

# PHILOSOPHY 101

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- The Ethical and the Metaethical
  - Levels of Ethics
  - Ethics
  - Metaethics
  - Example Metaethical Topics
  - Subjectivity and Objectivity in Ethics
  - Ethical & Metaethical Skepticism
  - Two Kinds of Metaethical Skepticism
  - Noncognitivism
  - The Error Theory

# THE ETHICAL AND THE METAETHICAL

# LEVELS OF ETHICS

1. First-Order (Ethics)
2. Second Order (Metaethics)

- **Ethics** is about what we ought to do
- **Metaethics** is about what we're thinking and doing when we think and talk about what we ought to do

# ETHICS

- Claims/questions concerning what is good/bad, right/wrong:
  - "Should I give money to the poor?"
  - "Murder is wrong"
- What is morally required/permisable?
  - One ought to help those in need
  - It is permissible to eat meat

# METAETHICS

- Metaethical claims are not about what is right/wrong, good/bad, or of value
- Metaethics asks questions about and makes claims concerning ethical values, judgments, and behavior

# EXAMPLE METAETHICAL TOPICS

- Metaphysics: what is the nature of a moral fact or property?
- Epistemology: how does one achieve ethical knowledge?
- Language: what is the function of moral discourse?
- Moral Psychology: what kinds of psychological states are characteristic of moral thought and behaviour?

# SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY IN ETHICS

## **Objective values:**

values that give reasons (or otherwise prescribe how we ought to act) regardless of what we (as individuals or as a culture) say, do, desire, or think

## **Subjective values:**

values whose reason-giving or prescriptive status depends in some way on what we (as individuals or as a culture) say, do, desire, or think



# ETHICAL & METAETHICAL SKEPTICISM

- First-Order (ethical): skepticism concerning prevailing moral views
  - typically is itself a moral view
  - involves a kind of condemnation of prevailing morality
- Second-Order (metaethical): skepticism concerning particular features of morality
  - is there moral knowledge?
  - do moral values/properties/facts exist?
  - are any moral judgments true?

# TWO KINDS OF METAETHICAL SKEPTICISM

- Noncognitivism
- Error Theory

# NONCOGNITIVISM

*if I say to someone, 'You acted wrongly in stealing that money,' I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, 'You stole that money.' In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, 'You stole that money,' in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker. (Ayers 1936, 107)*

- moral language is not descriptive/fact-stating — it is not *about* anything independent of the subject
  - moral claims are equivalent in meaning to reports of the judger's own feelings or attitudes
    - "Murder is wrong" → "I don't like murder" or "Boo! Murder!"
  - moral claims are equivalent in meaning to prescriptions or commands
    - "Murder is wrong" → "Don't murder!"

### **Semantic claim:**

Moral discourse is concerned with expressing or describing states of the subject

- Non-cognitivism isn't a form of moral skepticism, but it could be used to support moral skepticism

# THE ERROR THEORY

## Semantic claim:

Moral discourse makes descriptive claims of the objective world, but is systematically and uniformly *false*

## Metaphysical claim:

There are no objective moral facts or properties

Is the sentence 'it is morally wrong to cause unnecessary pain' true or false?

1. *True*
2. *False*
3. *Neither True or False*

Is there an objective fact of the matter whether it is morally wrong to cause unnecessary pain?

1. *Yes*
2. *No*
3. *Not sure*



