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A Taxonomy of Meta-ethical Theories

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The author contends that classifying theories in the field of meta-ethics along a single dimension misses important nuances in each theory. With the increased sophistication and complexity of meta-ethical analyses in the modern era, the traditional cognitivist–non-cognitivist and realist–anti-realist categories no longer function adequately. The author categorizes the various meta-ethical theories along three dimensions. These dimensions focus on the linguistic analysis offered by each theory, its metaphysical commitments and its degree of normative tolerance.

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1. Introduction

The aim with this typology is to present a classification of meta-ethical theories. Such a classification helps students new to philosophy to see at a glance the range of views in the field. It also assists professional philosophers and others interested in the field to explore the relationships between theories and the nuances of each view.

Such a classification is notoriously difficult and there is no widespread agreement amongst philosophers how this is to be achieved. This difficulty largely arises because each meta-ethical theory answers questions in multiple areas of enquiry. Firstly, many theories seek to provide a linguistic analysis of the ethical terms used in ordinary discourse. They endeavour to provide an account of the meanings of ethical words such as 'good' and 'right'. Secondly, such theories try to give some account of the psychological and social functions of ethics and of moral discourse. Thirdly, these theories strive to give an epistemological account of moral judgements: how we come to know moral truths and the logical relationships between moral judgements and natural descriptions of the world and of us. The problem of classification is made all the more difficult as some leading proponents of particular theories do not address all of these questions or answer them in unclear and ambiguous ways.

I have found it most useful to classify all of the major meta-ethical theories along three dimensions. Along the Cognitivism–Non-cognitivism dimension are classified theories according to whether they regard moral utterances as being truth-apt in the same way that ordinary descriptive sentences bear truth or falsity. On the Realism–Anti-realism dimension is shown the extent to which meta-ethical theories take morality to be about a mind-independent realm. The third categorization along the Monism–Pluralism scale places meta-ethical theories according to how tolerant they are of competing normative frameworks.

Many moral philosophers divide meta-ethical theories into Objectivist and Subjectivist types and then conflate this classification with either the Cognitivism–Non-cognitivism divide or the Realism–Anti-realism divide. Classifying theories this way misses an important characteristic and can be misleading. Subjectivism (in the narrow sense of the view that equates moral judgements with psychological reports of mental states) is a case in point. Without dispute, Subjectivism is a Cognitivist meta-ethic. However, classifying it under Objectivism for this reason is both confusing and misleading.

Consider also Ideal Observer and Divine Command Theories. Both these theories ascribe moral judgments to a single mind with preferences and so may be considered Subjectivist (in the sense of 'partial'). On the other hand, the preferences of this being are held to be epistemically privileged and obligatory for all moral agents and so may be considered Objectivist (in the sense of being 'universalist').

2. Meta-ethical Theory Dimensions

2.1 Linguistic Analysis

What do ethical terms such as ‘good’ and ‘right’ mean and how do these terms function in ordinary moral discourse? This aspect of moral language is encapsulated in the Cognitivism–Non-cognitivism dimension. This dimension characterises the extent to which the meta-ethical theory ascribes propositional weight to moral utterances. Cognitivists see moral utterances as having a robust truth value in much the same way as ordinary propositions or statements, such as, ‘Ontario is the capital city of Canada’. For Cognitivists, moral utterances are essentially about beliefs. In this sense, Cognitivism can be seen as synonymous with Descriptivism. For Non-cognitivists, on the other hand, moral utterances are not propositional in nature at all. Non-cognitivist positions lend greater weight to moral utterances being expressions of attitudes, exhortations, commands or commitments. Semi-cognitivism straddles the middle ground, maintaining that the central meaning of moral terms is affective, but allowing some propositional content to moral utterances.

In this dimension, Cognitivism is further divided into three types. Naturalism is the view that moral facts are exhaustively facts about the natural world. Conversely, Non-naturalists regard moral properties as non-natural properties of things and events. Lastly, Relativists translate statements about moral properties into statements about the preferences of a privileged individual or the group to which the speaker belongs.

2.2 Metaphysical Commitments

To what do ethical terms refer? Do they refer to natural properties of things and events or do they refer to non-natural or supernatural entities? This aspect of meta-ethical analysis is captured in the Realism–Anti-realism dimension. Realist positions view moral values and rules existing in a mind-independent realm, ontologically separate from the judgements and preferences of particular individuals or groups. Anti-realist proponents, on the other hand, see moral values and rules as being inextricably embedded within and the manifestations of human or super-human judgements and preferences. This dimension mirrors the realist–instrumentalist divide in epistemology and tells another side of the story compared with the Cognitivism–Non-cognitivism dimension. Quasi-realism strikes an intermediate position between Realism and Anti-realism. On this view, speakers are regarded as identifying their moral judgements with some objective feature of reality, while at the same time maintaining that the affective aspect of moral judgements remains central to their meaning.

Note that on the Realism–Anti-realism dimension, Realism is not synonymous with Cognitivism. Subjectivism, for example, attributes robust truth values to moral utterances (Cognitivist) while regarding moral judgements as reports of the speaker’s preferences (Anti-realist). On this dimension also, Realist positions are subdivided into Naturalist and Non-naturalist variants, while the Anti-realism group contains within it a sub-group of Relativist theories.

2.3 Normative Freedom

How epistemically tolerant is the meta-ethical theory to competing normative ethical systems? Does the meta-ethical theory allow in-principle for one and only one epistemically correct normative framework or does it allow epistemic legitimacy to more than one set of normative judgements? This aspect of normative tolerance is displayed on the Monism–Pluralism dimension.

Note that this question of tolerance is not a question about the standpoint of a typical moral agent engaging in normative discourse. It is not a question about how many normative systems a moral agent subscribing to that meta-ethical view recognizes as genuine competitors. It is a question about the tolerance level of the proponent of that meta-ethical view *qua* meta-ethicist. One way to imagine the Monism–Pluralism dimension is to consider the special case of a world in which only ideal moral agents existed. (The properties of an ‘ideal’ moral agent are specified by the meta-ethical theory in question.) In this world, consider how many normative theories would be accepted by moral agents as normatively correct. Meta-ethical views that entail that only one normative theory is correct are, according to this characterization, Monist. Those that entail more than one are regarded here as Pluralist.

To illustrate this way of classifying meta-ethical views, consider Intuitionism. As a group, Intuitionists argue for a variety of competing normative systems. Which normative system a particular Intuitionist proposes depends on how that particular Intuitionist thinks they sense non-natural moral properties. However, even given this plurality of competing systems, Intuitionists agree that there is only one normatively correct system of values and obligations. It is in this sense that I am categorizing them as meta-ethical Monists.

Now contrast Intuitionism with Prescriptivism. Like Intuitionists, Prescriptivists as a group also recognize a variety of competing normative systems. For a Prescriptivist, however, in a world consisting entirely of ideal moral agents, there would remain a multiplicity of normative judgements as moral agents will differ in the prescriptions that they would want to universalize. For a Prescriptivist, ‘Shut all doors’ is just as epistemically legitimate a normative position as ‘Keep all doors open’. Prescriptivism, in this sense, is Pluralist.

This categorization splits the Relativist group into those variants that have a single moral adjudicator and those that have a multiplicity of adjudicators. Surveying this dimension tells a richer story compared with just looking at the Cognitivism–Non-cognitivism dimension or the simplistic Objectivism–Subjectivism dichotomy.

There is some ambiguity in deciding where to place Existentialism on this dimension. Seeing Existentialism as promoting a single overriding normative principle—that of ‘authenticity’—leads to placing Existentialism in the Monism camp. Existentialism’s liberalism in allowing for a multiplicity of ‘authentic’ ethical commitments, on the other hand, appears to place it in the Pluralist camp. Here, I will draw a parallel between Existentialism and naturalistic Utilitarianism, with its single overriding principle of impartiality, and put Existentialism in the Monist camp.

3. Meta-ethical Theory Taxonomy

Linguistic Analysis	Cognitivism				Semi-cognitivism	Non-cognitivism
	Naturalism Utilitarianism Neo-Aristotelianism	Non-naturalism Intuitionism Rationalism	Relativism Cultural Relativism Subjectivism Ideal Observer Theory Divine Command Theory	 Constructivism Existentialism Revolutionary Fictionalism Error Theory	Sophisticated Emotivism Projectivism Norm-expressivism Plan-expressivism Hermeneutic Fictionalism	Radical Emotivism Prescriptivism
Metaphysical Commitments	Realism		Quasi-realism		Anti-realism	
	Naturalism Utilitarianism Neo-Aristotelianism	Non-naturalism Intuitionism Rationalism	Sophisticated Emotivism Projectivism Norm-expressivism Plan-expressivism		Relativism Cultural Relativism Subjectivism Ideal Observer Theory Divine Command Theory	Radical Emotivism Prescriptivism Constructivism Existentialism Hermeneutic Fictionalism Revolutionary Fictionalism Error Theory
Normative Freedom	Monism				Pluralism	
	Utilitarianism Rationalism Neo-Aristotelianism Constructivism Existentialism Ideal Observer Theory Divine Command Theory				Radical Emotivism Sophisticated Emotivism Projectivism Norm-expressivism Plan-expressivism	Prescriptivism Cultural Relativism Subjectivism Existentialism Hermeneutic Fictionalism Revolutionary Fictionalism Error Theory

Below is a short description of each of the meta-ethical theories classified in the above typology.

- Utilitarianism:* A type of Naturalism that equates morality with facts about what promotes the welfare or interests of sentient creatures. ([J. S. Mill](#))
- Neo-Aristotelianism:* A type of Naturalism that grounds ethics in facts about human nature and evaluates living things as specimens of their kind. ([G. E. M. Anscombe](#), [P. Foot](#), P. T. Geach)
- Intuitionism:* A form of Non-naturalism that posits that moral qualities are not natural qualities and that they are perceived directly by a moral sense. ([M. Huemer](#), G. W. Leibniz, H. J. McCloskey, [G. E. Moore](#), [W. D. Ross](#), [H. Sidgwick](#))
- Rationalism:* A form of Non-naturalism that postulates that universalized moral rules can be deduced by reason alone as synthetic *a priori* principles. ([M. Huemer](#), I. Kant, [C. Korsgaard](#))
- Cultural Relativism:* A type of Relativism in which moral judgements are understood as the speaker's report of their social group's accepted norms of behaviour. (F. Boas, G. Harman, E. Westermarck, D. B. Wong)
- Subjectivism:* A type of Relativism in which moral judgements are understood as the speaker's report of their psychological state of approving or preferring. ([D. Hume](#), Protagoras)
- Ideal Observer Theory:* A type of Relativism in which the standard for morality is determined by what is preferred by an impartial ideal observer with perfect knowledge and without cultural bias. ([R. B. Brandt](#), R. Firth, [D. Hume](#))
- Divine Command Theory:* A type of Relativism in which what is good is what God approves and what is right is what God commands. (R. M. Adams, P. Copan, P. Quinn)
- Existentialism:* The view that ethics is fundamentally grounded in the human freedom to choose and the imperative to act authentically. ([A. Camus](#), [S. Kierkegaard](#), [J-P. Sartre](#))
- Constructivism:* The view that moral principles are determined through an idealized process of deliberation and agreement by rational agents. (D. Copp, [T. Hobbes](#), [J. Rawls](#), T. M. Scanlon)
- Radical Emotivism:* The view that moral utterances are simply exhortations of emotions, attitudes or preferences with no descriptive content. ([A. J. Ayer](#), [B. Russell](#))
- Sophisticated Emotivism:* The view that moral utterances are centrally expressions of attitudes and preferences while also peripherally describing the object of evaluation in some way. ([D. H. Monro](#), [C. L. Stevenson](#))
- Projectivism:* The view that moral utterances are projections of approval or disapproval as a property onto an event or object. ([S. Blackburn](#))

- Norm-expressivism:* The view that normative judgments express the acceptance of systems of rules dividing actions under naturalistic descriptions into those that are forbidden, permitted and required. ([A. Gibbard](#))
- Plan-expressivism:* The view that normative judgments express the acceptance of plans to act in a particular way, depending on the naturalistic circumstances of the speaker. ([A. Gibbard](#))
- Prescriptivism:* The view that moral judgments are universal imperatives to act for any agent in a similar circumstance to the one judged. ([R. Carnap](#), [R. M. Hare](#))
- Hermeneutic Fictionalism:* The view that moral agents typically pretend to ascribe mind-independent moral properties to objects and events. (M. E. Kalderon, J. Woodbridge, [S. Yablo](#))
- Revolutionary Fictionalism:* The view that moral language should be reformed to continue the fiction in which moral agents falsely ascribe mind-independent moral properties to objects and events. (R. Joyce)
- Error Theory:* The view that moral agents falsely ascribe mind-independent moral properties to objects and events. (I. Hinckfuss, [J. L. Mackie](#))

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