Introduction

“Ethics is subjective.”

If ethics is subjective, then moral claims are subjective in some sense.

- Australia is the smallest continent.
- Our greenhouse gas emissions are causing climate change.
- There is no largest prime number.
- Abortion is killing.
- Abortion is morally permissible.
- You ought to keep your promises.

Are these claims true or false? What makes them true or false?

Truth and falsity depend on facts: facts about continents, greenhouse gases, numbers, abortion, etc.

What about moral claims? Are there moral facts that can make them true or false?

Four central questions about moral facts

(i) Do moral facts exist?
   Just as there are facts about continents or greenhouse gases, are there facts about the rightness and wrongness of actions?

(ii) How do we know moral facts?
    In other fields, we use observation (sciences), proofs (mathematics), perception and reasoning (everyday life). What can we use to learn about moral facts?

(iii) How can we account for moral disagreement?
    People seem to disagree about many moral judgments, and agree on many others. It seems possible to be mistaken in moral beliefs.

(iv) How can moral beliefs motivate?
    Moral beliefs necessarily motivate: there is an internal connection between moral belief and motivation which is lacking in the connection of ordinary belief and motivation. How to explain this?

Noncognitivism

“When you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it.”

(David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, III.i.1)

Noncognitivism is the view that moral judgments are neither true nor false—they are not truth-apt. One example:

Expressivism as an account of moral language. One function of language is to make (true or false) statements. Another is to express emotions and attitudes. Expressivism holds that moral judgments are expressions of approval and disapproval.

- If you say “X is wrong,” it means you have a negative attitude towards doing X.
- Thus, the function of moral language is to express attitudes and to influence behavior.
Noncognitivism

(i) Do moral facts exist?
- No, there are no moral facts.

(ii) How do we know moral facts?
- There are no moral facts to be known, only attitudes.

(iii) Are moral disagreements genuine disagreements?
- No, they are merely the expressions of different attitudes.

(iv) How can moral beliefs motivate?
- There is a connection between moral beliefs and motivation, since to make a moral judgment is to express a certain attitude, and an attitude is a disposition to act.

**PROBLEM:** moral reasons. Moral judgments aim to influence behavior; they are supported by moral reasons.

Can attitudes be “correct”? Can they be supported by reasons?

Error theory

Error theory. Our moral practice involves a systematic error: there are no moral facts that make moral judgments true. All moral judgments are false, because there are no corresponding facts in the world that could be their truthmakers.

(i) Do moral facts exist?
- No, there are no moral facts.

(ii) How do we know moral facts?
- There are no moral facts to be known.

(iii) Are moral disagreements genuine disagreements?
- No, since all moral beliefs are false, there are no genuine moral disagreements.

(iv) How can moral beliefs motivate?
- The connection between (false) moral beliefs and motivation still needs to be explained.

Relativism

Noncognitivist relativism. Moral evaluation is not subject to truth or falsity, but it depends on (relative to) something else; e.g., the speaker’s own attitudes.

**PROBLEM:** this is just noncognitivism.

Trivial relativism. The view that
- there are no universal moral requirements, but
- everyone should follow the moral requirements of his or her society or group.

Normative relativism. The view that no-one should ever pass judgment on other people’s moral codes or practices.

The argument from tolerance. It is always unacceptable to interfere with other people’s pursuit of their values.

**PROBLEM:** all these views are self-defeating: they formulate a universal moral requirement.

Relativism is a realist view.

Naturalism and anti-naturalism

Naturalism. The view that moral judgments can be analyzed in terms of, or reduced to, factual statements.

Reduction is not the same as elimination. If moral facts can be identified with nonmoral facts, it does not follow that they don’t exist. E.g., a table is only a collection of atoms, but it still exists.

Anti-naturalism. Realist ethical views that deny that ethics must be fitted into the scientific worldview. They hold that moral facts cannot be analyzed in terms of nonmoral facts: the “normative realm” is independent of science. Science is relevant only insofar as it settles the relevant facts (i.e., the relevant circumstances).

(ii) How do we know moral facts?
- Supernaturalism: moral facts are supernatural facts;
- Rationalism: moral facts are a priori.
Relativism and absolutism

Moral absolutism. The view that there is a single moral code that everyone has reason to follow. There are universal moral demands and they are the source of all moral reasons; these demands apply to all moral agents.

Note that on this view, a belief in absolute values is a belief that those values provide everyone with reasons.

Note that these reasons may be overridden but they still apply to all.

Moral relativism. The view that denies that there is a single moral code that applies to everyone universally. Moral truth and justification are relative to factors which are culturally and historically contingent. Different agents are subject to different moral demands or requirements, given by the moral conventions in which they participate.
Moral disagreement

- **Relevant facts.** Moral disagreements sometimes turn out to be factual disagreements.
  - Disagreeing on euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide because of their likely consequences (e.g., “slippery slopes”).

- **Values.** Arguments may appeal to different values. To resolve the disagreement, these values must be identified, defended by more basic principles, and weighed against one another. In balance, which provides the strongest reasons?
  - Something may have instrumental value or final value.
  - E.g., balancing the harms and benefits in legalized organ trading.

- **Fundamental principles.** There are disagreements about basic principles. The principles must be evaluated: accepted, rejected, or ruled irrelevant to the issue at hand.
  - The sanctity of life vs the quality of life view;
  - A woman’s right to choose vs the prohibition on killing the innocent.

Defending your moral beliefs

- **Conceptual analysis.** The concepts involved in your moral belief may be incoherent or inadequately defined.
  - “Cloning involves playing God.”

- **Consistency.** If your belief is inconsistent with other moral beliefs that you have, you have to reject or modify one or more of them.
  - If you believe abortion is wrong because taking human life is always wrong, you cannot consistently hold that taking human life is not wrong in war or as a punishment.

- **Implications.** If your belief has implications you are unwilling to accept, you have to reject or modify it.
  - If you believe abortion is permissible because the fetus is not a person, it follows that infanticide is permissible since a newborn is not a person.

- **Thought experiments.** Imaginary cases allow you to isolate a particular feature of an issue (“everything else being equal”). They are used to clarify moral beliefs and to uncover hidden assumptions and implications.
Moral knowledge

Error theory: since there are no moral facts, all moral beliefs and judgments are false. There is nothing to be known.

Noncognitivism: since moral beliefs and judgments are just expressions of attitudes, there are no moral facts; there is no moral knowledge.

Anti-naturalism: there are moral facts, but they are not natural facts; moral knowledge is not possible to attain through science. E.g.,

Supernaturalism: moral facts can be known through revelation.

Naturalism: there are moral facts, and they are just like natural facts; moral knowledge is possible to attain through science.

Relativism: there are no universal moral demands; truth in ethics is local.

Absolutism: there are universal moral demands.

How can naturalists give an account of moral knowledge?

Moral intuitions

Non-naturalist intuitionism: there is a “moral faculty” to detect moral properties. Moral knowledge is non-inferential.

- G. E. Moore (1903): “good” is an indefinable, non-natural property that we have intuitive awareness of.

- PROBLEM: it is mysterious what this faculty of moral intuition is.

Naturalist intuitionism: moral beliefs are non-inferential, but it is possible to study them through science (e.g., cognitive science, developmental and evolutionary psychology, decision theory). Intuitive moral judgments can serve as starting points for ethical theory (just as data can play this role for scientific theories).

Methodological intuitionism: non-inferential moral beliefs, while not infallible, can be used to justify particular moral theories (and be justified by them) – they are part of reflective equilibrium.

Trolley cases

Trolley Case 1

A trolley is running out of control down a track. In its path there are five people who do not see it coming. You can flip a switch, which will lead the trolley down a different track to safety. But there is a single person on that track. Should you flip the switch?

- Most people believe that you should flip the switch.
- As a consequence of your choice, one person dies and five people are saved from death.

Trolley Case 2

A trolley is running out of control down a track. In its path there are five people who do not see it coming. You are on a bridge under which it will pass, and you can stop it by dropping a heavy weight in front of it. The only heavy weight is a very fat man next to you. The only way to stop the trolley is to push him over the bridge and onto the track, killing him to save five. Should you proceed?

- Most people believe that you should not push the fat man off the bridge.
**Consequentialism**

Consequentialism: the ethical view that actions (policies, etc.) should be assessed solely by the goodness of their consequences.

Utilitarianism: the right action is that which maximizes well-being (utility).

- Consequentialist theories are impartial: every person’s good (well-being) counts the same.
- When you determine the goodness of the consequences, you should consider every person’s good impartially: your good counts for no more than anyone else’s good.

**Nonconsequentialism**

Deontology: the view that denies that the rightness or wrongness of actions is determined solely by the goodness of their consequences. There are further moral factors that determine the rightness or the wrongness of an act. These factors generate moral constraints.

- Avoiding harm. A prohibition on performing certain types of acts even if they would lead to the best consequences if they involve causing harm to others.
- Rights. Persons are the bearers of rights which protect their central interests and determines what is morally owed to them (claims and entitlements).
- Treating others merely as means. You ought not to use others as efficacious tools to some goal that do not serve their interests, at least not without their consent.

**Trolley cases**

- In both cases, one person dies and five people are saved from death as a consequence of your choice.
- How can saving the five be the right course of action in Case 1, but the wrong course of action in Case 2?

Consequentialism: the right course of action is that which has the best consequences. Since the consequences are the same, you ought to save the five in both Case 1 and 2.

Nonconsequentialism: the goodness of consequences is not the only relevant factor: there are further moral constraints.

Injunction against treating as mere means

- In Case 1, you don’t treat the one person as a mere means of saving others.
- In Case 2, you treat the fat man as a mere means of saving others.
- (You would not treat him as a mere means if you had his consent).

**Trolley Case 3**

A trolley is running out of control down a track. In its path there are five people who do not see it coming. You can flip a switch to divert the trolley through a loop before it reaches these people. There is a fat man on that track whose weight would stop the trolley, but the man would die. Should you flip the switch?

In this version, you would use the person as a mere means to save the five, but most people agree that you should flip the switch.
Trolley cases

- The different moral intuitions cannot be explained by the idea that in Case 2 the fat man is used as a mere means, but in Case 1 the one person is not used as a mere means.
- But we do have a robust negative emotional response to directly killing someone which explains the intuition in Case 2, and we don’t have the same emotional response in Case 1.

fMRI scans of Trolley cases

- In Case 2, areas of the brain associated with emotional responses show increased activity;
- In Case 1, areas of the brain associated with cognitive activity show increased activity;
- Those who consider pushing the fat man off the bridge permissible in Case 2 take longer to respond than those who consider it impermissible.

Example: how we evolved to detect defectors

Example 1
Each card has a number on one side and a letter on the other:

- D  F  3  7

If a card has a “D” on one side, it has a “3” on the other side.

- Which card(s) do you need to turn over to discover whether this is true?

Example 2
Your job is to make sure no underage customer drinks beer.

- drinking beer
- drinking Coke
- 25 years old
- 16 years old

- Which card(s) do you need to turn over?

Naturalism and moral knowledge

- There might be an evolutionary explanation for the difference in moral judgments: direct harming and killing evokes strong and immediate emotional reactions because this is the sort of situation that would have arisen in our evolutionary past.
- Our intuition in Case 2 might be based on an evolutionary determined reaction. In Case 1, we have no similar reaction.

- What should we conclude from these studies?

Consequentialists might argue that ethical theory should be based on rational reactions. We should reject our moral intuition in Case 2.

Nonconsequentialists might argue that moral intuitions have normative significance. Ethical theory should give an account of the difference between Case 1 and 2.

- Both arguments begin from methodological intuitionism.

Nature vs nurture

The linguistic analogy: just as there are implicit linguistic rules and structures that are innate and universal, there are implicit moral rules and structures that are innate and universal. This kind of view might be called moral nativism.

Anti-nativism: the view that morality is conventional, i.e., entirely (or almost entirely) determined by culture.

- Nativism vs relativism: if there are innate and universal moral rules or norms, then relativism becomes more difficult to defend. Conversely, if anti-nativism is true, absolutism becomes more difficult to defend.
- Our (often implicit) view about the source of ethical values affects the way we approach the scientific study of people.
- The way we think about the role of culture might affect our view on morality and value.