Meta Ethics

Meta ethics examines the language of ethics.

<u>For example:</u>

- What do we mean by good?
- What do we mean when we say murder is wrong?

<u>**Three types of ethical language**</u>.

- <u>Descriptive Ethical Language:</u> This is a description of a situation. It gives facts and avoids moral judgement or bias. "Most teenage pregnancies are from girls who leave school without GCSE's".
- <u>Normative Ethics:</u> Makes value judgements by analysing what is right and wrong. "War is always wrong".
- <u>Meta Ethics:</u> Before we can decide what constitutes good/ bad behaviour we must define terms such as good/ bad etc. "What is meant by good?"

<u>Key issue</u>: Are ethical statements objective (realist) or subjective (anti-realist)?

- <u>**Objective**</u>: there are moral facts. These facts are right and wrong and are the same for everyone.
- <u>**Subjective**</u>: there is no such thing as moral facts. Morality differs amongst people.

<u>Hume: Fact- Value Distinction. Is-ought gap.</u>

Hume maintained that there is a difference between facts and values. We need to examine the language in ethical statements carefully, we shouldn't be adding things that aren't there. The importance of Hume is to show the need to study the language we are using to be sure we understand and use it correctly.

We need to avoid adding prescriptive ideas to descriptive statements.

"A man killed his wife by stabbing her with a kitchen knife".

<u>Meta ethical theories can be split into two main categories:</u> **Cognitive** and **Non cognitive.**

Cognitive: Ethical Naturalism   Intuitionism

Non cognitive: Emotivism   Prescriptivism

<u>Cognitive</u>: The belief that moral truths exist and can be verified empirically.	<u>Non cognitive:</u> The belief that moral truths are a matter of personal choice and do not exist independently from human experiences.
A Cognitivist believes that moral concept are real. They are objective. As a result statements such as "murder is wrong" can be true or false.	Non cognitivists regard moral concepts such as "right" and "wrong" as subjective. To say "murder is wrong" is expressing your opinion.
Moral statements can be verified as they are based empirical evidence.	It is impossible to verify whether an opinion is true or false (so you cannot verify moral statements).

Strengths	Weaknesses	Strengths	Weaknesses
This approach takes seriously the idea of moral absolutes, surely morality is too important to simply be a matter of opinion.	A fundamental error has been made when it is claimed moral statements can be tested: "**London is the capital of England**"= empirical verifiable using our senses. **"Murder is wrong"** can't be shown to be true using our senses.	Societies formulate the preference of their society into laws= morality is flexible. Non cognitivist approach accepts the world as it is. Also allows for a flexible, non dogmatic approach to morality	A flexible approach to morality will lead to chaos.
	Rigid and dogmatic.		A subjective opinion is not in itself valuable, so a non cognitivist approach would be to say that ethical statements are not valuable.

<u>Cognitive Theory: Ethical Naturalism</u>

There are moral truths. Moral laws exists. They can be experienced and understood through analysis of the natural world and human nature. Using empirical evidence and logic moral statements can be verified

<u>Hume:</u> truth lies in the beliefs human beings have about the natural world that they have gained through experience. For example: self preservation is a central feature of human nature…so murder is wrong. HOWEVER this commits the naturalistic fallacy…Just because nature is a certain way, it does not follow there ought to be a moral demand. As we have seen this criticism 'fallacy' originated with Hume. Yet we can attack Hume with this!

<u>R. B. Perry</u> (hedonistic naturalist) suggests that 'good' means 'being on object of favourable interest' and 'right' means 'being conducive to harmonious happiness'. For Perry, 'x is good' is the same as 'x is an object of desire', while 'y is right' is the same as 'y is conducive to harmonious happiness'

<u>F. H. Bradley</u>, believed that a moral perspective was determined from self-realisation and from observing one's position in society. He rejected hedonism, as pleasure provides no final self-understanding.

<u>Strength:</u> if we view ethics as fact it means we can

consistently apply laws and ensure justice is done.

<u>Weaknesses:</u>

Ethical Naturalism **does not allow for moral dispute**. If 'Mother Teresa was good' simply refers to how the majority feels, then the judgement cannot be wrong or disputed by another person. We might change our opinion, but it is still correct as the statement is an expression of differing attitudes at a particular time.

Bradley's suggestion that morals were a feature of the concrete universe no longer carries much weight outside religious groups. Nor does it stand up in the light of the new science being developed in quantum physics, where traditional mechanistic approaches to the universe are being challenged by more radical accounts such as chaos theory.

For Naturalists, 'good' doesn't really exist on its own. It can be reduced to pleasure, happiness, or God's will. **Charles R. Pigden** writes: "**Naturalists, in short, resort to all sorts of supposed facts – sociological, psychological, scientific, even metaphysical or supernatural.**"

G. E. Moore claimed that any attempt to define ethical language in naturalistic terms, e.g. good = pleasure, happiness, desire, approval, virtue etc is mistaken. Any theory which argues that the good life is identified with any natural property is guilty of the **Naturalistic Fallacy** which assumes that goodness is something which can be grasped by an act of direct observation.

Cognitive Theory: Intuitionism

Intuitionism: the belief that ethical propositions are true or false and are known by intuition.

Intuition: To understand something instinctively without conscious reasoning.

Morality is intuitive- we know what good is, without being able to define it.

> We know what yellow is and can recognise it whenever it is seen. But we cannot define yellow. In the same way we know what good is. But we cannot actually define it". **Moore**.

Moore stated there are simple and complex ideas.

Complex: can be broken down. EG. Horse- animal, mammal, equine.

Simple: cant be broken down any further. EG. Yellow.

Moral terms are simple. The word 'good' is indefinable and can't be analyzed because it is simple and the concept cannot be broken down further.

Intuitionists claim that good and bad cannot be defined but we can know what they mean through our intuition. You don't need to experience murder to know that is wrong.

Moral norms are not the result of analysis of events. Eg. Do not kill. You do not determine these with an analysis of the events. The starting point for these is the self-evident nature of moral truths.

There are foundational moral principles from which moral laws develop. WD Ross- these are Prima Facie Values/ Principles. Eg. Faithfulness in relationships and gratitude.

Intuitionists state these are self evident, but do humans really have innate moral values? Do we really have any intrinsic morals that we are born with?

STRENGTHS

- ✓ Non naturalist- not dependent on the material world. Ethics are independent of actual events. Cannot be guilty of the naturalist fallacy.
- ✓ Explains why societies share moral values. E.g. Most would agree that we should not murder or steal.
- ✓ Supports the idea that we have an innate moral sense.
- ✓ Secular.

WEAKNESSES

- ✓ Can we trust our intuition? What if you're in a moral dilemma and people have differing intuitions. Who is correct? Tsunami.
- ✓ **Mackie:** morality is not just about your intuition, it is about doing something/ taking action. Intuitionism states foundational values but doesn't state the agent ought to follow them.
- ✓ Why should intuition be the basis for morality? We have intuitions about the weather…But we don't use them for the weather forecast. No explanation is given for why intuition should be the basis for morality.
- ✓ Can intuitions actually be learnt? Morality does differ from society. (what is the right way to treat the dead). We could learn our intuitions (from our culture?) – or what we think is an intuition but is indeed something we have learnt at a younger age. Hence the difference in our morals.
- ✓ Cognitive theory…with a variation in morals…problem?

Non- Cognitive Theory: Emotivism

Influence: Hume

- ✓ Sentiment is the source right and wrong.
- ✓ You help someone in need because of feelings, not due to reason.

Ayer: Logical Positivism If a statement is neither analytically or empirically verifiable, it says nothing of reality and is therefore meaningless. Moral beliefs are not true by definition and cannot be observed by sense perceptions. They are not any kind of fact.

For Ayer ethical statements and moral judgements are just emotional responses. An attitude, preference, feeling or emotion. Hence it is known as emotivism. BOO/ HURRAH. Moral arguments serve no purpose, they are just full of meaningless statements. They are simply just asserting feelings, he says it is not even an argument for someone's beliefs. They are used to provoke feelings and stimulate actions.

> "saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making a factual statement,…,I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments. …For neither of us is asserting a genuine proposition." **AYER**

Strengths	Weakness
Using emotive language is effective in changing the views of others.	Undermines all ethical theories that say morality is based in reason and logic.
People actually do make decisions based off emotions. It is describing how decision making works in the world.	Morality is meaningless. Responses to terror attacks, genocides etc…meaningless.
People actually do make decisions based off emotions. It is describing how decision making works in the world.	If all of morality is just emotions whose emotions should we follow?

C L Stevenson Through a moral statement we aren't just having an emotional response but you are also trying to persuade someone else to have the same response. Two uses/ elements/ purposes to a statement:

- ✓ An expression of an attitude (approval or disproval) based on a belief. Could say this is the descriptive element of the statement.
- ✓ Persuasive element also can be called the dynamic elements, provoking others to feel the same way.

☹ **James Rachels** : wrong of Ayer to make a connection between the 'ouch' response when you stub your toe and the 'that's wrong' reaction when you see details of a murder. Removing an appeal to reasons makes moral statements arbitrary.

☹ **R.M. Hare** says that we are too complex to reduce morality to this. He was against this REDUCTIONISM. It was too simplistic an analysis of language. Morality involves the use of reason. He cannot accept that such terrible acts as the Holocaust can be reduced to I believe that killing is bad.

☹ **Peter Vardy** says it is a moral 'non-theory' because it is not an ethical theory in the classical sense. Emotivism leaves moral debate as "just so much hot air and nothing else". Supported by Grosch.

Non- Cognitive Theory: Prescriptivism

Moral statements have a prescriptive quality because they command actions and guide our behaviour. They tell us what we ought to do.

"Abortion is wrong"- Trying to prescribe an attitude or behaviour eg. Do not have an abortion.

It is more than just a command (just a request at that certain time), a moral statement is a suggestion about what action is correct generally. When a person says "Do not murder" it is not just an expression of personal revulsion, it is also suggesting everyone should also follow this/ have this belief.

Hare maintained reason had a role to play in morality. Through our reason we can see that morality has a universal nature. If I say something is red, I am committed to the view that anything like it in colour will also be red. This judgement is descriptive (describing it is red) but universal too (it applies to everything similar).

Moral judgements should be universalised). Can be seen in a number of normative theories.

- ✓ Golden rule of Christianity- "Do unto others as you would do unto yourself".
- ✓ Kantian ethics: "Act only on the maxim through which you can and at the same time will it should become a universal law".

Example: If x prefers to care for a sick person than go to the pub, this implies that were x sick the he/she would wish someone to care for them.

Personal experience/ origin of ideas

Hare served in WW2 and was PoW for three years- spent building the Thailand-Burma Railway. The brutality of the treatment he received from the Japanese affected his attitude. The abuse he received could never be universalised. Developed a secular idea of the Golden Rule.

Four ideas of prescriptivism

1. Moral sentiment is not enough. An individual's morality must also involve **doing** what is morally required.

2. Ethical action has to be **consistent.**

3. Moral belief must be kept in **harmony** with others.

4. The moral agent cannot be **hypocritical**.

Prescriptivism suggests that in responding to moral statements we do not acknowledge if they are true or false, but accept or reject the actions being prescribed. Moral statements are still meaningful as they express an emotion and recommend a course of action.

☺ It seems beneficial that a moral system to require common rules and for your moral statements to have influence.

☹ **J L Mackie:** Morals can't be universal. Your preferences may be different from mine, so "do unto others as you would have done unto yourself" might not be helpful. There also may be situations when a different approach is required. (Kill or be killed scenario).