

What does it take to be a moral realist?

Moral claims are actually true if they are factually right; moral judgments describe moral facts.

Moral realists basically contend for the following: (1) Sentences we use when we make moral claims (e.g., “murder is wrong”) is capable of being either true or false; (2) some sentences really are true. Moral realists contend that there are moral facts & moral properties. Some argue those properties are **natural** (e.g., pleasure; lying has a wrong-making quality). Others say those properties are **non-natural** (unanalyzable property discovered by intuition (non-natural moral realism). Nevertheless, both natural or non-natural are properties whose existence are independent of people’s beliefs & attitudes about what is right from wrong.

Nihilism:

Nihilists affirm (1) but reject (2). When nihilists make claims about acts being right/wrong they intend to make claims about the way the world is. In other words, they intend to say something capable of being true or false. However, no sentence really is true. Therefore, people err when they presuppose “rightness” or “wrongness” as features that acts could possess. Though nihilists conceive the world as value-free, devoid of any moral nature, an individual can hardly sincerely continue to assert falsehoods once one knows them to be falsehoods. Thus, moral thought/talk takes on the status of religious thought & talk once one becomes a convinced atheist.

Expressivists or Non-Cognitivism:

Expressivists reject both (1) and (2). Thus, the sentence we use when we make moral claims are not used with the intention of saying something that is even capable of being either true or false. We do not use them to make claims about the way the world is. Therefore, we do not presuppose rightness and wrongness are features that acts could possess. We use moral sentences to express our feelings about acts, people, states of the world, and the like. When we say “Murder is wrong” it is as if we are saying “Book for murder!” Though Nihilism & Expressivism share a conception of the world as value-free, devoid of any moral nature, expressivists believe moral thought does not take on the status of religious thought. Because of a value free world, one is free to make moral claims (nothing more is presumed). For Emotivists moral language is subjective: expressive of emotions/feelings but there is no truth/falsity; moral language is imperative (it commands, “Murder is wrong.”); moral language aims at persuading (language has a magnetic force, aiming at influencing another person’s actions: “This is right” means “I approve of this; do so as well). Remember, moral statements are said to be without truth-value (are neither true nor false): they have no cognitive content.

(2) Some sentences really are true. Ordinary rules of logic (e.g., *modus ponens*) may be applied to moral statements. Thus, a moral belief is false or unjustified or contradictory in the same way we would about a factual belief. Moreover, moral realists can use laws of logic to resolve moral disagreements: (e.g., if two moral beliefs contradict one another, they cannot both be right, and therefore everyone involved ought to be seeking out the right answer to resolve the disagreement).

QUESTIONS & TWO CRITICISMS

Are values essentially different from facts? Are values derived from facts? Can value statements (“Murder is wrong.”) be true or false like factual statements are (“The apple is red.”)? If sentences ascribe rightness & wrongness are capable of being true or false, then is Expressivism refuted? If any sentences are able to ascribe rightness and wrongness to actions really are true, is Nihilism refuted? Consider the following two criticisms:

1. Moral Realism can’t seriously explain moral conflicts.
2. Moral truths cannot be observed or justified in the same way as material facts (e.g., scientific method). The mere fact that moral facts might be compatible with natural facts does nothing to support the idea that we could learn about the moral facts (e.g., David Hume argued that no moral conclusion follows non-problematically from non-moral premises; no “ought,” follows from an “is” – without the help of another (presupposed) “ought”). There is no valid inference from non-moral premises to moral conclusions unless one relies on a moral premise. If, then, all that science can establish is what “is” and not what “ought” to be, science cannot alone establish moral conclusions. Thus, Hume suggests that there is something wrong in arguing from facts to values: “*Hume’s Fork*” or the “*naturalistic fallacy*.” “(1) Fact; (2) Therefore, value” or “(1) is (2) Therefore, ought.” Moore goes further & states that ethical characteristics are *different in kind* from non-ethical ones, & thus, we cannot deduce ethical propositions from non-ethical ones. Moore concludes that value can’t be identified with a natural property; it must be definably ostensibly as a non-natural one, resembling a Platonic form, that we all know by intuition (non-natural moral realism).

Non-natural moral realism is the combination of intuitionism with moral realism whereby moral knowledge rests on self-evident moral truths *sui generis* (class in its own) & not reducible to any natural facts or properties.

Ethical naturalism: moral rules designed to guide actions which change over time. Thus, ethical concepts (ex. “slave,” to “person”) change. Moral realism grounds ethics & moral rules can be rationally discovered/measured via analysis of the changing nature of ourselves, our needs & our society. Naturalism can either be subjective (truth originates in individual or social decision) or objective (truth is independent of individual or social decision). Ethical judgments are disguised assertions of fact & thus, can be justified empirically. In contrast:
Ethical non-naturalism: (either Intuitionism or Religious revelation) states that ethical terms can’t be defined in factual terms; the refer to non-natural properties & thus, can’t be derived from empirically confirmed propositions; either intuition alone or divine revelation provides justification.

Moore’s Intuitionism includes 4 Theses: 1). **Humean Thesis:** Ought statements can’t be derived from is statements; (2) **Platonic Thesis:** Basic value terms, including moral statements, refer to non-natural properties; (3) **Cognitive Thesis:** Moral statements are either true or false; they are objective, putative (assumed to exist) about reality, which can be known; (4) **Intuition Thesis:** Moral truths are discovered by the intuition; they are self-evident upon reflection.

Emotivists (non-cognitive) say intuitive speculation is meaningless. They accept Thesis 1 but deny 3 & 4. Thesis 2: they agree that evaluative statements claim to refer to a non-natural world, but there is no way to find out whether there is a non-natural world & no way to know whether they refer to anything at all. Thus, evaluative language is meaningless or non-cognitive: use the term “meaning” in a way that does not depend upon whether a sentence is true or false. **Ayer:** meaning of sentence found in its method of verification. All meaningful sentences are either tautologies (A is A) or empirically verifiable (The apple is red). Value statements are non-sense (e.g., “murder is wrong”).

Rejecting metaphysical and epistemological notions of intuitionism, some later moral realists assert that moral beliefs are justified when they form part of an explanatorily coherent system of beliefs with another with various non-moral beliefs, and insists that moral properties are just natural properties of the people, actions, and policies that instantiate them (i.e., provides an instance of or concrete evidence in support of them).