

Introduction

Later on I asked Marlow why he wished to cultivate this chance acquaintance. He confessed apologetically that it was the commonest curiosity. I flatter myself that I understand all sorts of curiosity - curiosity about daily facts, daily things, about daily men. It is the most respectable faculty of the human mind - in fact, I cannot conceive the uses of an incurious mind. It would be like a chamber perpetually locked up.

Joseph Conrad, *Chance*

In this chapter I provide a brief account of the territory covered in metaethics, and of the main philosophical positions in metaethics to be covered in detail in the course of the book.

I.1 What is Metaethics?

Suppose I am debating with a friend the question whether or not we ought to give to famine relief, whether or not we are morally obliged to give to famine relief. The sorts of questions philosophers raise about this kind of debate fall roughly into two groups. First, there are *first order* questions about which party in the debate, if any, is right, and why. Then, there are *second order* questions about what the parties in the debate are doing when they engage in it. Roughly, the first order questions are the province of *normative ethics*, and the second order questions are the province of *metaethics*. As one recent writer puts it:

In metaethics, we are concerned not with questions which are the province of normative ethics like 'Should I give to famine relief?' or 'Should I return the wallet I found in the street?' but with questions about questions like these. (Smith 1994a: 2)

It is important to be clear that in normative ethics we do not just look for an answer to the question 'Should we give to famine relief?', we also look for some insight into *why* the right answer is right. It is in their answers to this latter sort of 'why?' question that the classic theories in normative ethics disagree. Examples of such theories include: *act-utilitarianism* (one ought to give to famine relief

because that particular action, of those possible, contributes most to the greater happiness of the greatest number); *rule-utilitarianism* (one ought to give to famine relief because giving to famine relief is prescribed by a rule the general observance of which contributes most to the greater happiness of the greatest number); and *Kantianism* (one ought to give to famine relief because universal refusal to give to famine relief would generate some kind of inconsistency). Normative ethics thus seeks to discover the general principles underlying moral practice, and in this way potentially impacts upon practical moral problems: different general principles may yield different verdicts in particular cases. In this book we are not concerned with questions or theories in normative ethics. Rather, we are concerned with questions about the following:¹

- (a) *Meaning*: what is the *semantic function* of moral discourse? Is the function of moral discourse to state *facts*, or does it have some other non fact-stating role?
- (b) *Metaphysics*: do moral facts (or properties) exist? If so, what are they like? Are they identical or reducible to some other type of fact (or property) or are they irreducible and *sui generis*?
- (c) *Epistemology and justification*: is there such a thing as moral knowledge? How can we know whether our moral judgements are true or false? How can we ever justify our claims to moral knowledge?
- (d) *Phenomenology*: how are moral qualities represented in the experience of an agent making a moral judgement? Do they appear to be 'out there' in the world?
- (e) *Moral psychology*: what can we say about the motivational state of someone making a moral judgement? What sort of connection is there between making a moral judgement and being motivated to act as that judgement prescribes?
- (f) *Objectivity*: can moral judgements really be correct or incorrect? Can we work towards finding out the moral truth?

Obviously, this list is not intended to be exhaustive, and the various questions are not all independent (for example, a positive answer to (f) looks, on the face of it, to presuppose that the function of moral discourse is to state facts). But it is worth noting that the list is much wider than many philosophers forty or fifty years ago would have thought. For example, one such philosopher writes:

[Metaethics] is not about what people ought to do. It is about what they are doing when they talk about what they ought to do. (Hudson 1970:1)

The idea that metaethics is exclusively about language was no doubt due to the more general idea that philosophy as a whole has no function other than the study of ordinary language and that 'philosophical problems' only arise from the application of words out of the contexts in which they are ordinarily used. Fortunately, this 'ordinary language' conception of philosophy has long since ceased to hold sway, and the list of metaethical concerns - in metaphysics, epistemology, phenomenology and moral psychology, as well as in semantics and the theory of meaning - bears this out.

Positions in metaethics can be defined in terms of the answers they give to these sorts of question. Some examples of metaethical theories are *moral realism*, *non-cognitivism*, *error-theory* and *moral anti-realism*. The task of this book is to explain and evaluate these theories. In this chapter I give thumbnail sketches of the various theories and try to convey an idea of the sorts of questions they address. These preliminary sketches are then developed at more length in the remainder of the book.

12 Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism

Consider a particular moral judgement, such as the judgement that murder is wrong. What sort of psychological state does this express? Some philosophers, called *cognitivists*, think that a moral judgement such as this expresses a *belief*. Beliefs can be true or false: they are *truth-apt*, or apt to be assessed in terms of truth and falsity. So cognitivists think that moral judgements are capable of being true or false. On the other hand, *non-cognitivists* think that moral judgements express non-cognitive states such as emotions or desires.² Desires and emotions are not truth-apt. So moral judgements are not capable of being true or false. (Note that, although it may be true *that I have* a desire for a pint of beer and false *that I have* a desire to see England win the World Cup, this does not imply that desires *themselves* can be true or false.) In many ways, it is the battle between cognitivism and non-cognitivism that takes centre-stage in this book: chapters 3 to 5 concern non-cognitivism and its problems, while cognitivism and its problems are the topic of chapter 2 and chapters 6 to 10.

1.3 Strong Cognitivism: Naturalism

A *strong cognitivist* theory is one which holds that moral judgements (a) are apt for evaluation in terms of truth and falsity, and (b) can be the upshot of cognitively accessing the facts which render them true. Strong cognitivist theories can be either *naturalist* or *non-naturalist*. According to a naturalist, a moral judgement is rendered true or false by a natural state of affairs, and it is this natural state of affairs to which a true moral judgement affords us access. But what is a natural state of affairs? In this book I will follow G. E. Moore's characterization:

By 'nature', then, I do mean and have meant that which is the subject matter of the natural sciences and also of psychology. (Moore [1903] 1993: 92)

A natural property is a property which figures in one of the natural sciences or in psychology: examples might include the property of being conducive to the greatest happiness of the greatest number and the property of being conducive to the preservation of the human species. A natural state of affairs is simply a state of affairs that consists in the instantiation of a natural property.

Naturalist cognitivists hold that moral properties are identical to (or reducible to) natural properties. The *Cornell realists* (e.g. Nicholas Sturgeon, Richard Boyd, and David Brink; see Sturgeon 1988; Boyd 1988; and Brink 1989) think that moral properties are *irreducible* natural properties in their own right. *Naturalist reductionists* (e.g. Richard Brandt and Peter Railton; see Brandt 1979 and Railton 1986a) think that moral properties are reducible to the other natural properties that are the subject matter of the natural sciences and psychology. Both the Cornell realists and the naturalist reductionists are *moral realists*: they think that there really are moral facts and moral properties, and that the existence of these moral facts and instantiation of these moral properties is constitutively independent of human opinion. The non-reductive naturalism of the Cornell realists is discussed in chapter 8 and naturalist reductionism is the subject of chapter 9.

1.4 Strong Cognitivism: Non-Naturalism

Non-naturalists think that moral properties are not identical to or reducible to natural properties. They are irreducible and *sui generis*.

We will look at two types of strong cognitivist non-naturalism: Moore's ethical non-naturalism, as developed in his *Principia Ethica* (first published in 1903), according to which the property of moral goodness is non-natural, simple, and unanalysable; and the contemporary version of non-naturalism that has been developed by John McDowell and David Wiggins (roughly from the 1970s to the present day; see McDowell 1998 and Wiggins 1987). Again, both types of non-naturalist are moral realists: they think that there really are moral facts and moral properties, and that the existence of these moral facts and instantiation of these moral properties is constitutively independent of human opinion.³ Moore's non-naturalism, and his attack on naturalism, are discussed in chapters 2 and 3; the non-naturalism of McDowell is discussed in chapter 10.

1.5 Strong Cognitivism without Moral Realism: Mackie's 'Error-Theory'

John Mackie has argued that although moral judgements are apt to be true or false, and that moral judgements, if true, would afford us cognitive access to moral facts, moral judgements are in fact always *false* (Mackie 1977). This is because there simply are no moral facts or properties in the world of the sort required to render our moral judgements true: we have no plausible epistemological account of how we could access such facts and properties, and, moreover, such properties and facts would be *metaphysically queer*, unlike anything else in the universe as we know it. A moral property would have to be such that the mere apprehension of it by a moral agent would be sufficient to motivate that agent to act. Mackie finds this idea utterly problematic. He concludes that there are no moral properties or moral facts, so that (positive, atomic) moral judgements are uniformly false: our moral thinking involves us in a radical *error*. Because Mackie denies that there are moral facts or properties, he is not a moral realist, but a *moral anti-realist*. Mackie's error-theory is the subject of chapter 6.

1.6 Weak Cognitivism about Morals without Moral Realism: 'Best Opinion' Theories

A *weak cognitivist* theory is one which holds that moral judgements (a) are apt for evaluation in terms of truth and falsity, but (b) cannot be the

upshot of cognitive access to moral properties and states of affairs. Weak cognitivism thus agrees with strong cognitivism on (a), but disagrees on (b). An example of a weak cognitivist theory would be one which held that our best judgements about morals *determine* the extensions of moral predicates, rather than being based upon some faculty which *tracks, detects* or *cognitively accesses* facts about the instantiation of moral properties. (The extension of a predicate is the class of things, events or objects to which that predicate may correctly be applied.) Moral judgements are thus capable of being true or false, even though they are not based on a faculty with a tracking, accessing or detecting role - in other words, even though true moral judgements are not the upshot of cognitive access to moral states of affairs. This view thus rejects moral realism, not by denying the existence of moral facts (like the error-theory), but by denying that those facts are constitutively independent of human opinion. In chapter 7 I will discuss weak cognitivist theories of this type in the context of Crispin Wright's work on *anti-realism* (e.g. Wright 1988a).

1.7 Non-Cognitivism

Non-cognitivists deny that moral judgements are even apt to be true or false. Non-cognitivists thus disagree with both weak and strong cognitivism. We shall look at a number of arguments which the non-cognitivist uses against cognitivism. An example of such an argument is the *argument from moral psychology*.

Suppose that moral judgements can express beliefs, as the cognitivist claims. Being motivated to do something or to pursue a course of action is always a matter of having a belief and a desire. For example, I am motivated to reach for the fridge because I believe that it contains beer and I have a desire for a beer. But it is an internal and necessary fact about an agent that, if she sincerely judges that X is good, she is motivated to pursue the course of action X. So if a moral judgement expressed a belief, it would have to be a belief which sustained an internal and necessary connection to a desire: it would have to be a necessary truth that an agent who possessed the belief would *inter alia* possess the desire. But no belief is necessarily connected to a desire because, as Hume claimed, 'beliefs and desires are distinct existences', and it is impossible to have a necessary connection between distinct existences (Hume [1739] 1968). So it cannot be the case that moral judgements express beliefs. So moral judgements are not truth-apt.⁴

If moral judgements cannot express beliefs, what do they express? We shall look at three versions of non-cognitivism which

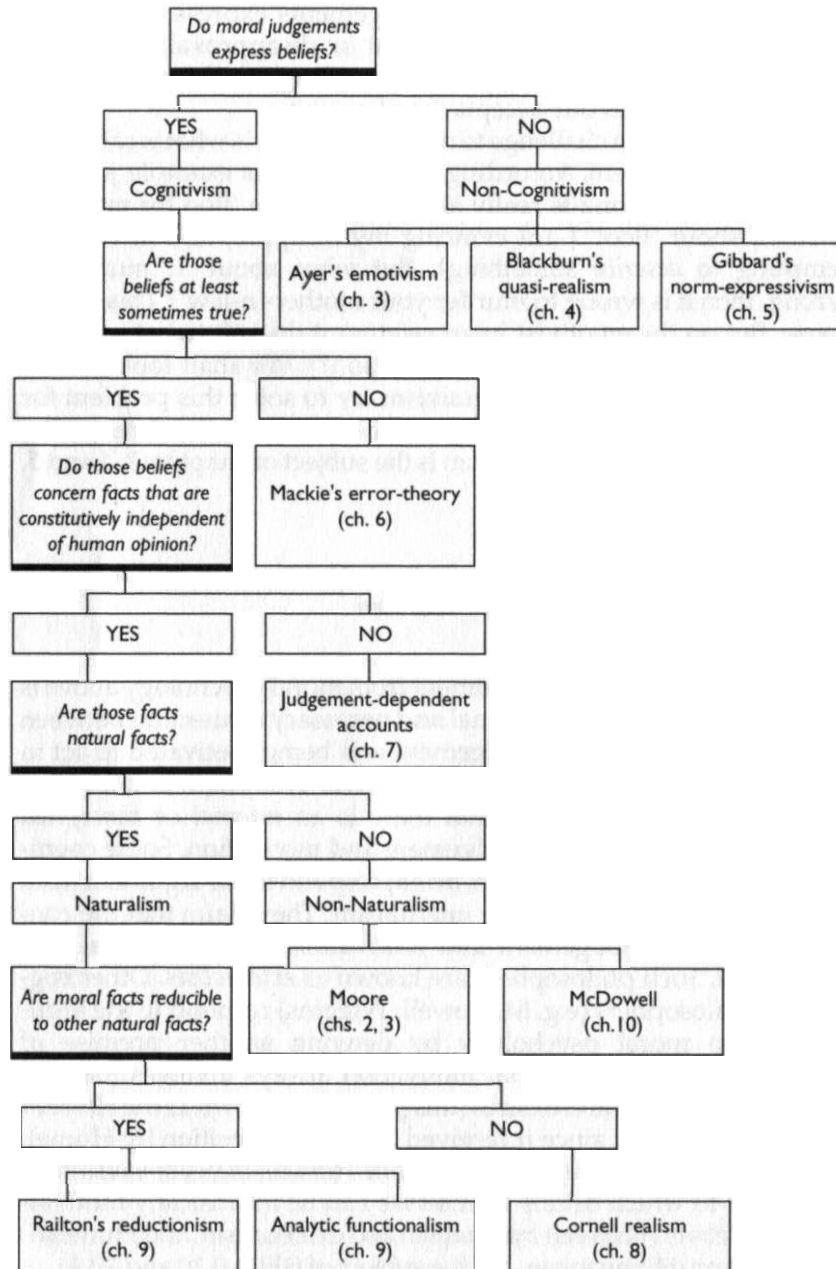
give different answers to this question: A. J. Ayer's *emotivism* (1936), according to which moral judgements express emotions, or sentiments of approval or disapproval; Simon Blackburn's *quasi-realism* (1984), according to which moral judgements express our dispositions to form sentiments of approval or disapproval; and Allan Gibbard's *norm-expressivism* (1990), according to which our moral judgements express our acceptance of norms.

Perhaps the main challenge to non-cognitivism is what is called the *Frege - Geach* problem. According to emotivism, for example, judging that murder is wrong is really just like shouting 'Boo for murder!' (when I shout 'Boo!' I am evincing my disapproval; I am not attempting to *describe* something). But what about 'If murder is wrong, then it is wrong to murder your mother-in-law'? This makes sense. But on the emotivist interpretation it doesn't (what would it sound like on an emotivist interpretation?). We shall look at how quasi-realism and norm-expressivism try to solve this problem for non-cognitivism, as well as a range of other problems that threaten the non-cognitivist. Non-cognitivism is the subject of chapters 3, 4 and 5.

1.8 Internalism and Externalism, Humeanism and Anti-Humeanism

One of the premises in the argument from moral psychology above is the claim that there is an internal and necessary connection between sincerely making a moral judgement and being motivated to act in the manner prescribed by that judgement. This claim is known as *internalism*, because it says that there is an *internal* or *conceptual* connection between moral judgement and motivation. Some cognitivist philosophers (e.g. Railton, Brink) respond to the argument from moral psychology by denying internalism. They claim that the connection between judgement and motivation is only external and contingent. Such philosophers are known as *externalists*. Other cognitivist philosophers (e.g. McDowell, Wiggins) respond to the argument from moral psychology by denying another premise of the argument, the claim that motivation always involves the presence of *both* beliefs and desires (this premise is known as the *Humean theory of motivation*, since it received a classic exposition by Hume). McDowell and Wiggins advance an *anti-Humean theory of motivation*, according to which beliefs themselves can be intrinsically motivating. The debates between internalism and externalism, and Humeanism and Anti-Humeanism, are the subject of §§9.9-9.10 and 10.4.

1.9 Flowchart of Main Metaethical Theories



1.10 Further Reading

The following surveys of recent and contemporary metaethics may be found useful: Sayre-McCord 1986; Darwall, Gibbard and Railton 1992; Little 1994a, 1994b; and Railton 1996a. For those entirely new to philosophical ethics, Blackburn 2001 is an excellent and concise introduction. Benn 1998 is also useful.