different universes. The first in the 'is' and the second in the 'ought'. One is about fact, the other about values. One is descriptive, the other prescriptive.

In essence, he argues that no moral prescription ('ought statement') logically follows from a descriptive statement ('is statement').

So why do people feel it logical to say, 'Children are starving, therefore we should feed them'? Hume would answer it in this way: there is a hidden value principle (e.g. When we see suffering we ought to try and relieve it) that really lies behind 'therefore we should feed them'. In summary, 'ought' follows 'ought'; ought never logically follows 'is'.

The Naturalistic Fallacy

The Cambridge Philosopher G. E. Moore (1873-1958) criticised Ethical Naturalism in *Principia Ethica (1903)*.

For Moore, philosophers who attempt to define intrinsic goodness commit the *naturalistic fallacy*, the fallacy of defining the term "goodness" in terms of some natural property, such as pleasure.

Moore defends his contention with what has been called the *open question argument*. For any property we attempt to identify with "goodness," we can ask, "Is that property itself good?" For example, if I claim that pleasure is the highest intrinsic good, the question can be asked, "But, is pleasure itself good?" The fact that this question makes sense shows that "pleasure" and "goodness" are not identical. Moore believes that no proposed natural property can pass the test of the open question argument. This implies that all moral theories fail that are based on anything other than immediate moral intuition. It is only of secondary importance whether an action produces pleasure, is in accord with the will of God, or is conducive to reason. What truly matters is whether we can simply recognize the goodness of a particular action.

G.E. Moore went on to argue that any particular naturalist definition of, say, 'right' or 'good' will be inadequate; we can always conceive of a 'right' or 'good' that defies the given naturalist definition.

In essence, he revived Hume's criticism of the 'is/ought' illogical step. For example, the statement below tries to interpret 'ought' statements in terms of 'is' statements.

Telling lies is <u>bad</u> = <u>I/we disapprove of lying</u>

Notice how a moral word ('bad') is explained in terms of a non-moral, factual phrase ('I/we disapprove of). If 'good' = 'I/we approve of' and 'bad' = 'I/we disapprove of', then 'good' and 'bad' are open to being analysed scientifically - in this case the scientist might be a psychologist.

A further criticism is this: if the moral usage of 'good' and 'bad' can be explained and analysed in a scientific manner, then ethics should be a scientific discipline whose conclusions are arrived at in a cool, methodical way; this does not at all square with our own experience of moral deliberation; what room is there for moral debate when the 'good' or 'bad' we argue about is really a matter of experiment, analysis, conclusion?

3

INTUITIONISM (Ethical Non-Naturalism)

G.E. Moore presented his ideas that the notion of moral goodness cannot be defined or identified with any property. Moore argues that "goodness" is a foundational and unanalysable property, similar to the foundational notion of "yellowness," and is not capable of being explained in terms of anything more basic. We intuitively recognize goodness when we see it, as we similarly recognize yellowness when we see it.

But the notion of "goodness" itself cannot be defined. We cannot define yellow, but we can point to things that are yellow in order to illustrate our point. It is the same with the idea of Good. You cannot easily define the word, but you can point to things that are thought of as good.

George Edward Moore

Everyone does in fact understand the question "is this good?" When he thinks of it, his state of mind is different from what it would be, were he asked, "Is this pleasant, or desired, or approved?" It has a distinct meaning for him, even though he may not recognise in what respect it is distinct. Whenever he thinks of 'intrinsic value' or 'intrinsic worth', or says that a thing 'ought to exist', he has before his mind the unique object - the unique property of things - which I mean by "good".

G .E. Moore, <u>Principia Ethica,</u> 1903

Intuitionists would accept that we can use 'good' in other ways – e.g. to mean 'I approve of' - but this does not describe 'good in itself'. According to intuitionists 'good in itself' is a simple, indefinable, unanalysable property (hence a 'non-natural' property, a thing not open to scientific scrutiny).

Later thinkers

Influential philosophers like **W. D. Ross** (The Right and the Good, 1939) and **H. A. Prichard** (Moral Obligation, 1937) argued that moral propositions and obligations to others *were self-evidently true*.

The latter thinker tried to use Euclidean geometry as analogy. Just as the mind could directly apprehend (intuit) Euclidean geometrical axioms (e.g. parallel lines never meet) as universal truths, so it could intuit moral obligations. The trouble was that *non-Euclidean geometry* was being developed, which rather weakened the whole analogy.

CRITIQUE OF INTUITIONISM

1. **It may be irrelevant.**
   Even if Intuitionism were correct, it may be irrelevant.
   Why? Suppose experience shows that all moral behaviour
   promotes human happiness (a naturalistic property). For all
   practical purposes, we have discovered the highest intrinsic
   good – human happiness.

   We could argue that it is irrelevant at that point whether we
   can intuitively recognize the presence of goodness. The
   presence of human happiness is the only criterion of moral
   value we need for the purposes of making our judgment.

2. **Do we have a 'sixth sense' to pick-up morality?**
   A second problem with Moore's view concerns how it is
   that we perceive goodness, given that it is indefinable and
   foundational. Although "yellowness" is an indefinable and
   foundational concept, we perceive yellowness through our
   sense of sight.

   We might ask which sense it is we use to perceive the
   moral facts. If we cannot answer this, it might seem that
   the comparison with sense-perception is no more than a
   gesture.

3. **Why do we argue over moral matters?**
   People argue about morality, about what is good or bad. If
   they can already intuit the Good, why do they argue? What
   is there to argue about? Surely the Good is self-evident?

   Why should we believe someone who says that it is 'self-
   evident' that we are obliged to do something?

   The practice of giving *reasons* and *justifications* for moral
   choices seems to contradict somewhat the claim that
   everyone intuits the good.

QUESTIONS

1. **If Utilitarianism (Ethical Theory) relies on Ethical Naturalism (Meta-Ethical Theory), on what Meta-Ethical Theory could Deontological Ethical Theories rely?**

2. **If you accepted a version of Ethical Naturalism (e.g. good=certain brain states), would any of this persuade you to 'be good'?**

3. **Assuming Intuitionism to be correct in its claims, by what process could a child become aware of this intuitive 'moral faculty'?**

4. **Do you think G.E. Moore's assertion about 'Good-in-Itself' passes his open question/closed question test?**

5. **If you reject Ethical Naturalism and Intuitionism (Ethical Non-Naturalism), are there any Meta-Ethical approaches left to you?**

Summary so far …

1. **Ethical Naturalism** says there are moral facts and that they are analysable.

2. **Intuitionism** (**Ethical Non-Naturalism)** says that there are moral facts and they are not analysable.

3. A third type of Meta-Ethics – **Ethical Non-Cognitivism** – argues that there are no moral facts than we can speak of meaningfully.

Non-Cognitivism

In Meta-Ethical theory, Non-Cognitivism is the view that moral utterances are neither true nor false statements about the world. They are, instead, expressions of feelings or prescriptive utterances.

Propositional Utterances and Non-propositional Utterances

Propositional utterances are either true or false statements about the world, such as the following:

- *The door is brown*
- *The house is on fire*
- *Emma claims to have seen Elvis*
- *Jake is wearing his suit again*

To test for whether the statement "the door is brown" is propositional, we need only to ask, "Is it true or false that 'the door is brown?'" Since this question is intelligible (i.e. makes sense), then the statement, "the door is brown" is propositional.

Summary: A statement S is propositional if the question *'Is it true or false that S?'* is intelligible.

Non-propositional utterances fail the test. Examples of these are:

- *What time is it?*
- *Keep out of my yard!*
- *Oh, my aching back!*
- *Come on, you Reds!*

Although we understand what is being said, the statements are neither true nor false statements about the world. It makes no sense to ask, "Is it true or false that 'what time is it?'" Non-propositional utterances include:

1. Questions (e.g. "what time is it?"),
2. Commands (e.g. "keep out of my yard!"),
3. Expressions of feelings (e.g. "oh my aching back!").

Summary: A statement S is non-propositional if the question *'Is it true or false that S?'* is unintelligible.

Which of these statements are propositional?

    a) *David has only one eye.*
    b) *Have you an eye patch, David?*
    c) *It's getting quite cold outside.*
    d) *Will it be cold outside?*
    e) *What weather!*
    f) *Great play!*

Are moral utterances propositional?

Consider the following list of moral utterances:

- *Jenny is a good woman*
- *Charity is good*
- *Dave is a bad man*
- *Murder is wrong*

Ethical Naturalists and Non-Naturalists would argue that moral statements are propositional, since it seems intelligible to ask, "is it true or false that 'Jenny is a good woman'? EN and ENN are cognitivist meta-ethical theories since they hold that the truth-value of moral utterances *can* be known (or subject to cognition).

Ethical Non-Cognitivists argue that moral statements are *not* propositional. There are no moral facts. When someone says, 'Murder is wrong', it is not intelligible in the same way as, for example, 'Your multiplication is wrong.'

Instead 'Murder is wrong' is:

- an expression of feeling (**Emotivism** – A.J. Ayer and C.L. Stevenson).
- a command or prescription (**Prescriptivism** – R.M. Hare).

Emotivism (The 'Hurrah! - Boo!' Theory)

Emotivism in ethics derives from an epistemological approach developed in the 1920s known as **Logical Positivism**.

In a nutshell, Logical Positivism claims that only two forms of language are meaningful:

a)   analytic propositions (*a priori* – e.g. logic and tautologies)

Write down a few examples.

Alfred Ayer

b)   synthetic propositions (*a posteriori* - empirically testable statements)

Write down a few examples.

Thus Logical Positivism sets up a **Verification Principle** to test whether a statement is meaningful.

Which of the statements below are meaningful according to the Verification Principle?

a)   *Jane has red hair.*
b)   *Jane has dyed her hair.*
c)   *Jane is a spinster.*
d)   *A spinster is an unmarried woman.*
e)   *God exists.*
f)   *God loves every person.*
g)   *Human life is sacred.*
h)   *Murder is wrong.*
i)   *One plus one equals two.*
j)   *Honesty is good.*

Review

1   Write down:
    a)   a non-cognitive metaethical theory.

    b)   a version of ethical naturalism.

    c)   version of ethical non-naturalism.

2   **One** thinker associated with each theory above?
    a)

    b)

    c)

3   **One positive** criticism of each theory in 1a),b),c)?
    a)

    b)

    c)

4   **One negative** criticism of each theory in 1a),b),c)?
     a)

     b)

     c)

5   Every theory of normative ethics has some metaethical
     stance. What metaethical stance would there be for the
     following?

     AU & RU good =

     DCE good =

     Virtue Ethics good =

     Kantian Ethics good =

6   Explain the meaning of the following words.

Naturalist =

Intuitionism =

Simple =

Cognitive =

7   Give an example of the use of each word in a sentence
     that might form part of a philosophy essay.

(Naturalistic Fallacy)

(Intrinsic good)

(Emotivism)

(Non-cognitive)

12