Meta-ethics Intro – by Matt McVeagh

Experience of value is a constant feature of life. It relates to most important elements of our lives - what gives us meaning, what we strive for. We admire people because of their character and because of the value we perceive in there lives and actions. At time people are prepared to give their lives to do what is right. This sense of rightness and virtues is the subject of morality or ethics. (Using terms moral and ethics interchangeably).

When we think about morality - various levels we can do this:

Applied/practical ethics = particular moral questions like is it ok to eat meat or have abortions

Normative ethics - theories about how people should act and go about making moral decisions - deontology, consequentialism, virtue theory.

Meta-ethics - neither of these it asks over arching questions about what we are doing when we are talking about right and wrong, what it means. What kind of statements these are.

Also not read the handout - refer to handout as a stimulus and resource for discussion rather than a script for the intro.
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A meta-ethical theory needs to do 2 things:

1) Provide an explanation of the features of our ethical discourse and phenomenology.
2) Provide a plausible picture of how that explanation fits into our wider view of the world.

The central meta-ethical question is "Is value something we place on things or do we discover what is valuable?"

To over-simplify, people who think that value exists in the world to be discovered are moral realist and those that don't are irrealists or anti-realists. Worth stating that realists doesn't imply theist. Survey found majority of academic philosophers are moral realists while only a minority are theists. Prominent atheists like Ian Law are moral realists and some of the most important figures in moral realism like Thomas Nagal are avowed atheists. Nagel famously said not only does he not believe in God, he doesn't want it to be true that God exists.

Meta-ethics is a huge area so I have to focus down in this introduction. In history of metaethical debate the main division has been between cognitivism and non-cognitivism so I will concentrate on this. One way of asking the core question of meta-ethics is to ask "are moral sentences truth-apt?" In other words, do they express propositions that can be true or false? If they express a truth what is it that makes them true?

Diagram (at 1 on handout) is one way of representing some of the major positions.

The position that moral statements express beliefs about the world is called cognitivism - so if I say "rape is wrong" I'm making a factual statement - a claim that the act of rape contains the property of wrongness. This property is independent of my attitudes and so is something I can be right or wrong about. If I say rape is ok, then I'm saying something that is incorrect from a realist point of view. I'm making a mistake.

Non-cognitivism denies this. It says that moral statements aren't the kind of statements that can be true or false. So instead of making a claim that moral properties exist what I'm doing when I say "rape is wrong" is expressing an attitude like "boo to rape" or alternatively expressing a command like "Don't rape".

Non-cognitivism is a form of irrealism - it says value doesn't exist in the world as what is valuable or moral is mind dependent - its based on our attitudes.

In this debate realists have claimed the starting advantage and argue that both our moral discourse and our moral phenomenology presumes and presupposes moral truth. For example (see point 2 of the handout):

- Intuitively if we ask the question like "If I didn't disapprove of slavery will it still be wrong?" the answer seems to be a yes or no one, on face value.
- Moral arguments are rationally compelling - not just about our feelings.
- We seem to perceive things like cruelty and bravery as part of actions we observe, not simply in terms of our emotions.
- We think we can make moral errors - straightforward way of understanding why we can be error is that we've got the facts wrong.
- People argue and change their views about moral issues based on argument.
- We change our views over time, including some times our most fundamental views, and when we do so we think our old views are wrong and that in coming to recognize our new views we have come to appreciate truths that we missed before.

The non-cognitivist points to other features of morality such as widespread disagreement and the internally motivating nature of moral judgements as evidence of their basis in attitudes rather than facts (*see handout point 3*). They argue there is a fundamental gap between fact and value so moral values cannot be facts. To explain this, belief desire-theory is the standard account of motivation we get from Hume beliefs tell us the way the world is and desires tell us the way we want the world to be. Belief without a desire is like a map without a destination. The desire tells you were you want to get to and the belief tells you how to get there. Together you are motivated to act. Non-cognitivists say that moral statements are internally motivating - that is to hold a moral position is simply enough to motivate you to do it. If both internalism is true, and the belief desire theory is true, then moral statements must be attitudes or desires rather than facts.

Non-cognitivists also argue that they can accommodate some notion of the language of truth - we can say "thats true" to express an agreement of attitude, and non-cognitivists can maintain there is a truth about whether the facts are correctly interpreted in how they relate to our moral attitudes and that we can argue that someone's views are untrue if they are internally inconsistent - those that are inconsistent would be "wrong". Of course this weak notion of truth is not going to satisfy the worries of the realist. It leaves the possibility of many internally consistent traditions with no way to decide between them.

A major problem for non-cognitive is that it struggles to make sense of our moral language - the Frege-Geach problem is the most famous example of this. This is quite complicated but is illustrated on the handout at point 4. Basically it showed that sentences that express moral judgments can form part of semantically complex sentences in a way that an expressivist cannot easily explain.

This problem led to years of debate and pretty much destroyed early forms of non-cognitivism. More recently non-cognitivists have attempted more and more sophisticated versions of the theory such as the quasi-realism of the hugely influential Simon Blackburn. Blackburn thinks he has solved the problem by using a a complex form of non-cognitivism that tries to 'steal the realist clothes' and account for moral truth by arguing that we project attitudes onto the world 'as if they were real', but there is a huge amount of debate over whether his solution works, or adequately deals with realist concerns.

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An alternative position to both realism and non-cognitivism is Error Theory, most notably propounded by John Mackie. Error theory is an irrealist position and a form of nihilism which agrees with the realist that moral statements really are making truth claims but also agrees with the non-cognitivist that moral facts don't exist so morality is in fact infested with error and

all moral utterances are false. Talking about something being good or bad is like talking about what colour unicorns are. Whatever answer you give will be wrong as there are no such things as unicorns.

Mackie's argues for error theory are listed at number 5 on the handout. The most famous is the so called argument from queerness. Mackie said that if moral facts exist they would be a very queer type of fact. Hard to make sense of what they could possibly be or how we can know about them. Don't seem to fit with a naturalistic world view. This queerness has been expressed in terms of metaphysics (how would they relate to the natural facts) in terms of epistemology (how can they be detected) and practically (how can they motivate action - as per 3 on the handout).
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If Moral realism is to move from the 1st challenge of explaining our moral phenomenology & discourse to the 2nd of providing a plausible explanation of how moral facts fit into our world view it needs to answer these questions to do with disagreement and queerness.

I've given some examples of realist responses to conflict at 6 on the handout, however the truth is realists have no single reply, to these points rather there are multiple moral realisms which wildly disagree with each other on how to answer them. The most commonly drawn distinction between types of moral realism is naturalism and non-naturalism. Naturalism says that moral facts are identical to natural facts, (lots of debate over which natural facts they are and in reality this distinction is hopelessly messy, although it is still used). Non-naturalism by contrast argues that moral facts are not natural facts as usually understood so are not simply accessible to science. G. E. Moore was a famous non-naturalist of the "intuitionist" variety and used the open question argument to show that moral facts could not be natural facts because it always begged the question why would "pleasure" (or whatever) be good? This argument was extremely influential for a long time, however recent developments in philosophy of language have undermined this argument allowing naturalism back into play.

Another distinction which often, although not always, distinguishes these same 2 approaches is how they respond to moral motivation and the noncognitivist challenge referred to at point 3 of the handout. Naturalists and some other realists often deny motivational internalism and argue that "the good" is identified with some "natural" feature which we have to care about if we are in the game of morality. They would argue its quite possible to recognise what is good and not care if you were a psychopath or depressed or some such state. Nevertheless our moral concepts are tightly bound up with our understanding of the world and our own objective flourishing so seeing something as moral but not being motivated to do it is irrational and so there is a strong rational internal motivation to act morally.

Others (usually non-naturalists) respond by accepting motivational internalism - that is they agree with non-cognitivists that recognising moral states are intrinsically motivating but take the more radical step of denying the belief-desire theory of action. Moral facts then are "non-natural" in that they are inherently motivational beliefs so can't simply be mapped onto or reduced to non-moral facts. These realists argue that to have a desire simply IS to be motivated by the facts of a situation not something else we bring to it separate from our beliefs about the world.

If either of these arguments work practical queerness isn't an issue.

If realists can pursue a naturalist strategy then this undercuts the accusations of metaphysical or epistemological queerness too as moral facts just are natural facts. Some naturalists try to do this by a simple analytical approach of identifying the meaning of good with some natural properties like being pleasant. Others take an Aristotelian approach and identify the good ultimately with the wholeness of human physiological, psychological and social flourishing which are natural facts. To achieve these ends we need to cultivate virtues of character and it is these virtues which are the correct subject of moral discourse.

Accusations of queerness are toothless against these forms of realism, but the challenge for these approaches is whether the theories can be articulated in a way that fits with widely held moral judgements.

By contrast, Non-naturalist realists tend to meet the metaphysical challenge head on with a "so what?" To argue that moral facts are too strange to exist is simply to beg the question against moral realism. Normatively, they argue is simply in the world in the forms of favouring relations -that is that the details of how facts sit in the world does at time intrinsically count in favour of acting in a certain way. Perceiving moral truth isn't a special magical sense, its about having an adequate conceptualisation of the details of natural facts as we perceive them through natural means.

Here non-naturalists split again into on one hand "robust realists" who see these favouring relations as brute facts existing in the world totally independently of us, and on the other hand an approach called "secondary quality realism". This latter approach says that moral properties are like secondary properties of objects like colour, which are not in the world as such, totally independent of perception, but are there in the way that certain objective features of the world are perceived by people with the right type of sensual apparatus to perceive them.

To expand, humans see colour because of our type of sight organs so the experience of red is something that is created by that interaction between real features of the world and our perceptive apparatus - a red object has properties that are disposed to cause us to experience the colour red when seeing them. Similarly good or bad situations are ones disposed to elicit a response because of our moral capacities. This second weak version of realism does not see morality then as entirely independent from us, nevertheless they argue they are still objective in a weaker yet still relevant sense that value is 'out there' in situations for us to recognise, regardless of whether anyone actually does recognise it or not - a real feature of the world. They argue that if we give up on secondary properties as being features of the world we would give up huge numbers of things we normally consider to be objective to a degree that simply isn't consistent with our normal understanding of the objective world.

Finally one last point to think about. Some realists have argued that if you don't think value can really exists in the world then your have a wider problem than morality. When we make any argument, (including those against value realism) we are relying on epistemological values - we believe that, for example: we ought to be consistent, possibly that theories ought to be simple, that we ought to be reasonable in weighing the claims of others, we ought to have good grounds for our beliefs, etc. These are claims that underpin our rational discourse and they are normative. If moral values and oughts are queer, so are epistemological values and oughts. But as these oughts underpin rational argument any argument that tries to undermine them will also inevitably have to presuppose them, undermining the rationality of anti-realism about value. This in itself, they argue, doesn't prove that moral realism is true, but if its right it does undermine most of the arguments that motivate and support anti-realism about moral truth.