Meta-ethics

March 20, 2022

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Branch of ethics seeking to understand ethical properties

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75 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_philosophy
76 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judeo-Islamic_philosophies_(800%E2%80%931400)
77 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kantianism
78 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legalism_(Chinese_philosophy)
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In metaphilosophy[120] and ethics[121], **meta-ethics** is the study of the nature, scope, and meaning of moral judgment[122]. It is one of the three branches of ethics generally studied by philosophers[123], the others being normative ethics[124] (questions of how one ought to be and act) and applied ethics[125] (practical questions of right behavior in given, usually contentious, situations).

While normative ethics addresses such questions as "What should I do?", evaluating specific practices and principles of action, meta-ethics addresses questions such as "What *is* goodness[126]?" and "How can we tell what is good from what is bad?", seeking to understand the assumptions underlying normative theories. Another distinction often made is that normative ethics involves first-order or substantive questions; meta-ethics involves second-order or formal questions.

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107 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Philosophy-related_lists
108 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Index_of_philosophy
109 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline_of_philosophy
110 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_years_in_philosophy
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114 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_philosophy
115 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists_of_philosophers
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124 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Normative_ethics
125 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Applied_ethics
126 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good

Some theorists argue that a metaphysical[127] account of morality[128] is necessary for the proper evaluation of actual moral theories and for making practical moral decisions; others reason from opposite premises and suggest that studying moral judgments about proper actions can guide us to a true account of the nature of morality.

1.1 Meta-ethical questions

According to Richard Garner and Bernard Rosen, there are three kinds of meta-ethical problems, or three general questions:[1]

1. What is the meaning of moral terms or judgments ? (moral semantics[129])
   - Asks about the meanings of such words as 'good', 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong' (see value theory[130])
2. What is the nature of moral judgments ? (moral ontology[131])
   - Asks questions of whether moral judgments are absolute[132] or relative[133], of one kind or many kinds[134], etc.
3. How may moral judgments be supported or defended ? (moral epistemology[135])
   - Asks such questions as how we can know if something is right or wrong, if at all.

Garner and Rosen say that answers to the three basic questions "are not unrelated, and sometimes an answer to one will strongly suggest, or perhaps even entail, an answer to another."[1] A meta-ethical theory, unlike a normative ethical[136] theory, does not attempt to evaluate specific choices as being better, worse, good, bad, or evil; although it may have profound implications as to the validity and meaning of normative ethical claims. An answer to any of the three example questions above would not itself be a normative ethical statement.

1.2 Moral semantics

Moral semantics attempts to answer the question, "What is the meaning of moral terms or judgments?" Answers may have implications for answers to the other two questions as well.

1.2.1 Cognitivist theories

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127 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphysics
128 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morality
129 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semantics
130 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Value_theory
131 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ontology
132 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_absolutism
133 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_relativism
134 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Value_pluralism
135 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology
136 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Normative_ethics

Cognitivist[137] theories hold that evaluative moral sentences express propositions[138] (i.e., they are 'truth-apt[139]' or 'truth bearers[140]', capable of being true or false), as opposed to non-cognitivism[141]. Most forms of cognitivism hold that some such propositions are true (including moral realism and ethical subjectivism), as opposed to error theory[142], which asserts that all are erroneous.

Moral realism

Moral realism[143] (in the *robust* sense; cf.[144] moral universalism[145] for the minimalist sense) holds that such propositions are about *robust* or mind-independent facts, that is, not facts about any person or group's subjective opinion, but about objective features of the world. Meta-ethical theories are commonly categorized as either a form of realism or as one of three forms of "anti-realism[146]" regarding moral facts: ethical subjectivism[147], error theory[148], or non-cognitivism[149]. Realism comes in two main varieties:

1. *Ethical naturalism[150]* holds that there are objective moral properties and that these properties are reducible[151] or stand in some metaphysical relation (such as supervenience[152]) to entirely non-ethical properties. Most ethical naturalists hold that we have empirical[153] knowledge of moral truths. Ethical naturalism was implicitly assumed by many modern[154] ethical theorists, particularly utilitarians[155].
2. *Ethical non-naturalism[156]*, as put forward by G. E. Moore[157], holds that there are objective and *irreducible* moral properties (such as the property of 'goodness'), and that we sometimes have intuitive[158] or otherwise *a priori[159]* awareness of moral properties or of moral truths. Moore's open question argument[160] against what he considered the naturalistic fallacy[161] was largely responsible for the birth of meta-ethical research in contemporary analytic philosophy[162].

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137 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitivism_(ethics)
138 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proposition
139 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth-apt
140 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth-bearer
141 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-cognitivism
142 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Error_theory
143 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_realism
144 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cf.
145 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_universalism
146 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-realism
147 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethical_subjectivism
148 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Error_theory
149 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-cognitivism
150 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethical_naturalism
151 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reductionism
152 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supervenience
153 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empiricism
154 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_philosophy
155 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utilitarianism
156 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethical_non-naturalism
157 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G._E._Moore
158 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethical_intuitionism
159 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_priori_and_a_posteriori
160 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_question_argument
161 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturalistic_fallacy
162 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Analytic_philosophy

Ethical subjectivism

Ethical subjectivism[163] is one form of moral anti-realism. It holds that moral statements are made true or false by the attitudes and/or conventions of people, either those of each society, those of each individual, or those of some particular individual. Most forms of ethical subjectivism are relativist[164], but there are notable forms that are universalist[165]:

- **Ideal observer theory[166]** holds that what is right is determined by the attitudes that a hypothetical *ideal observer* would have. An ideal observer is usually characterized as a being who is perfectly rational, imaginative, and informed, among other things. Though a subjectivist theory due to its reference to a particular (albeit hypothetical) subject, Ideal Observer Theory still purports to provide universal[167] answers to moral questions.
- **Divine command theory[168]** holds that for a thing to be right is for a unique being, God, to approve of it, and that what is right for non-God beings is obedience to the divine will. This view was criticized by Plato in the *Euthyphro[169]* (see the Euthyphro problem[170]) but retains some modern defenders (Robert Adams[171], Philip Quinn, and others). Like ideal observer theory, divine command theory purports to be universalist[172] despite its subjectivism.

Error theory

Error theory[173], another form of moral anti-realism, holds that although ethical claims do express propositions, all such propositions are false. Thus, both the statement "Murder is morally wrong" and the statement "Murder is morally permissible" are false, according to error theory. J. L. Mackie[174] is probably the best-known proponent of this view. Since error theory denies that there are moral truths, error theory entails moral nihilism[175] and, thus, moral skepticism[176]; however, neither moral nihilism nor moral skepticism conversely entail error theory.

1.2.2 Non-cognitivist theories

Non-cognitivist[177] theories hold that ethical sentences are neither true nor false because they do not express genuine propositions[178]. Non-cognitivism is another form of moral anti-

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163 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethical_subjectivism
164 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_relativism
165 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_universalism
166 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideal_observer_theory
167 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_universalism
168 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_command_theory
169 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euthyphro
170 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euthyphro_problem
171 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Merrihew_Adams
172 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_universalism
173 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Error_theory
174 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._L._Mackie
175 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_nihilism
176 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_skepticism
177 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-cognitivism
178 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proposition

realism. Most forms of non-cognitivism are also forms of expressivism[179], however some such as Mark Timmons and Terrence Horgan distinguish the two and allow the possibility of cognitivist forms of expressivism. Non-cognitivism includes:

- **Emotivism[180]**, defended by A. J. Ayer[181] and Charles Stevenson[182], holds that ethical sentences serve merely to express emotions. Ayer argues that ethical sentences are expressions of approval or disapproval, not assertions. So "Killing is wrong" means something like "Boo on killing!".
- **Quasi-realism[183]**, defended by Simon Blackburn[184], holds that ethical statements behave linguistically like factual claims and can be appropriately called "true" or "false", even though there are no ethical facts for them to correspond to. Projectivism[185] and moral fictionalism[186] are related theories.
- **Universal prescriptivism[187]**, defended by R. M. Hare[188], holds that moral statements function like universalized imperative[189] sentences. So "Killing is wrong" means something like "Don't kill!" Hare's version of prescriptivism requires that moral prescriptions be universalizable[190], and hence actually have objective values, in spite of failing to be indicative[191] statements with truth-values[192] per se.

1.2.3 Centralism and non-centralism

Yet another way of categorizing meta-ethical theories is to distinguish between **centralist** and **non-centralist** moral theories. The debate between centralism and non-centralism revolves around the relationship between the so-called "thin" and "thick" concepts of morality: thin moral concepts are those such as good, bad, right, and wrong; thick moral concepts are those such as courageous, inequitable, just, or dishonest.[2] While both sides agree that the thin concepts are more general and the thick more specific, centralists hold that the thin concepts are antecedent to the thick ones and that the latter are therefore dependent on the former. That is, centralists argue that one must understand words like "right" and "ought" before understanding words like "just" and "unkind." Non-centralism rejects this view, holding that thin and thick concepts are on par with one another and even that the thick concepts are a sufficient starting point for understanding the thin ones.[3][4]

Non-centralism has been of particular importance to ethical naturalists in the late 20th and early 21st centuries as part of their argument that normativity is a non-excisable aspect of language and that there is no way of analyzing thick moral concepts into a purely descriptive element attached to a thin moral evaluation, thus undermining any fundamental division

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179 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expressivism
180 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotivism
181 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._J._Ayer
182 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Stevenson_(philosopher)
183 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quasi-realism
184 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Blackburn
185 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Projectivism
186 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_fictionalism
187 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_prescriptivism
188 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R._M._Hare
189 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperative_mood
190 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_universalism
191 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indicative
192 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth-value

between facts and norms. Allan Gibbard[193], R. M. Hare[194], and Simon Blackburn[195] have argued in favor of the fact/norm distinction, meanwhile, with Gibbard going so far as to argue that, even if conventional English has only mixed normative terms (that is, terms that are neither purely descriptive nor purely normative), we could develop a nominally English metalanguage that still allowed us to maintain the division between factual descriptions and normative evaluations.[5][6]

1.3 Moral ontology

Moral ontology attempts to answer question, "What is the nature of moral judgments?"

Amongst those who believe there to be some standard(s) of morality (as opposed to moral nihilists[196]), there are two divisions:

1. universalists[197], who hold that the same moral facts or principles apply to everyone everywhere; and
2. relativists[198], who hold that different moral facts or principles apply to different people or societies.

1.3.1 Moral universalism

Moral universalism[199] (or **universal morality**) is the meta-ethical position that some system of ethics, or a universal ethic[200], applies universally, that is to all intelligent beings regardless of culture[201], race[202], sex[203], religion[204], nationality[205], sexuality[206], or other distinguishing feature. The source or justification of this system may be thought to be, for instance, human nature[207], shared vulnerability to suffering, the demands of universal reason[208], what is common among existing moral codes, or the common mandates of religion[209] (although it can be argued that the latter is not in fact moral universalism because it may distinguish between Gods and mortals). Moral universalism is the opposing position to various forms of moral relativism[210].

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193 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allan_Gibbard
194 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R._M._Hare
195 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Blackburn
196 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_nihilism
197 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_universalism
198 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_relativism
199 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_universalism
200 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_ethic
201 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture
202 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_(classification_of_human_beings)
203 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex
204 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion
205 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nationality
206 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual_orientation
207 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_nature
208 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reason
209 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion
210 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_relativism

Universalist theories are generally forms of moral realism[211], though exceptions exists, such as the subjectivist ideal observer[212] and divine command[213] theories, and the non-cognitivist universal prescriptivism[214] of R. M. Hare[215]. Forms of moral universalism include:

- **Value monism** is the common form of universalism, which holds that all goods are commensurable[216] on a single value scale.
- **Value pluralism[217]** contends that there are two or more genuine scales of value, knowable as such, yet incommensurable, so that any prioritization of these values is either non-cognitive or subjective. A value pluralist might, for example, contend that both a life as a nun and a life as a mother realize genuine values (in a universalist sense), yet they are incompatible (nuns may not have children), and there is no purely rational way to measure which is preferable. A notable proponent of this view is Isaiah Berlin[218].

1.3.2 Moral relativism

Moral relativism[219] maintains that all moral judgments have their origins either in societal or in individual standards, and that no single standard exists by which one can objectively assess the truth of a moral proposition. Meta-ethical relativists, in general, believe that the descriptive properties of terms such as "good", "bad", "right", and "wrong" do not stand subject to universal[220] truth[221] conditions, but only to societal convention and personal preference. Given the same set of verifiable facts, some societies or individuals will have a fundamental disagreement about what one *ought* to do based on societal or individual norms[222], and one cannot adjudicate these using some independent standard of evaluation. The latter standard will always be societal or personal and not universal, unlike, for example, the scientific standards for assessing temperature[223] or for determining mathematical truths[224]. Some philosophers maintain that moral relativism entails non-cognitivism[225], while others considerate it a form of cognitivism[226]. Some but not all relativist theories are forms of moral subjectivism[227], although not all subjectivist theories are relativistic.[*clarify*[228]]

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211 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_realism
212 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideal_observer_theory
213 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_command_theory
214 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_prescriptivism
215 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R.M._Hare
216 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commensurability_(ethics)
217 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Value_pluralism
218 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaiah_Berlin
219 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_relativism
220 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universality_(philosophy)
221 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth
222 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norm_(sociology)
223 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thermodynamic_temperature
224 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proof_theory
225 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-cognitivism
226 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitivism_(ethics)
227 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_subjectivism

1.3.3 Moral nihilism

Moral nihilism[229], also known as ethical nihilism, is the meta-ethical view that nothing has intrinsic moral value. For example, a moral nihilist would say that killing someone, for whatever reason, is intrinsically neither morally right nor morally wrong. Moral nihilism must be distinguished from moral relativism[230], which does allow for moral statements to be intrinsically true or false in a non-universal sense, but does not assign any static truth-values to moral statements. Insofar as only true statements can be known, moral nihilists are moral skeptics[231]. Most forms of moral nihilism are non-cognitivist[232] and vice versa, though there are notable exceptions such as universal prescriptivism[233] (which is semantically non-cognitive but substantially universal).

1.4 Moral epistemology

Wikiquote has quotations related to: ***Moral epistemology[234]***

Moral epistemology is the study of moral knowledge. It attempts to answer such questions as, "How may moral judgments be supported or defended?" and "Is moral knowledge possible?"

If one presupposes a cognitivist interpretation of moral sentences, morality is justified by the moralist's knowledge of moral facts, and the theories to justify moral judgements are epistemological theories. Most moral epistemologies posit that moral knowledge is somehow possible (including empiricism and moral rationalism), as opposed to moral skepticism[235]. Amongst them, there are those who hold that moral knowledge is gained inferentially on the basis of some sort of non-moral epistemic process, as opposed to ethical intuitionism[236].

1.4.1 Moral knowledge gained by inference

Empiricism

Empiricism[237] is the doctrine that knowledge is gained primarily through observation and experience. Meta-ethical theories that imply an empirical epistemology include:

- ethical naturalism[238], which holds moral facts to be reducible to non-moral facts and thus knowable in the same ways; and

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229 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_nihilism
230 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_relativism
231 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_skepticism
232 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-cognitivism
233 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_prescriptivism
234 https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Moral_epistemology
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236 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethical_intuitionism
237 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empiricism
238 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethical_naturalism

- most common forms of ethical subjectivism[239], which hold that moral facts reduce to facts about individual opinions or cultural conventions and thus are knowable by observation of those conventions.

There are exceptions within subjectivism however, such as ideal observer theory[240], which implies that moral facts may be known through a rational process, and individualist ethical subjectivism[241], which holds that moral facts are merely personal opinions and so may be known only through introspection. Empirical arguments for ethics run into the *is-ought*[242] problem, which asserts that the way the world *is* cannot alone instruct people how they *ought* to act.

Moral rationalism

Moral rationalism[243], also called ethical rationalism, is the view according to which moral truths (or at least general moral principles) are knowable *a priori*[244], by reason alone. Some prominent figures in the history of philosophy[245] who have defended moral rationalism are Plato[246] and Immanuel Kant[247]. Perhaps the most prominent figures in the history of philosophy who have rejected moral rationalism are David Hume[248] and Friedrich Nietzsche[249].

Recent philosophers who defended moral rationalism include R. M. Hare[250], Christine Korsgaard[251], Alan Gewirth[252], and Michael Smith[253]. A moral rationalist may adhere to any number of different semantic theories as well; moral realism[254] is compatible with rationalism, and the subjectivist ideal observer theory[255] and non-cognitivist universal prescriptivism[256] both entail it.

1.4.2 Ethical intuitionism

Ethical intuitionism[257] is the view according to which some moral truths can be known *without* inference. That is, the view is at its core a foundationalism[258] about moral beliefs. Such an epistemological view implies that there are moral beliefs with propositional

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239 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethical_subjectivism
240 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideal_observer_theory
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257 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethical_intuitionism
258 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foundationalism

contents; so it implies cognitivism[259]. Ethical intuitionism commonly suggests moral realism[260], the view that there are objective[261] facts of morality and, to be more specific, ethical non-naturalism[262], the view that these evaluative facts cannot be reduced to natural fact. However, neither moral realism nor ethical non-naturalism are essential to the view; most ethical intuitionists simply happen to hold those views as well. Ethical intuitionism comes in both a "rationalist" variety, and a more "empiricist" variety known as moral sense theory[263].

1.4.3 Moral skepticism

Moral skepticism[264] is the class[265] of meta-ethical theories all members of which entail that no one has any moral knowledge. Many moral skeptics also make the stronger, modal[266], claim that moral knowledge is impossible. Forms of moral skepticism include, but are not limited to, error theory[267] and most but not all forms of non-cognitivism[268].

1.5 See also

- Anthropic principle[269]
- Axiology[270]
- Deontic logic[271]
- Ethical subjectivism[272]
- Fact–value distinction[273]
- Is–ought problem[274]
- Meta-rights[275]
- Moral realism[276]
- Normative ethics[277]
- *Principia Ethica*[278]
- The Right and the Good[279]

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259 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitivism_(ethics)
260 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_realism
261 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Objectivity_(philosophy)
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277 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Normative_ethics
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1.7 External links

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- *The Language of Morals[295]* (1952) by R. M. Hare
- *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals[296]* by Immanuel Kant
- Essays by philosopher Michael Huemer[297] on meta-ethics, especially intuitionism
- *Relativity theory of ethics[298]* by J. J. Mittler

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298 http://www.moralbalance.com/English/ch_04.html

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