

Volume 9, Number 3, April 2013

Activity

Meta-ethics: test yourself

Jon Mayled

Cut out the cards and match the topics to the statements.

(a) Analytic statements	(i) Believe that moral facts are objective facts that are in the world. They believe that things are good and bad independently of humans. Moral values then, such as being generous, are as much real properties of people as hard and soft are properties of objects.
(b) Cognitivists	(ii) Believe that moral statements can be used to describe the world. If we say that abortion is wrong then we have given it a property and can say whether it is true or false.
(c) Criticisms	(iii) Do not believe that moral statements are subjective, and they relate to human feelings and opinions, not to the world.
(d) Emotivism	(iv) Say that when someone makes a moral statement they are expressing their feelings, not describing the world. They argue that moral statements are not descriptive but subjective so they cannot be called true or false.
(e) Ethical naturalism	(v) Maintains that all ethical statements are the same as non-ethical (natural) ones. Ethical statements are factual and so can be true or false. We can see whether a person is good or bad by their behaviour, just as we can see whether they are tall or short.
(f) Intuitionism	(vi) G. E. Moore (1873–1958) said that ethical naturalism was a mistake, basing his argument on David Hume, who argued that to derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’ was logically invalid.
(g) Moral anti-realists	(vii) Moore argued instead that good is a simple property that we cannot analyse. In his model of ideal utilitarianism he said that right acts are those that produce the most good but that goodness itself could not be defined.

(h) Moral realists	(viii) W. D. Ross (1877–1971) argued that it was obvious that certain types of actions were right. In any particular situation people would come to recognise certain prima facie (from a first impression) duties.
(i) Naturalistic fallacy	(ix) If the naturalistic fallacy establishes that value judgements cannot be inferred from natural facts then the introduction of ‘non-natural’ facts and a special ‘intuition’ simply makes the whole idea a mystery.
(j) Non-cognitivism	(x) Makes a distinction between facts and values and argues that there is no ethical knowledge because ethical statements cannot be proven to be true or false.
(k) Non-cognitivists	(xi) A. J. Ayer (1910–1989) said that ‘ethical terms do not serve only to express feelings. They are calculated also to arouse feeling, and so to stimulate action.’
(l) Obligation intuitionism	(xii) Whether these are true or false can be seen from their content, e.g. ‘all bachelors are unmarried men’. Maths and logic employ them.
(m) Prescriptivism	(xiii) Whether these are true or false can be worked out by checking to establish the facts. Science, history and ordinary life employ them.
(n) Simple subjectivism	(xiv) J. Rachels (1941–2003) criticised emotivism, saying that it could produce the idea that: ‘Where morality is concerned, there are no “facts” and no one is “right”.’
(o) Synthetic statements	(xv) Ayer and Stevenson both based their views on a distinction between facts and values that, according to Hume, made it impossible to deduce a prescriptive statement (‘ought’) from a descriptive statement (‘is’).