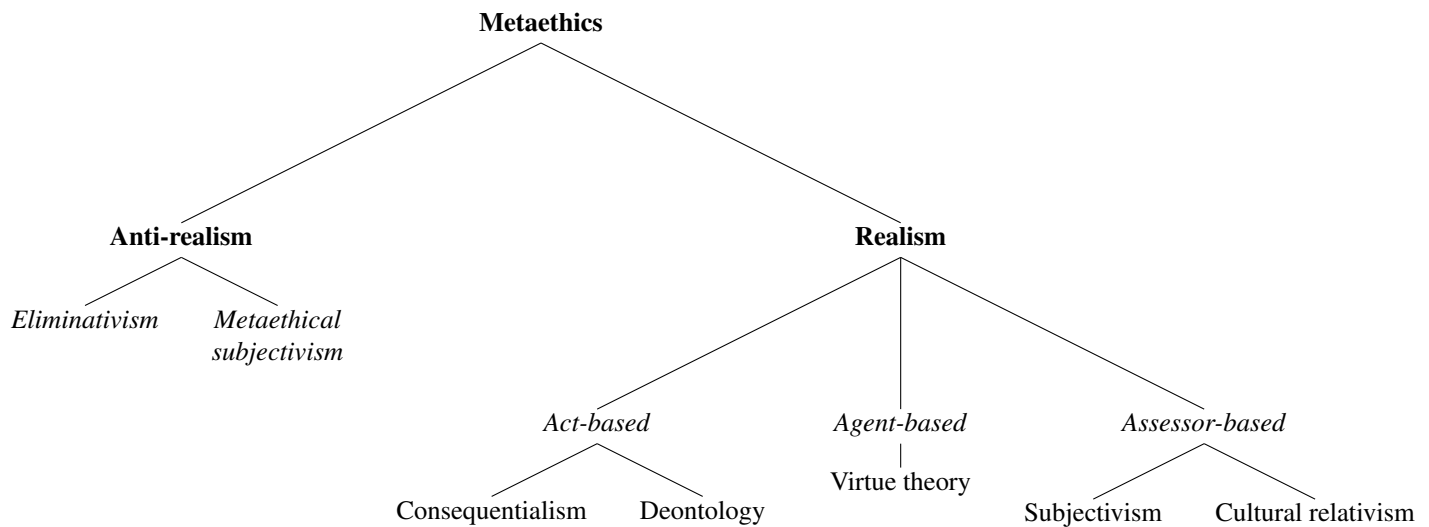


1 Metaethics

Metaethics is the study of the nature of **morality** (and perhaps value in general). It is the attempt to understand what we are getting at when we make claims such as the following, what we might call **evaluative claims**:

- (1)
 - a. Alfred is a good person.
 - b. Beth did the right thing.
 - c. Carl ought not to have given Dana the keys.
 - d. Abortion is wrong.

The following tree provides a categorization of various positions one can take in theorizing about the nature of morality. We'll describe the positions at the nodes of the tree in the sections that follow.



1.1 Realism vs. anti-realism

The moral claims listed above appear on their face to have the same form as the following claims:

- (2)
 - a. Alfred is an accountant.
 - b. Beth did a triple lutz.
 - c. Carl offered to give Dana the keys.

These sentences say things about specific features of the world, and they can be true or false depending on whether what they say actually obtains in the world. So, for instance, (2-a) is true just in case Alfred has the property of being an accountant.

Similarly, we might think that moral claims also say things about specific features of the world, and can be true or false. If we take this position on morality, then we are **moral realists**. So, for instance, (1-a) is true just in case Alfred has the property of being a good person. Moral realism maintains that properties such as “goodness” and “being wrong” are genuine features of the world just like “greenness” and “being an accountant”.

But one might be skeptical that moral claims really correspond to features of the world, and thus that they aren’t the sorts of statements that can be true. If we take this position on morality, then we are **moral anti-realists**.

1.2 Realism

Those metaethicists who think that moral claims express genuine features of the world are often inclined to provide an account of how they fit into the world. That is, they want to give a theory of what makes moral claims true or false. These theories are called, **normative theories**.

Normative theories can differ depending on what one takes to be the primary subject of moral evaluation. Notice that (1-a) applies a moral property (goodness) to an **agent**, namely Alfred. But (1-b) applies a moral property (rightness) to an **action** (what Beth *did*). So normative theories might differ on whether they take agents or actions to be the primary subjects of moral evaluation.

1.2.1 Agent based theories

One could take agents (people) to be the primary subjects of moral evaluation. The most famous agent based normative theory was proposed by Aristotle, and is known as **virtue ethics**. Virtue ethics starts with the idea of a perfectly virtuous person; someone who possesses character traits such as *courage* and *beneficence*. A person is a good person to the extent that they resemble this perfectly virtuous ideal. Then, the virtue ethicist attempts to explain what makes *actions* right or wrong in terms of the virtuous person. For example, they might say that an action is the right action to perform if it is the action that the virtuous person would perform.

The truth of evaluative claims is grounded in the properties of **moral agents**.

1.2.2 Act based theories

Alternatively, one could take *actions* to be the primary subjects of moral evaluation. Actions have two parts:

- They are *events*, so they have particular **consequences**. An action brings about a certain result.
- They are *performances*, so they are done with particular **intentions**.

Act based theories can differ based on which aspect of the action they take to be morally significant.

- **Consequentialist** theories take the consequences of actions to be what is morally weighty. So, for example, one might say that an action is the right one to perform if it will bring about the most *happiness* (or overall good).
- **Deontological** theories generally take the intentions with which actions are performed to be the morally important feature. So, for example, one might say that an action is right only if it was done with a *good will* (we would have to say quite a bit more about what a good will is).

Then, the act-based theory attempts to explain what makes *agents* good or bad in terms of right action. For example, they might say that a person is good to the extent that they tend to perform the right actions.

1.2.3 Assessor based theories

Moral claims are also interesting in that different people often tend to evaluate them differently. What seems wrong to one person may seem perfectly fine to another. This could just mean that one person is mistaken, but if we take the disagreement seriously, we might be led to think that whether a moral claim is true or false depends on *who* is evaluating it.

Assessor based theories suggest that what makes a moral claim true is that it is **approved** by someone who judges it. Assessor based theories can differ based on who they take to be the relevant judge(s).

- **Subjectivism** maintains that if some *individual* approves of a moral claim, then that moral claim is true. In a slogan, “Approval makes it so.”
- **Cultural relativism** maintains that the truth of moral claims depends on the approval of some *society*. If a moral claim is held to be true by some society, then it is true.

Arguments for subjectivism Subjectivism may have an initial air of plausibility because it seems to respect a number of qualities that many of us take to be important in discussing moral matters.¹

- Tolerance: We feel that it is important to be respectful of the viewpoints of others. One way to explain why this respect is important is that all such viewpoints are *equally true*, which is just what subjectivism says about moral viewpoints.
 - What is respect of opinion? But we can respect other people’s opinions without being forced to say that they are all true. For instance, geologists might hold different views on whether the markings on the surface of Mars were caused by water or not, and they can each respect that the other’s opinion has merit. But ultimately one viewpoint is incorrect.
 - Is subjectivism tolerant? Additionally, it’s unclear whether subjectivism actually promotes tolerance. *Tolerance* is itself a moral notion. Thus, according to the subjectivist, if someone approves of the claim “Tolerance is bad”, then it is true that tolerance is bad. Subjectivism actually seems to undermine the main argument in its favor.
- Disagreement: There is quite a lot of disagreement over moral claims, and the disagreement can sometimes seem intractable. One way to explain why we never seem to come to a conclusion on these matters is that there is no objectively right answer, which is just what subjectivism says about moral matters.
 - Disagreement = no truth? But just because people disagree doesn’t mean there is no answer. As above, geologists might disagree on what caused the markings on the surface of Mars. But ultimately one answer is right and the others are wrong.
 - Contradictions Additionally, subjectivism runs into a problem of accepting **contradictions**. If I approve of “Abortion is always wrong”, but you approve of “Abortion is sometimes permissible”, then subjectivism maintains that abortion is both always wrong and sometimes ok, but that’s impossible.
 - We can get around this issue by slightly modifying the subjectivist position. What our approvals really mean is:
 - (3) a. Abortion is always wrong (for me).
 - b. Abortion is sometimes permissible (for you).
 - The two claims are now no longer contradictory. But if this is what our moral claims really mean, then why do we even disagree with each other? I should be able to accept that abortion is sometimes ok for you while maintaining that it is wrong for me.
 - Thus, subjectivism again seems to undermine an argument in its favor.

¹I focus here on two main arguments often put forward for subjectivism. You should use these as examples, and make sure you understand the other arguments that Shafer-Landau discusses as well.

Arguments against subjectivism Subjectivism also has a couple implications that are hard to swallow.

- Criticizing other views: If all moral opinions are equally true, then we cannot morally criticize the viewpoints that led to Naziism and slavery.
- Infallibility: If our moral opinions make themselves true, then we are all morally infallible. There is no sense to be made of how we can advance as moral creatures.

1.3 Anti-realism

There are different ways of being an anti-realist about morality. One way is just to maintain that all moral talk is mistaken. On this view, moral claims are similar to claims such as: Are moral claims fictitious?

(4) Elena is a witch.

It turns out that there are no witches, so anyone who says (4) speaks falsely. The **moral eliminativist** suggests that claims about morality are like claims about witchcraft.

Alternatively, one might think that moral claims aren't true because they aren't really *claims* at all. On this view, known as **metaethical subjectivism**, when we assert sentences involving moral terms, we aren't saying anything about the world at all; instead, we are *expressing* our own sentiments on the issue. The metaethical subjectivist suggests that moral claims are similar to claims such as:

- (5)
- Ouch! (said after stubbing one's toe)
 - Yumm! (said after tasting broccoli)

We would thus redescribe the moral claims in (1) something like:

- (6)
- Hooray for Alfred!
 - What Beth did, yay!
 - Boo! to Carl giving Dana the keys.

Thus, moral sentences are neither true nor false; they are merely expressions of taste.

Arguments for metaethical subjectivism This take on moral theorizing captures many of the ideas that motivated normative subjectivism, but avoids many of its downfalls. Since metaethical subjectivism maintains that moral statements are neither true nor false, it does not accept contradictions, and it does not force anyone to accept that intolerance is good.

Perhaps the strongest arguments in favor of metaethical subjectivism appeal to scientifically minded people:

- Economy (simplicity): We might think that the goal of moral theorizing is to explain why we make the particular moral claims that we do. Metaethical subjectivism has a simple answer to this question: we make those claims because they express our inner sentiments. Realist theories on the other hand posit these extra entities, moral properties. Thus, metaethical subjectivism seems to be the simpler theory.
- Oddness: For the realist, moral properties are quite a bit different from other properties in the world. They aren't qualities that we can see, hear, or touch, so it's unclear how we gain knowledge of them in the first place. The metaethical subjectivist has a simple account of what morality amounts to (expression of inner sentiment), but the realist has to explain what the heck moral properties are. There are two ways they might try to do this:

- **Naturalism** tries to fit moral properties into the natural order.² For instance, if we maintain that rightness is just the bringing about of the most happiness, then we have a natural account of what *rightness* is because happiness can be recognized and measured. Of course, giving a complete analysis of all moral properties in a way that respects our moral intuitions is likely to be very difficult.
- **Non-naturalism** denies that morality can be explained in purely natural terms; instead, we must posit moral properties as distinct in their own right.³ Of course, if we take this stance, then we are left with the difficult question of saying how we manage to recognize moral properties if we can't see, hear, or smell them.

Arguments against metaethical subjectivism Like normative subjectivism, metaethical subjectivism has a hard time making sense of **moral criticism** and **moral advancement**. Since moral statements merely express inner sentiments, there is no sense to be made about one moral viewpoint being better than any other.

But the metaethical subjectivist is unlikely to be persuaded by these worries. After all “better than” is just another evaluative term, so it depends on the particular viewpoint from which it is evaluated. And there is no ultimate perspective from which we can evaluate all moral sentiments.

²This viewpoint is an analog of the physicalist theories of the mind that we looked at.

³This viewpoint is an analog of dualism.