Introduction

If you are not confused then you are not paying attention.

(Tom Peters)

CHAPTER AIMS

- To explain what metaethics is, and how it differs from normative and applied ethics.
- To outline two considerations when developing a metaethical position.
- To explain some key terms and common misunderstandings in metaethics.

Introduction

We *know* that when Nero used Christians as human candles he did something wrong. It seems *true* to us that the civil rights movement is a good thing. It is a *fact* that racism is wrong. If a culture thinks it right to torture children to death then they are mistaken.

But can we really have moral *knowledge*? What is it for a moral claim to be *true*? In what sense is it a *fact* that racism is wrong? How can something be right and wrong independently of what people think?

These are all metaethical questions and it is the aim of this book to give you the resources to start to answer them. But why are these questions classed as metaethical? What is metaethics anyway?

One useful way of answering this question is by contrasting metaethics with applied ethics and normative ethics. Consider an analogy that will illustrate the contrast: imagine ethics as football. We can equate different things associated with football with the different disciplines of ethics. There are the *players*, whom we can think of as *applied ethicists*. Applied ethicists are interested in moral questions regarding particular issues such as whether it is wrong to have an abortion, how to allocate limited hospital funds, whether hunting is wrong, whether we have an

obligation to give money to charity, whether human cloning is wrong and so on. Then there is the *referee*, who helps interpret the rules that the players are following. The referee can be thought of as the *normative ethicist*. The normative ethicist is interested in questions regarding the underlying principles that guide the applied ethicist. For example, in working out what is right and wrong, should only the consequences matter? What sort of people should we become? How do we weigh moral considerations? Finally, there is the football *analyst or pundit*, who does not kick a ball or interpret the rules for the players but tries to understand and comment on what is going on *in the game* itself. This is like the *metaethicist*, who asks questions about the very practice of ethics, some of which we shall consider below.

Notice then that "meta" in metaethics is not about being "next to" or being "transformed" or "changing", as the prefix is sometimes used. Instead, it means to "stand back from", to "think about" or "sit apart from" ethics. For this reason philosophers call metaethics a "*second*-order" discipline. Think then of metaethics as taking a bird's-eye view on the practice of ethics: the metaethicist peers down as intently as possible and tries to make sense of what is going on.

In some sense then "meta*ethics*" is a fairly misleading name, since sometimes people think it is going to involve practical questions about how to live their lives. However, it is not.

Furthermore, even though metaethics is probably as old as philosophy itself it has only really gained a sense of identity since the publication of G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* in 1903. So our discussions arise from works written after this date, but although the book is relentlessly contemporary in its focus, the issues can more often than not be traced much further back in the history of thought.

The types of metaethical question

If metaethics is about trying to understand the practice of ethics, then we can start to explain it by thinking about the various parts of that practice. Looking at ethics we can see that it involves what people *say*: moral *language*. So one strand of metaethics considers what is going on when people talk moral talk. For example, what do people mean when they say something is "wrong"? What links moral language to the world? Can we define moral terms?

Obviously ethics also involves people, so metaethicists consider and analyse what's going on in peoples' minds. For example, when people make moral judgements are they expressing beliefs or expressing desires? What's the link between making moral judgements and motivation?

Finally, there are questions about what exists (ontology). Thus metaethicists ask questions about whether moral properties are real. What is it for something to be real? Could moral facts exist independently of people? Could moral properties be causal?

Metaethics, then, is the systematic analysis of:

(a) moral *language*;
(b) moral *psychology*;
(c) moral *ontology*.

This classification is rough and does not explicitly capture a number of issues that are often discussed in metaethics, such as truth and phenomenology. However, for our purposes we can think of such issues as falling under these broad headings.

Given (a)–(c), we can ask which, if any, should take priority in metaethics. Will thinking hard about language help us resolve issues regarding ontology and psychology? Will a clear understanding of ontology give us ways of answering questions in psychology and language? Or will thinking hard about psychology help us to better understand language and ontology? For example, if we conclude that there are moral facts (ontology) then this might suggest that when we make moral judgements we are expressing beliefs about those facts (psychology).

In metaethics the type of question that gets priority often echoes what was generally thought to be important in philosophy at the time. For example, Moore worked during a period when the central focus was on the philosophy of language. It is no surprise then that he starts with (a) and writes that the most important question in ethics is "How is 'good' to be *defined*?" (Moore [1903] 1993: 58). Yet later the philosophy of language and issues about meaning and analyticity became less important and this had a direct effect on metaethics. As Stephen Darwall *et al.* put it: "The narrowly language-oriented agenda of analytic metaethics was fully displaced … because of an uneasiness about the notions of 'meaning' or 'analytic truth'" (1992: 123).

So when studying the work of metaethicists it is worth asking whether (a), (b) or (c) has primary focus. Perhaps more importantly,

one should ask which should take priority in metaethics, remembering of course that perhaps none of them should.

How should we develop a metaethical theory?

There is another fundamental methodological question that is well worth keeping at the front of the mind: what should the metaethicists be sensitive to when developing their theory? For example, if we are trying to answer questions about moral language – and, as philosophers, we take a particular approach to truth that differs from the view held by most people – then who wins? Do we go with the people on the street? Or the philosopher? This point can be best illustrated by revisiting our football example.

Imagine that the people in the crowd simultaneously shout "Penalty!" Leaving what the referee says to one side, imagine that the analyst or pundit thinks it clearly was *not* a penalty. She argues that despite the crowd's insistence, what they are saying is wrong. After all, she reasons, she has a vast amount of experience and has watched more games than most of them, she does not support either of the teams and therefore is not biased and she is in a much better position emotionally to understand what actually went on. What should we say in this situation? Was it a penalty or not? Do we take seriously the fact that 50,000 people simultaneously shouted the same thing at the same time?

So, when trying to work out the best analysis of moral practice, shall we start with how most people think and talk and try to build a theory around this? Or should we develop a theory and then either explain what people say in light of this or conclude that the way people think and talk is *not* a reliable guide to truth? If people think that certain moral claims are *always* true, does this mean that any metaethical theory should show this? Or rather, can the metaethicist claim to know more about these issues and agree that people are mistaken?

Of course, one might think it is a bit of both: that on some issues people's everyday thought and talk should direct our metaethical theorizing, whereas in other cases the philosopher should. But to take this route we shall need to tread carefully, for we need to give good reasons why on some issues great evidential weight is given to people and why in other cases it is not. As you read the rest of this book you will see metaethicists wrestling with this issue.

Why metaethics is a hard subject

Finally it is worth stressing that metaethics is a hard subject and that there are a number of reasons for this. The first is that it relies on, and varies with the developments in, other areas in philosophy. So, for example, if we say that moral *facts* exist then we'll need some ideas from *metaphysics* about the nature of facts and existence. Or if we think that we can only give synthetic definitions of moral terms then we'll need to be sensitive to issues in the philosophy of language regarding the analytic/synthetic distinction.

Consequently, in studying metaethics you should expect to spend time reading in other areas such as in metaphysics, philosophy of language, psychology, epistemology, phenomenology, philosophy of art, logic and so on. If you compartmentalize these subjects and believe you can study metaethics in isolation, it will be much tougher.

The second reason why metaethics is tough is its terminology. Metaethicists often introduce terms that are unfamiliar and peculiar to metaethics. For this reason I believe those starting to study the subject should make it a priority to get familiar with some basic terminology. The next section highlights key terms and the common misunderstandings about them. There is a glossary for reference at the end of the book.

Basic terminology and common misunderstandings

Moral realism

This is about what exists (ontology). The moral realist argues that moral properties exist and are in some way independent from people's judgements. For example, if moral realism is correct then we can say that the act of killing someone has the property of wrongness, and that it has it independently of whether people think it does.

Potential misunderstandings

- Moral realism is silent about the nature and origin of moral properties. So, for example, being a moral realist does not automatically mean that you are a theist. Moral properties can be natural or non-natural.
- Moral realists can hold that moral properties only exist because

people do. This is not the same as the claim that people can choose what is right and wrong (see Chapters 4 and 5).
- Just because the realists think that there are moral properties this does not mean they claim they know what things are right and wrong. It is perfectly consistent for the moral realist to claim that they have no better idea of what things are right and wrong than anyone else.
- Properties and facts are distinct, although the issues in this book (especially Chapters 4 and 5) do not depend on this distinction.

Moral non-realism

The moral non-realist argues that there are no moral properties or facts. Non-realism includes, among others, quasi-realism, anti-realism, error theory and irrealism.

Potential misunderstandings

- Even though the non-realist thinks there are no moral properties and facts, this does not mean they think there is no moral truth. This would only follow if they also held that a claim is true if and only if there are facts and/or properties that *make* claims true. But this is an independent claim about the nature of truth that the non-realist could reject (see Chapter 2).
- The non-realist can also be a cognitivist (see below).

Cognitivism

The cognitivist argues for two claims. The first is that when someone makes a moral claim they are expressing a belief. The second is that moral claims can be true or false; this is part of cognitivism because beliefs are the sort of thing that can be true or false. Philosophers call the potential for a claim to be true or false *truth-aptness*. Because beliefs are thought to be descriptions, cognitivism is sometimes called *descriptivism*.

Potential misunderstandings

- Cognitivism is not the view that moral claims are true, since it is quite coherent for the cognitivist to hold that all moral claims are false (see Chapter 3). This is a common mistake and it is best

avoided by remembering that cognitivism is a view about truth-aptness and not about truth.

Non-cognitivism

The non-cognitivist argues that if a person makes a moral claim they are expressing a non-belief state such as an emotion: for example, to say that "killing is wrong" is to *express disapproval* towards killing. Put crudely, it is as if you are saying "Boo! Killing!" Consequently, because expressions of approval or disapproval are not the sort of things that can be true or false, the non-cognitivist thinks that moral claims are not truth-apt in the way that the cognitivist thinks moral claims are truth-apt.

Potential misunderstanding

- Non-cognitivism is not the view that moral claims are about our own mental states. For example, it is not the claim that "killing is wrong" really means "I disapprove of killing". In fact, this would be a form of cognitivism, which asserts that when we make a moral claim we are describing a mental state, in this case my disapproval of killing (see Chapter 2).

Naturalism and non-naturalism

The naturalist claims that the only things that exist are those things that would appear in the scientific picture of what exists. The non-naturalist thinks that there are some things that exist that could not show up on the scientific picture of what exists. So, for example, pleasure, salt and electrons would be natural things whereas God would not be (see Chapters 4 and 5).

Potential misunderstandings

- You could be a non-naturalist and deny that God exists. All you are committed to as a non-naturalist is that there are some things that exist that would not show up in the scientific account of what exists.
- You can be a naturalist but *not* be a moral realist because all that the naturalist is committed to is the claim that if moral properties exist then they would be natural. This leaves it open that there may be no moral properties. Equally, you could be a non-naturalist but

not be a moral realist, thinking perhaps that God exists but that he does not have anything to do with morality.

Internalism about motivation

The internalist about motivation thinks that when we make a moral judgement we are motivated as a matter of conceptual necessity to act in accordance with that judgement (see Chapter 8). So to judge that giving money to charity is right is necessarily to be motivated to give money to charity. For the internalist it is conceptually impossible that someone could be psychologically normal, make a judgement and yet remain unmotivated to follow it.

Potential misunderstandings

- Internalism does not entail that there is a necessary connection between judgement and action, since action is not the same as motivation. For example, someone could presumably be motivated to lose weight but never get around to doing anything about it.
- Internalism is not the view that true judgements motivate. It is simply the view that there is a necessary link between moral judgements (be they true or false) and motivation.
- The internalist does not hold that there is a necessary connection between judgement and reasons for action: there could be a necessary connection between judgement and reasons but not a necessary link between reasons and motivation.
- In metaethics the term "internalism" is also used to discuss internal reasons (see Chapters 7 and 8) and outside metaethics it is used to discuss mental content and epistemic justification.

Externalism about motivation

The externalist thinks that there is *no* necessary connection between making a moral judgement and being motivated. Moral judgements motivate an agent because of the agent's desires. For the externalist, then, the link between judgement and motivation is contingent on the psychological states of the agent.

Potential misunderstandings

- This is not the view that it is a matter of chance whether moral judgements will motivate. For example, it could be a psychological fact that most of the time most people have a desire to do the right thing and consequently most of the time most people are motivated by their moral judgements.
- In metaethics the term "externalism" is also used to discuss external reasons (Chapters 7 and 8) and outside metaethics it is used to discuss mental content and epistemic justification.

The layout of the book

Each chapter starts with a number of aims, and throughout each chapter I include summaries of key ideas and figures in metaethics.

At the end of each chapter is a list of key things to remember that can lead to confusion if forgotten. I finish each chapter with some suggestions for further reading.

At the end of the book I ask a number of questions that will help you to reflect on the issues discussed.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Metaethics does not prescribe how we ought to behave.
- Metaethics is a second-order discipline.
- Be ready to consult books discussing, for example, the philosophy of language, psychology, epistemology, the philosophy of mind and phenomenology.
- It is important to learn the terminology as quickly as possible.

Further reading

For some general surveys see Sayre-McCord (1986); McNaughton (1988); Darwall *et al*. (1992); Smith (1994: ch. 1); Jacobs (2002: ch. 1); A. Miller (2003: intro.); Shafer-Landau (2003); Fisher & Kirchin (2006: intro.); Schroeder (2010: ch. 1).

Particularly good for the methodology and taxonomy of metaethics is Timmons (1999: ch. 1). An excellent introduction to the philosophy of language is Miller (2007); metaphysics, Tallant (2011); epistemology, O'Brien (2006); psychology, Jacobs (2002); philosophy of mind, Lowe (2000).