

The Role of Rationality in Metaethics

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Abstract: The article explores the role of rationality in metaethics, focusing on how reason shapes moral judgments, ethical language, and normative justification. It examines various philosophical perspectives on the relationship between rational thought and moral values, highlighting the debates between cognitivist and non-cognitivist approaches. The study emphasizes that rationality serves as a crucial tool for analyzing moral concepts, resolving ethical dilemmas, and evaluating the consistency of moral beliefs. By situating rationality at the core of metaethical inquiry, the article underscores its significance in understanding the foundations of moral discourse and decision-making

Keywords: Metaethics, Rationality, Moral Reasoning, Ethical Language, Normative Ethics, Moral Judgment, Cognitivism, Non-Cognitivism, Moral Philosophy, Justification

Introduction

As is well known from the history of philosophy, the primary functions of the ethics of science are directed toward ensuring the well-being of humanity and its future, maintaining peace and stability on Earth, and preserving the balance between nature and society. Scholars emphasize that modern science and technological development still possess powerful, yet untapped, potential. In addition to the rational use of these opportunities, it is crucial to recognize that there are still people around the world living in extreme hardship—those who suffer from hunger, disease, and poverty. They, too, have the right to share in the blessings of life. This understanding requires that the capabilities of science be directed toward improving their quality of life as well.

In this article, we attempt to explore how metaethics within the ethics of science can rationally address and shed light on social problems and their potential solutions. In doing so, we analyze existing philosophical perspectives and focus attention on certain pressing social issues.

In science, metaethics is studied as a field that investigates the foundations of normative ethics. Contemporary analytic ethics is based on the examination of various aspects of moral language and, as a practical endeavor, is capable of addressing a range of urgent issues in moral and everyday life. Arguably, normative ethics appears to have given

way to metaethics, which seeks to explain the criteria and possibilities for correct, evidence-based moral reasoning, and to develop a model or “reference framework” for moral values.

Metaethics primarily aims to determine the meanings and logical relations of moral terms, as well as the epistemological status of moral and other types of judgments and statements. However, the human need for normative principles and moral beliefs that enable them to understand themselves as rational and volitional beings has not lost its relevance.

Methodology

Metaethical research, on the one hand, aims to develop a certain “ideal” model of ethics by identifying the criteria and possibilities for correct and justified moral reasoning. On the other hand, it critically analyzes existing ethical systems, including specific doctrines, concepts, and arguments.

Metaethics can be regarded as a secondary branch of philosophical inquiry. It follows normative ethics—or simply ethics—which deals with primary questions concerning good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice. The main goal of normative ethics is to construct a normative theory that explains concepts such as goodness and moral correctness. Metaethics, by contrast, operates at a higher level, investigating the semantic, metaphysical, epistemological, and other foundational issues that arise in the process of developing normative ethical theories.

Metaethics emerged as an independent field in the early 20th century, with the views of British philosopher George Edward Moore playing a pivotal role in its formation. His work *Principia Ethica* is considered the first fundamental study in the field of metaethics. In this book, Moore analyzes the nature and foundations of moral concepts. He particularly emphasizes that the concept of “good” is simple and indefinable—it cannot be reduced to or explained by other concepts. Moore argues that attempting to define “good” in terms of natural or psychological concepts constitutes a “naturalistic fallacy.” Therefore, *Principia Ethica* is regarded as the starting point of metaethical inquiry and is distinguished from normative ethics by its focus on the semantic, logical, and epistemological foundations of moral concepts.

The appropriateness of distinguishing between metaethics and normative ethics became a central subject of debate with the emergence of emotivism, proposed by A.J. Ayer and C.L. Stevenson, which stood in contrast to G.E. Moore’s intuitionism. Moore insisted that moral concepts could not be fundamentally reduced to non-moral terms such as utility or expediency. In contrast, emotivism claimed that in the absence of context, all moral judgments are essentially meaningless and merely express emotional attitudes.

According to emotivism, all value judgments—including moral decisions, preferences, and attitudes—are expressions of feelings rather than statements that can be objectively verified. This led to the realization that the boundary between analytic metaethical statements and the synthetic judgments of normative ethics is highly relative. As a result, contemporary philosophy has moved away from sharply opposing value-neutral metaethics to normative ethics. Instead, a growing tendency has emerged to explore

the possibility of mutually acceptable answers to fundamental moral questions regarding the nature of normativity, seeking to bridge the gap between the two domains.

The British philosopher R.M. Hare undertook the defense of prescriptivism, a non-cognitivist approach that affirms the prescriptive nature of moral judgments rather than their truth-value as cognitive judgments that can be examined and verified within the framework of metaethics. According to Hare, since moral judgments are not verifiable, the only requirement they must meet is logical consistency.

From this perspective, all moral judgments must be universalizable and should be free from direct reference to specific actions, events, authors' positions, or subjective perceptions. Hare referred to these new universal moral categories as "global terms", emphasizing that they serve as a foundation for moral choice.

At the same time, prescriptivity and universality can become effective criteria for determining what constitutes moral good and moral evil, much like Kant's categorical imperative. However, such standards must be supported by a theory grounded in correct rational principles. From the semantics of the key terms of such a moral theory, it is possible to derive a schematic and neutral concept of impartiality. This concept equally corresponds to the ideal observer in utilitarianism and the ideal contractor in contractarian conceptions of morality.

Raising the question of the influence of Kantian deontology on metaethical concepts developed by analytical philosophers is useful when seeking to clarify the foundations of normativity. On the one hand, if we recall early metaethicists such as A.J. Ayer and G.E. Moore—both of whom sharply criticized Kantian epistemology—as well as representatives of deontological intuitionism like W.D. Ross and H.A. Prichard, the influence of Kant's ideas might seem marginal. These thinkers tended to treat moral rules independently of Kantian categories, and the thematic focus of their work was shaped more by epistemological concerns, including the authors' moral attitudes and preferences, rather than by direct engagement with Kantian moral philosophy.

On the other hand, Kant's definitions of morality and key moral categories have served as foundational points of reference in many modern ethical debates. In the late 19th century, for instance, Henry Sidgwick directly engaged with Kantian ethics in his efforts to defend an intellectualist version of intuitionism, characterized by a principled opposition to consequentialism. While proposing a version of moral rationalism, Sidgwick formulated several principles of practical rationality. These included the principle of conformity of moral judgments to standards of clarity and precision, and what he identified as key rational principles such as justice, rational prudence, and rational benevolence.

Henry Sidgwick, who identified himself as a utilitarian, asserted that at the foundation of any coherent moral system lies the obligation of duty, happiness, and goodness, and he emphasized their recognition as intuitive. He argued that the direct, intuitive perception of moral truths through moral sense is essential for ensuring both their universal character and the moral autonomy of individuals in making life decisions. As R. Price stated, "...even the most depraved are never so far gone as to lose all sense of moral distinctions, all notions of justice and injustice, honor and disgrace." Sidgwick's theory

differs significantly from traditional approaches in its structure and philosophical commitments.

Result and Discussion

In the 20th century, G.E. Moore reaffirmed the logical independence of the intuitive content of moral ideals and clarified key moral standards, especially those relating to virtue and moral perfection. Moore demonstrated not only a strong interest in moral philosophy but also in epistemology. Thanks to Moore, it became possible to study metaethical problems independently of the challenges posed by normative ethics. His intuitive conception of the essence of “goodness,” and his insistence that it could not be reduced to any specific moral norm, reflect a core ambiguity in his theory.

At the beginning of the 21st century, new works in metaethics emerged by philosophers such as Jonathan Dancy and John McDowell, marking a continued development and reinterpretation of these foundational themes.

Sidgwick defined intuitionism as a doctrine holding that “the ultimate aim of moral actions lies in adherence to certain rules or unconditionally defined principles of duty.” Twentieth-century intuitionist scholars such as W.D. Prichard and David Ross did not radicalize the notion of duty’s unconditional nature or the assessment of multiple moral obligations. According to them, intuitive capacity is a universal human trait and serves as the foundation for moral judgment. Recognizing what one ought to do morally does not necessarily imply that the action is good in itself. In this regard, the rightness of an action is understood directly, in contrast to goodness, and is generally sufficient as a justification for performing a given act. Therefore, the demand to prove or justify the meaning of a specific duty is considered unnecessary. Prichard thus criticizes Moore for attempting to create a new “science of morality,” arguing that the rightness of an act stems from a pre-existing concept of goodness.

From the perspective of scientific ethics, metaethics does not function as an arbiter in moral disputes nor does it shape positions on values. Instead, it serves a regulatory and systematizing function by introducing logical consistency into ethical debates. Moreover, it helps eliminate unnecessary complexity in addressing ethical issues.

According to Richard Garner and Bernard Rosen, there are three main problems in metaethics:

- What is the meaning of moral concepts and judgments?
- What is the nature of moral judgments?
- How can moral judgments be justified?

An example of the first type of question would be: What do concepts like “good,” “bad,” “right,” and “wrong” actually mean?

The second category of questions involves issues such as whether moral judgments are universal or relative, or whether they are precise or ambiguous.

The third category of questions includes issues such as: How do we know what is good and bad? or Is it even possible to know such things at all?

According to Garner and Rosen, these three types of questions are interrelated, and an answer to one often necessitates taking a definite position on the others as well.

From a semantic perspective, metaethical theories are typically divided into cognitivism and non-cognitivism:

Cognitivism holds that moral judgments have descriptive content and can be true or false. In other words, such judgments describe moral facts and express the speaker's beliefs about them.

Non-cognitivism, on the other hand, argues that moral judgments are not descriptive and therefore cannot be true or false. Instead, these judgments express the speaker's emotional states, acceptance of a normative system, plans, or attitudes. That is, while cognitivists treat moral statements as claims to knowledge and truth, non-cognitivists view them as expressions of personal feelings and attitudes.

Conclusion

From a metaphysical perspective, metaethical theories are divided into realism and anti-realism.

Realism acknowledges the existence of moral properties, facts, and states. It views moral values and principles as objective realities that exist independently of our beliefs or attitudes.

Anti-realism, on the other hand, denies the existence of such moral truths. All non-cognitivist theories fall under this category, including:

- Prescriptivism — which claims that moral judgments are merely commands or recommendations.
- Emotivism — which asserts that moral statements are expressions of emotions.
- Quasi-realism — which argues that although moral statements appear objective, they are in fact based on personal attitudes and emotions.
- Norm-expressivism — which emphasizes that moral judgments simply express social norms accepted by a community.
- Plan-expressivism — which interprets moral statements as expressions of personal plans and intentions.

Among the anti-realist cognitivist theories, error theory stands out. According to this view, all moral claims are false. While error theorists accept that moral claims purport to refer to objective moral truths, they maintain that such truths do not actually exist.

Realist theories differ based on how they characterize moral facts:

- Moral non-naturalism holds that moral facts are non-natural. That is, they possess unique normative properties that cannot be explained by natural sciences such as psychology, biology, or chemistry. Moral truths are irreducible to natural facts and have an independent ontological status. Moral naturalism considers moral facts to be connected with natural facts. It can be subdivided into:
 - Reductive naturalism, which reduces moral facts to psychological, biological, or other natural facts;

- Non-reductive naturalism, which holds that moral facts are natural but cannot be fully reduced to other natural facts.

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