

Meta Ethics

Introduction

- Concerned with what we mean by morality.
- Epistemological questions – theory of knowledge, including the origin of knowledge, roles of experience and reason in generating knowledge and the validity of knowledge:
 - What do we mean by ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and ‘right’ and ‘wrong’?
 - Do such concepts have an existence independent of human feelings?
 - How is it possible to discover whether they do or don’t?
 - If they do, what do we mean by them?
- Some believe that the truth is God-given – there are absolute moral norms.
 - These scholars are fideists – they believe in faith and follow Divine Command Theory.
- Others believe that the truth lies in empirical data – sensory perceptions.
 - Naturalist – David Hume – the truth lies in beliefs that human being have about the natural world.
 - Ethical Naturalism – the idea that moral laws can be verified through observation of the natural world – words like ‘good’ can be reduced to have some fundamental value.
 - Utilitarians can reduce the word good to the fundamental value of pleasure or welfare.
- **Realism** – belief that concepts have value in and of themselves – independent of the human mind, opinions or feelings.
- **Cognitivism** – moral truths exist and ethical statements can be verified empirically.
- **Anti-realism** – rejection of the idea that things have an intrinsic value independent of the human mind.
- **Non-cognitivism** – the belief that moral truths are matters of personal choice and do not exist independent of human experiences.

Cognitivism and Non-cognitivism

- Division between those that believe moral concepts such as 'good' and 'bad' exist and those that believe these concepts are a matter of opinion and feelings.
- Cognitivists – moral concepts are real.
- Non-cognitivists – moral concepts do not exist, they are matters of personal choice.

Non-cognitivists

- Good and bad are subjective feelings or opinions.
- 'Murder is bad' – you are expressing an opinion – killing is not intrinsically bad, but it disgusts you.
- 'Murder is bad' – neither true nor false.
- Morality is a matter of opinion – therefore it is impossible to verify.
- Reject statements like "Mother Teresa was a good person", 'The Lake District is beautiful' and even 'this box is blue' – these are based on opinion.
- Rejection of propositions (a statement or assertion that expresses a judgement or opinion).

Strengths

- Accepts the world the way it is – morality is a matter of personal choice and society formulates laws from the majority's personal preference.
- Not a rigid dogma – allows for moral flexibility as opinions develop and change.

Criticisms

- Cognitivists argue that flexibility means that truths do not exist and moral absolutes change from day to day – chaotic.

Cognitivist

- Statements that are propositions are based on empirical data.
- Moral, aesthetic and common sense are propositions based on sensory experiences – verified by empirical data.
- ‘Murder is bad’ is either true or false.

Strengths

- Takes the existence of moral absolutes seriously – morality is too important to be regarded as a matter of personal opinion.
- Makes morality objective rather than subjective – more reliable.
- Moral truths can be tested by human reason and logic – human beings do not just observe the universe – their minds test their experiences.

Criticisms

- Non-cognitivists say that these strengths are a misunderstanding of ethics.
- Moral statements are not objectively real – ‘murder is wrong’ different from the statement ‘London is the capital of the United Kingdom’ – one is opinion, the other is fact – denying this difference is a fundamental flaw of cognitivism and this undermines the other strengths.
- Opinions cannot logically be tested – subject to empirical research – they are a matter of personal choice.
 - Non-cognitivists argue that subject opinions are valuable in themselves – the statement ‘murder is wrong’ is not devalued because it is an opinion – we just can’t prove it to be true or false.

Ethical Naturalism

- Might support normative theories – Natural Law and Utilitarianism.
- Assumptions:
 - Moral laws exist.
 - They can be experienced and understood through analysis of the natural world or human nature.
- Once verified by nature, moral statements are objectively true.
- Utilitarian – ‘murder is wrong’ is true because killing prevents happiness.
- Natural Law – ‘murder is wrong’ is true because it prevents fulfilment of the individual.
- Hume – ‘murder is wrong’ is true because self-preservation is central to human nature.
- Nature reveals why it is a moral law – principles such as ‘murder is wrong’ can be tested against these laws.

- Cognitivists and non-cognitivists oppose ethical naturalism.
- Non-cognitivists argue that moral propositions do not actually exist – naturalistic fallacy suggests that it is illogical to go from how something ‘is’ to how something ‘ought’ to be.
 - Hume is guilty of naturalistic fallacy because he suggests that human nature is the basis of moral decision-making – assumes that human nature (what is) is the only basis for morality (what ought to be).
- Non-cognitivists also argue that it is not possible to draw moral laws from human nature – moral laws are concepts, whereas the universe is physical.
- Cognitivists have concerns about the reductionism of naturalism – believe that moral propositions do exist, but argue that it is not possible to reduce the concept of good to a simple law.
 - Reject the claim that there is a single, empirical basis to morality.

Intuitionism

- Belief that ethical propositions are true or false and known by intuition.
- Absolutist and strong realist moral theory.
- Put forward by G.E. Moore and W.D. Ross.
- Intuitionists believe that moral norms have an objective existence that is independent of human experience.
- Morality is intuitive – Moore:
 - ‘We know what yellow is and can recognise it whenever it is seen, but we cannot actually define yellow... we know what good is... we cannot actually define it’ – Principia Ethica.
- When we say something is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ we are referring to properties that we cannot define – we intuitively know what they mean.
- You do not have to experience a killing to know that ‘murder is wrong’ – a moral norm such as ‘you shall not kill’ is determined without reference to any murderers.
 - It is a matter of belief – which is rationally analysed.
 - The starting point is the self-evident nature of moral truths.
- Intuitionists believe that there are foundational moral principles from which moral laws can develop – Ross called them ‘prima facie’ meaning on the face of it they are self-evidently true:
 - Beneficence (being generous or good to others).
 - Faithfulness in a relationship.
 - Gratitude for favours done to you.
 - Justice.
 - Non-maleficence (not being hurtful to others).
 - Promise-keeping.
 - Self-improvement.
- Intuitionists argue that the core values are self-evident.

Strengths

- Intuitionism is non-naturalistic.
 - Morality does not depend on the material world.
 - This theory is not guilty of naturalistic fallacy.
- It explains why differences in societies share moral values such as ‘murder is wrong’.
- Does justice to the fact that human beings have an innate moral sense – independent of personal experience or circumstances.
- It does not require God as the source of absolute ethical principles.

Criticisms

- How do we know we can trust our intuition?
 - Two people in the same moral dilemma could have different intuitions about what to do.
- No link in intuitionism between what is right and what a person ought to do.
 - J.L. Mackie argued that morality is not just what a person believes is right – it is about doing something about it.

- Intuitionism states what the foundational principles are, but does not expect the moral agent to follow the ethical values.
- Intuitionists do not explain why intuition is universally applicable to ethics.
 - No intrinsic reason why human intuitions should be taken as the basis of moral judgements – people have intuitions it will rain tomorrow, but the weather is not based on these intuitions.
 - Some argue that Moore never adequately explained why one particular human experience should form the sole basis for morality.
- Moral intuitionism does not take seriously the differences in morality that exist from one society to another.
 - Could be argued that our intuitions are learnt from the cultures we live in – intuitions differ from society to society.

Emotivism

- Non-cognitive ethical theory.
- Developed out of the logical positivism that developed in Vienna in the early 20th century – Vienna Circle.
- Rejected absolutism and naturalism – built foundations of empiricism.

Vienna Circle

- 1922-1938 – the Vienna Circle brought about a revolution in philosophy.
- Logical positivists believed that the only moral truths were based on science.
- They were interested in the details of language – the importance of philosophy was in its ability to analyse words and arguments logically.
- Vienna Circle regarded its job as the analysis of words, sentences and argument to create philosophy for the age of science and technology.
- Sentences convey information – this information needs to be analysed and verified otherwise it becomes meaningless.
- Statements and propositions have to be based on factual information – must be logically coherent.
 - Without these 2 principles any statement was wrong and meaningless.
- Logical positivists created a system to evaluate statements – verification principle (statements are only valid if they can be verified empirically).
- Statements have to be analytic or synthetic in order to be true.
 - Analytic statement – can be logically deduced from the words (all bachelors are single men – requires understanding of the word bachelor).
 - Synthetic statement – can be verified by analysing facts (John is a bachelor).
- Logical positivists analysed religious and moral language.
- Reached the conclusion that God and goodness could not be verified – therefore ethical statements are meaningless.
- Carnap – rejected the idea that there is a divide between what is and what ought to be – life is physical, there is no place for the metaphysical.
- Vienna Circle – knew that there was no need of God, but they were aware that moral goodness could not be removed as easily.
- They tried and failed to undermine morality.
- Wittgenstein rejected the simplicity of the Vienna Circle's dismissal of ethical and religious language.
- A moral system has to exist but this creates a contradiction – morality is necessary but cannot be verified.

Alfred Ayer

- 1910-1989.
- Emotivism – solution to the problem of moral language.
- Boo-Hurrah theory – morals are determined by people’s feelings and opinions.
- When we use ethical language we are expressing our emotions about an issue.
 - ‘Hurrah’ – when something is morally good.
 - ‘Boo’ – when something is morally wrong.
- ‘Murder is wrong’ is not based on objective moral absolutes or principles – we are simply saying ‘I don’t like murder’.
 - Applying it to a wider community – ‘If murder became legal then I believe society would not survive’.
 - The statement cannot be reduced to an analytical or synthetic statement – not possible to justify the view that murder is either wrong or right.
- New edition of Language, Truth and Logic – Ayer claimed that many ethical statements contain elements of fact.
- Some ethical statements are descriptive and verifiable – others are not.
 - ‘Stealing is wrong’ – matter of opinion and therefore non-verifiable.
 - ‘You know that when you stole from that person you did wrong’ – capable of verification through the experience of the person who stole.
 - This allowed Ayer to maintain his emotivist ethical position, whilst accepting that there are some facts in ethics.

Charles L. Stevenson

- 1908 – 1979.
- Ethics and Language.
- Agrees with Ayer that ethical statements can express an emotional response and that it is possible for people to differ in the way they respond, even though they have the same end in mind.
- Two people hold similar views about whether war is right or wrong – on the basis of gut-reaction to the events.
 - They might have different methods for ending the conflict.
 - One wants to withdraw troops immediately.
 - The other argues for a planned withdrawal.
- Ayer’s views begin and end with an expression of revulsion – Stevenson believes it is necessary to go further.
- Stevenson’s views allow emotivism to move beyond a mere shouting match of opinions.
- Ethical statements contain elements of persuasion – they do not simply reflect a person’s feelings, they also present a moral claim.
- When a person says ‘murder is wrong’ they are not just saying ‘I don’t like murder’ – they are implying that the person you are speaking to should feel the same way too.
 - They expect the recipient of the statement to share those feelings.

Strengths

- Accepts the importance of the scientific approach to language.
 - Words have particular meanings – should be empirically verified.
- Allows the development of a complex and sophisticated discussion of moral language.
 - Prevents ethicists regarding statements such as ‘murder is wrong’ as self evidently true.
- Ethical statements are not the same as empirically verifiable facts.
- Stresses the importance of the individual’s moral feelings.

Criticisms

- Ethical statements are judged on the claims they make.
 - G.J. Warnock – to claim ‘murder is wrong’ is to make a factual statement which can be discussed and debated.
 - If this were not the case morality would change as emotions changed – causing extreme relativism and subjectivism.
- Moral statements might carry a weight of public and private emotions, but this does not mean that they are moral.
 - It is possible to feel one is right about something and yet be considered very wrong.
- Just because you have an emotion that something is wrong, does not mean that people should agree.
 - There is a disconnection between saying ‘murder is wrong’ and concluding that other people should not do it.
- Language is not just about verifiability.
 - Language is much richer and more opaque than scientific experiments or mathematical numbers.

Prescriptivism

Richard Hare

- Moved beyond the idea that ethical statements are just expressions of feelings – moral language is prescriptive and tells us how we ought to act.
- Ethical system which describes what a person should do – like a doctor's prescription, it will vary from person to person.
- 'You shall not murder' is not just a personal feeling – it means everyone should follow this moral truth.
- Universalizability principle – when an individual prefers one thing rather than something else this implies that this preference would be good for anyone.
 - If x prefers to take care of a sick person, this implies that if x were sick then they would wish someone to take care of them too.
- Golden Rule – 'do to others as you would have them do to you'.
- Prescriptivism asserts 4 basic ideas:
 - Moral sentiment is not sufficient – the individual's morality must involve doing what is morally required.
 - Ethical action has to be consistent – practice a consistent morality in all situations.
 - Moral belief must be kept in harmony with others.
 - Moral agent cannot be hypocritical.
- Ethical statements are expressions of opinion by saying that they also give directions as to how we ought to act.
- Hare believed that ethical statements are universalizable – this does not mean they are objective.
- There is no way to judge whether one person's preferences should be followed over another person's.
- There is nothing to stop us changing our preferences