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Advanced Metaethics: Meaning, Motivation, and Moral Epistemology for Scholars

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Introduction

This book is for graduate students and researchers who want a rigorous, synoptic, and up-to-date guide to the central debates in metaethics and moral theory. Its subtitle—“A graduate-level exploration of the central debates in metaethics and moral theory”—signals both ambition and scope: we focus on three interlocking pillars of advanced metaethical inquiry, namely meaning (the semantics and pragmatics of moral discourse), motivation (the psychology and rationality of practical commitment), and moral epistemology (how, if at all, we know moral truths). Throughout, the treatment engages contemporary literature on moral realism, expressivism, moral motivation, and epistemic access, while foregrounding argumentative structure and research strategy.

Part of what makes metaethics difficult—and exciting—is that it sits at the crossroads of philosophy of language, mind, action, and epistemology. We therefore begin with the shape of the problem-space: debates between cognitivists and noncognitivists about whether moral judgments aim at truth; the evolution from emotivism to sophisticated expressivisms; quasi-realist programs designed to earn realist-seeming commitments without realist metaphysics; and challenges such as the Frege-Geach problem. In parallel, we examine realist options—both naturalistic and non-naturalistic—alongside rivals like error theory and constructivism. Questions about supervenience, dependence, and grounding provide the metaphysical scaffolding for these positions.

Motivation is the second pillar. Are moral judgments intrinsically motivating (internalism), or do they require independent desires (externalism)? What is the relation between reasons and motivation, and how do Humean and anti-Humean accounts of normativity differ? We connect these debates to contemporary moral psychology, exploring how belief, desire, and affect interact in practical deliberation. The aim is not merely to catalogue views but to model how fine-grained distinctions—between kinds of reasons, forms of rational pressure, and varieties of commitment—shift the dialectic.

The third pillar is moral epistemology. Here we investigate whether moral knowledge is possible and, if so, by what methods: intuition, seemings, perception-like experiences, testimony, coherence via reflective equilibrium, or other hybrid approaches. We scrutinize reliability, sensitivity, and safety conditions adapted from mainstream epistemology, and we confront genealogical “debunking” challenges—evolutionary and cultural—that threaten to undermine moral belief. Rather than treating these as purely destructive, we assess how genealogical insights can be integrated into constructive accounts of epistemic access.

Methodologically, the book advocates pluralism in tools and evidence. Conceptual analysis and formal argumentative clarity remain central, but we also draw on developments in formal semantics and pragmatics where they illuminate moral language, and we take seriously inputs from moral psychology and the social epistemology of testimony and disagreement. This is not a “science of morality” text; it is a metaethical text attentive to how empirical findings and formal frameworks can constrain, sharpen, or reframe traditional philosophical claims.

Each chapter is designed for seminar use: it ends with a curated reading list keyed to the current research frontier and a problem set that ranges from conceptual exercises to miniature research prompts. The problem sets are meant to develop technical and dialectical skills—clarifying commitments, testing principles in hard cases, and constructing or diagnosing argument forms—while the readings guide sustained engagement with the literature. Instructors can assign single chapters or build modular sequences tailored to a course’s emphasis.

Finally, a word about stance and strategy. Although I occasionally gesture at my own sympathies, the primary aim is adjudicative clarity rather than advocacy. Arguments are developed in a charitable, steel-man spirit, with careful attention to the strongest versions of competing views. Readers are encouraged to resist premature verdicts, to track the costs of theoretical commitments across chapters, and to revisit earlier assumptions as new distinctions emerge. If the book succeeds, it will equip you not merely to state positions in metaethics but to see how those positions interlock, to diagnose where controversies genuinely bite, and to identify promising avenues for original research.

CHAPTER ONE: Mapping the Terrain: A Cartography of Metaethics

To embark on a serious study of metaethics is to enter a philosophical landscape teeming with intricate distinctions, contested territories, and intellectual fault lines. It is less like strolling through a manicured garden and more like navigating a dense, often exhilarating, wilderness. Before we delve into specific debates, it is crucial to gain a high-level understanding of this terrain. This involves identifying the primary questions metaethicists ask, understanding the major theoretical camps that have emerged in response, and appreciating how these camps relate to one another. Think of this chapter as your topographical map, highlighting the main geographical features and historical routes, preparing you for the more detailed explorations that follow.

At its core, metaethics is the branch of philosophy that asks about the nature of moral thought, talk, and practice. Unlike normative ethics, which grapples with *what* we ought to do (e.g., Is abortion morally permissible? What are our duties to the global poor?), or applied ethics, which takes normative theories and applies them to specific practical problems, metaethics steps back. It investigates the foundations. It queries the meaning of terms like "good," "right," "ought," and "virtue." It probes the metaphysical status of moral properties, if such properties exist at all. It examines the psychological states involved in making moral judgments and the motivational force, or lack thereof, of those judgments. And it scrutinizes the possibility and nature of moral knowledge.

Consider the simple moral claim, "Stealing is wrong." A normative ethicist might analyze this claim within a utilitarian framework, arguing that stealing is wrong because it generally leads to more suffering than happiness. An applied ethicist might discuss specific cases of stealing, such as intellectual property theft, and weigh its ethical implications. A metaethicist, however, would ask a different set of questions. What does "wrong" *mean* in this sentence? Is "wrong" referring to an objective property of the act of stealing, akin to how "red" refers to a property of an apple? Or is it merely an expression of the speaker's disapproval, similar to saying "Boo, stealing!?" If stealing is indeed "wrong," is this wrongness something we discover, or something we invent? And if we know it's wrong, how do we come to know it?

These foundational inquiries quickly lead to a bifurcation in the philosophical landscape. One major division is between cognitivism and noncognitivism. This distinction concerns the nature of moral judgments themselves. Cognitivists generally hold that moral judgments express beliefs and are, therefore, truth-apt. That is, they are the sorts of things that can be true or false. When someone says "Stealing is

wrong," a cognitivist believes they are expressing a belief about stealing, and this belief can be either true or false. This opens the door to the possibility of moral knowledge: if moral judgments can be true, then we might be able to know them.

Noncognitivists, on the other hand, deny that moral judgments express beliefs. Instead, they argue that moral judgments primarily express non-cognitive attitudes, such as emotions, desires, or prescriptions. For a noncognitivist, saying "Stealing is wrong" might be more akin to expressing an attitude of disapproval, issuing a command, or advocating for a particular course of action. If moral judgments don't express beliefs, then they aren't truth-apt—they can't be true or false in the same way factual claims are. This naturally raises significant challenges for the idea of moral knowledge. How can one "know" something that isn't true or false?

Within the cognitivist camp, further distinctions emerge, most notably between moral realists and anti-realists. Moral realists believe that there are objective moral facts or properties that exist independently of our minds and attitudes. These facts make our moral judgments true or false. Just as there are facts about the physical world (e.g., "The Earth is round"), realists contend there are facts about the moral world (e.g., "Torturing innocent children for fun is wrong") that exist regardless of what anyone thinks or feels. This robustly objective picture of morality is often seen as providing a firm foundation for moral truth and knowledge.

Moral anti-realists, while still cognitivists (meaning they agree moral judgments express beliefs and are truth-apt), deny the existence of objective moral facts. They might argue that moral facts are constructed by us, or that they are merely conventions, or that all moral claims are systematically false. The error theorist, for instance, is a cognitivist anti-realist who believes that all positive moral claims (e.g., "Stealing is wrong") are false because there are no moral properties or facts for them to correspond to. They see moral discourse as suffering from a widespread and systematic error, much like an ancient discourse about witches might be seen as universally false because witches simply don't exist.

The noncognitivist tradition also boasts a rich internal diversity. Early forms, such as emotivism, famously argued that moral judgments are simply expressions of emotion. To say "Murder is wrong" is to say "Boo, murder!" or "I disapprove of murder!" While influential in its time, emotivism faced significant challenges, particularly in accounting for the apparent logical structure of moral discourse. How can emotions logically entail other emotions, or participate in valid arguments? This led to the development of more sophisticated forms of noncognitivism, often grouped under the umbrella of expressivism.

Contemporary expressivism seeks to overcome the shortcomings of earlier noncognitivist theories by offering a more nuanced account of how moral language functions. Expressivists today often argue that moral judgments express complex, non-

cognitive attitudes—such as plans, commitments, or desires—that play a crucial role in coordinating our actions and attitudes with others. These theories attempt to explain how moral language can appear to be truth-apt, and how moral arguments can seem logically coherent, even if moral judgments don't express beliefs in the traditional sense. This endeavor is often referred to as "quasi-realism," where expressivists try to earn the right to use realist-sounding language (e.g., "It is true that murder is wrong") without committing to a realist metaphysics of moral facts.

Beyond these core distinctions between cognitivism and noncognitivism, and realism and anti-realism, metaethics also delves into the psychology of moral motivation. This area explores the connection between making a moral judgment and being motivated to act accordingly. The central debate here is between internalism and externalism. Motivation internalists claim that there is a necessary, conceptual connection between judging something to be right and being motivated to do it. If you sincerely judge that you *ought* to help a person in need, then, *ceteris paribus*, you will be motivated to help them. If you aren't motivated, then, according to internalists, you haven't truly made that moral judgment.

Motivation externalists, conversely, deny this necessary connection. They argue that moral judgments are beliefs about moral facts (if such facts exist), and these beliefs, like any other beliefs, don't intrinsically motivate. For an externalist, a separate, independent desire is needed to bridge the gap between a moral judgment and action. You might believe that helping the needy is right, but without a desire to be helpful or to do what is right, you might not be moved to act. This debate has significant implications for how we understand the nature of moral reasons and the rationality of practical action.

Finally, moral epistemology forms another critical pillar of metaethical inquiry. If moral knowledge is possible, how do we acquire it? Is it through some form of intuition, where moral truths are grasped directly, akin to how we grasp mathematical or logical truths? Do we perceive moral properties in the world, much like we perceive colors or shapes? Or is moral knowledge more akin to scientific knowledge, built upon empirical observation and theoretical construction? The field grapples with questions of justification, evidence, and the sources of moral belief.

One prominent approach, coherentism, suggests that moral beliefs are justified by their coherence with a wider system of beliefs, often achieved through a process of "reflective equilibrium." This involves moving back and forth between our specific moral judgments and our general moral principles, adjusting each in light of the other until they form a stable, coherent whole. Other epistemological theories explore the role of moral perception, moral testimony, and even the potential for "evolutionary debunking" arguments, which challenge the reliability of our moral beliefs by pointing to their evolutionary origins.

The interplay between these different domains of metaethics is crucial. For instance, your stance on whether moral judgments are truth-apt (cognitivism vs. noncognitivism) will profoundly influence your views on moral realism, motivation, and epistemology. If moral judgments aren't truth-apt, then the very idea of moral facts existing for us to discover becomes problematic, and moral knowledge as a pursuit of objective truth might be a chimera. Similarly, assumptions about moral motivation can shape theories of moral language and the nature of moral reasons.

This introductory cartography reveals a dynamic and interconnected field. The debates within metaethics are rarely isolated; instead, they ripple across different sub-disciplines, forcing philosophers to consider the systemic implications of their positions. As we proceed through this book, we will delve into each of these areas in much greater detail, unpacking the arguments, exploring the nuances, and identifying the leading contemporary research. Our aim is not simply to catalog these positions but to understand their underlying rationale, their strengths and weaknesses, and the intellectual pathways they open for further inquiry. Prepare to engage with some of the most fundamental and enduring questions about what it means to be a moral agent in a complex world.

Problem Set

1. Consider the moral statement: "It is wrong to break promises."
 - Formulate one question about this statement that a normative ethicist might ask.
 - Formulate one question about this statement that a metaethicist might ask, distinguishing it from the normative question.
 - Explain how a cognitivist and a noncognitivist would likely interpret the meaning of "wrong" in this statement.
2. Define moral realism and moral anti-realism. Provide an example of a moral claim and explain how a moral realist and a cognitivist moral anti-realist (e.g., an error theorist) would differ in their assessment of its truth value.
3. Distinguish between motivation internalism and motivation externalism. Present a brief thought experiment or scenario that highlights the difference between these two views.
4. If a philosopher argues that moral judgments are fundamentally expressions of emotion, what challenges might they face in explaining how we can engage in rational moral argumentation or debate? How might a sophisticated expressivist attempt to address these challenges?
5. Reflective equilibrium is a method often discussed in moral epistemology. Describe, in your own words, how this method works and what kind of moral knowledge or justification it aims to provide.
6. Consider the interconnections described in this chapter. Explain how a commitment to (a) noncognitivism might influence one's views on (b) the possibility of moral knowledge. Provide a brief justification for your reasoning.

Reading List

- Blackburn, Simon. *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning*. Oxford

- University Press, 1998. (See especially Chapter 1: "The Project of Practical Reasoning")
- Darwall, Stephen, Gibbard, Allan, and Railton, Peter. "Toward Fin de siècle Ethics: Some Trends." *The Philosophical Review* 101, no. 1 (1992): 115-189. (A classic overview of the landscape)
 - Finlay, Stephen. "Metaethics: An Overview." *Philosophy Compass* 2, no. 3 (2007): 365-381.
 - Joyce, Richard. *The Myth of Morality*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. (Provides a clear articulation of error theory)
 - Miller, Alexander. *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*. 3rd ed. Polity Press, 2021. (Chapters 1 and 2 offer a good foundational overview)
 - Ridge, Michael. "Metaethics." In *The Routledge Companion to Ethics*, edited by John Skorupski. Routledge, 2010. (A comprehensive survey)
 - Sayre, Justin. "Metaethics." In *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, edited by David Copp. Oxford University Press, 2006. (Another excellent foundational piece)
 - Street, Sharon. "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value." *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (2006): 109-166. (Introduces the evolutionary debunking challenge)

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