Meta-ethics

1. The task of meta-ethics: To provide a systematic and theoretical understanding of moral terminology, discourse, thought and action guidance (‘moral practice’).

NB. Meta-ethics is not ethics. Two helpful analogies: football commentators (not footballers) and philosophers of science (not scientists). More specifically, meta-ethics is concerned with the following:

(a) **Semantics** of moral language: What do moral terms mean? What linguistic function do they have? Are they apt for any sort of truth?

(b) **Psychology** of morality: What sort of mental state is involved in accepting a moral claim? A belief? An emotion? What role do they play in our actions and behaviour?

(c) **Metaphysics** of morality: Is there any sort of moral reality, moral properties or moral facts? If so, what are they like (natural, observable etc.)?

(d) **Epistemology** of morality: What sort of reason, if any, can be evoked in favour of moral claims? Is ethical knowledge obtainable? If so, how?

2. Moral realism: Moral theories are maps of moral reality.

(a) **Semantics**: Moral judgements function to describe the world and some of these descriptions are successful. Successful descriptions state the moral facts (‘factualism’).

(b) **Psychology**: Moral judgements express states of mind that represent the world as being a certain way, i.e. beliefs. (‘cognitivism’)

(c) **Metaphysics**: There is an independently existing moral reality (i.e. moral facts, properties, whatever) which our moral judgements seek to describe. Questions about this moral reality:
   a. Are moral facts/properties natural or non-natural?
   b. How are moral facts/properties related to other facts/properties?
      Some options: they have a distinct existence; they are reducible as a matter of empirical fact; they are reducible as a matter of definition.

(d) **Epistemology**: Our moral judgements are justified to the extent that they are the result of some specified sort of contact with moral reality. (NB. Most realists are also optimists: hold that our present methods of ethical inquiry are adequate to get us in contact with moral reality.)

Note: Realism is not the same as absolutism. Absolutism (at least in one sense of that term) is the view that moral theory consists of exceptionless moral rules (e.g. don’t lie). Realism entails nothing about the content of moral claims, just that they are made true by correctly representing moral reality

Further reading
- Brink, D. Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics. (CUP 1989). Chapter 1
3. Expressivism: Moral judgements do not attempt to describe some moral reality; rather they express some subset of agents’ attitudes, emotions, preferences or desires.

(a) **Semantics**: Moral judgements express non-descriptive states of mind, thus do not attempt to state facts.

(b) **Psychology**: To have a moral conviction is to have a non-cognitive attitude towards a certain (type of) act or state-of-affairs (hence ‘**non-cognitivism**’).

Variations:
- The attitude is an emotion (Ayer, Stevenson)
- The attitude is a universal preference (Hare)
- The attitude is a practical stance (Blackburn)

(c) **Metaphysics**: There is no moral reality.

(d) **Epistemology**: There is no place for a specific ‘moral sense’ in the explanation of moral practice. It is not the case that moral judgements are justified to the extent that they conform to moral reality.

**NB.** One important difference between Ayer and Stevenson: For Ayer moral judgements are *mere* expressions of emotion. For Stevenson (and all later expressivists) moral judgements are the expression of attitudes *with the purpose of persuading others to adopt those attitudes*. I.e. moral practice is not mere ‘show-and-tell’ it is an essentially practical, co-ordinating practice.

**NB.** Expressivism is distinct from subjectivism, which ascribes subjective truth-conditions to moral judgements. I.e. there is a distinction between *describing oneself as having an attitude* and *expressing that attitude*. The former is truth-apt (and sometimes true); the latter is not truth-apt (so never true or false). E.g. This is the distinction between claiming “I am bored” (*describing one’s attitude*) and tapping one’s fingers (*expressing one’s attitude*).

**Further reading**
4. Arguments for expressivism:

4.1. Ayer’s verificationalist argument

1. A statement is factually significant if and only if there is some observation that would count as evidence for accepting it as true or for rejecting it as false.
2. There is no observation that could possibly count as evidence for accepting a moral statement as true, or for rejecting it as false.
Therefore:
3. Moral statements are not factually significant.

Problems:
(a) Quine’s attack on the criterion of verifiability (premise 1)…

Even scientific statements do not have observational consequences when taken in isolation. E.g.

(i) Radon emits electrons
Only has observational consequences when combined with background hypotheses such as:
(ii) Electrons leave a trail when they pass through water vapour
(iii) This stuff is water vapour
(iv) That stuff is radon.
(i)-(iv) have the observational consequences: “If we put that stuff in a cloud chamber we will observe a trail”

Similarly, moral claims have observational consequences when combined with background assumptions. E.g.

(v) Hitler was a good man
(vi) No good man would oversee the Holocaust
(v) and (vi) produce the observational consequence: “Hitler didn’t oversee the Holocaust”

Moral: Just as scientific claims only have observational consequences when considered in groups, so do moral claims. So moral claims are no more unverifiable than scientific claims, and Ayer’s argument fails

(b) If moral properties are identified with natural properties, then moral statements will be verifiable.

(c) Might moral intuitions count as moral observations?

(d) Ayer’s argument doesn’t entail expressivism.

Further reading
4.2. Mackie’s argument from ontological queerness

1. If moral realism is true, moral judgements are made true by the existence of objectively existing and necessarily motivating entities.
2. Objectively existing and necessarily motivating entities are metaphysically queer.
3. We have no reason to believe in the existence of metaphysically queer entities (application of Ockham’s razor).

Therefore

4. Moral realism is false

Problems
- What is metaphysically queer may still exist
- Moral entities may not be necessarily motivating

4.3. Mackie’s argument from relativity

1. If moral realism were true, then different cultures would tend to converge on the same moral judgements over time (absent epistemological errors and the like).
2. Different cultures do not tend to converge on the same moral judgements over time (even when they come together and even when free from epistemological errors and the like).

Therefore

3. Moral realism is false.

4.4. The argument from practicality

1. Moral judgements are necessarily connected to the motivations of the agents that make them ['internalism’ or ‘motivational internalism’].
   \[\Rightarrow\] E.g. If I judge that murder is wrong, I will have some motivation not to murder people (other things being equal)
2. No descriptive judgements are necessarily connected to the motivations of the agents that make them
   \[\Rightarrow\] This is one component of ‘Humean Psychology’

Therefore:

3. Moral judgements are not descriptive judgements

Replies:
- Deny internalism e.g. if the amoralist is possible (in this context, the amoralist is someone who makes moral judgements but remains completely unmoved by them)
- Deny Humean psychology.

Further reading
5. Arguments against expressivism

5.1. The presumptive case against expressivism (and in favour of realism) – sometimes called the task of ‘saving the appearances’.

1. Our engagement in moral practice carries the following commitments:

   (i) Some moral judgements are true, others false
   (ii) Some moral judgements are justified, others unjustified
   (iii) Some moral claims can be known
   (iv) Genuine disagreement over moral matters is possible
   (v) Moral sentence differ in meaning from religious or aesthetic sentences.

2. The best explanation of these commitments is that moral practice is a realist practice. E.g.

   (i): Moral judgements are made true by correctly representing a moral reality, otherwise they are false
   (ii): Our moral judgements are justified to the extent that they are the result of some specified sort of contact with moral reality
   (iii): Moral claims are known when they are believed, true and justified (in the ways specified above).
   (iv): Moral disagreement is disagreement over the correct contours of moral reality. So it is disagreement in belief.
   (v): Moral sentences attempt to describe moral reality, whereas religious aesthetic sentences either attempt to describe religious/aesthetic reality or are not descriptivist at all.

Replies

- Deny that moral practice involves the commitments stated.
- Deny that the appearances need saving: they are the result of conceptual confusions that can safely be dispensed with (revisionism).
- The argument is abductive (inference to the best explanation) so alternative explanations might be available. Some tentative expressivist explanations:

   o For (iv): Moral disagreement is disagreement in attitude e.g. permitting smoking.
   o For (v): Moral judgements are practical – part of an attempt to influence attitudes – in a way in which religious and aesthetics attitudes are not (cf. Stevenson).
   o It is less clear what the expressivist might say about (i)-(iii). Minimalism about truth?

Further reading

Further further reading

There are a number of good introductions to meta-ethics, most written by realists and all of which cover predominantly the same ground. The shortest and most easily accessible is:


There are then a number of systematic defences of moral realism that can get quite technical. The two most popular are:

- Shafer-Landau, Moral Realism (OUP 2003). This is also available on Oxford Scholarship online, which is (unfortunately) a subscription service.

On the expressivist side, besides the Ayer and Stevenson (for which I would recommend his collection Facts and Values) there is:

- Blackburn, S, Spreading the Word (OUP 1984). Chapters 5 & 6. [This is a classic statement of a modern expressivist view, and is the beginning of Blackburn’s ‘crusade’ to save the appearances for expressivism – what he calls the project of ‘quasi-realism’. For a more recent work of his Ruling Passions (OUP 1998), which covers meta-ethics (at sometimes quite a technical level) and much else besides.]

The following provides a (mostly) non-partisan overview, although can be quite dry (and is also prone to large swings in difficulty level):


Finally there are number of collections that contain must of the important recent contributions to meta-ethics. The best is:


Online resources

- The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (http://plato.stanford.edu/) is free and much more reliable than wikipedia. There are good entries on “Moral Realism” and “Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism”
- Student guide to writing philosophy essays: