

Edited by  
Andrew Fisher and Simon Kirchin



# Arguing About **Metaethics**

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*Edited by  
Andrew Fisher and Simon Kirchin*

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# ARGUING ABOUT METAETHICS

'In recent years, metaethics has been one of the most exciting growth areas in philosophy. This volume contains the most comprehensive and up-to-date set of readings currently available, and will be valued by advanced undergraduates, postgraduates, and professionals with interests in recent and contemporary metaethics.'

Alex Miller, *University of Birmingham*

*Arguing about Metaethics* collects together some of the most exciting contemporary work in metaethics in one handy volume. In it, many of the most influential philosophers in the field discuss key questions in metaethics:

- Do moral properties exist?
- If they do, how do they fit into the world as science conceives it?
- If they don't exist, then how should we understand moral thought and language?
- What is the relation between moral judgement and motivation?

As well as these questions, this volume discusses a wide range of issues including moral objectivity, truth and moral judgements, moral psychology, thick evaluative concepts and moral relativism.

The editors provide lucid introductions to each of the eleven themed sections in which they show how the debate lies and outline the arguments of the papers. *Arguing about Metaethics* is an ideal resource text for students at upper undergraduate or postgraduate level.

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### STARTING THOUGHTS

#### 1

Imagine we are debating whether it is right to torture people who are suspected of being terrorists. And, moreover, these people are suspected of hiding a bomb that is soon to detonate. As we are debating we might raise a number of considerations such as ‘torture is always wrong, no matter what the consequences’, ‘we have a duty to protect innocent people in our society’ and ‘the possible consequences of inaction here outweigh any pain caused to the suspects’. As the conversation develops (the bomb has a long fuse), perhaps our various views crystallize, with some people being in favour, and some not, of torturing the terrorists. At this stage, other types of question might be raised and points made. We might wonder – given the polarized views – whether there is a fact of the matter about whether the torture is right or wrong. After all, why assume that someone has to be right and someone has to be wrong?

After reflecting we might form an opposite view. Torture – along with female genital mutilation, chemical dumping, genocide and the like – are such important moral matters that we cannot say that someone or some state is justified in carrying out such things just because they feel like it and they think they are justified. We might come to believe that there are moral standards that apply to everyone irrespective of what they feel like doing; there is a difference between what seems right (or wrong) to people and what is, in fact, right (or wrong). Even if we disagree about whether the torture is right or wrong, we think that there is a correct answer to the question. What we are doing when we debate such moral questions is trying to find this answer, an answer that does not depend simply on our opinions and reasoning about the issue. We are helping each other develop the correct perspective on the issue. From this we might generalize and conclude that there are correct and incorrect answers to many, if not all, moral

questions, from the significant, such as torture, to the relatively trivial, such as whether you should keep an appointment with a friend or whether you should recycle that drinks can you've just finished.

These latter questions and points serve to introduce much of the area of philosophy known as *metaethics*. Metaethics is not concerned with which actions are right or wrong, or good or bad, nor is it concerned with which type of feature – consequences, say – we should concentrate on when trying to justify our actions. Rather it is concerned with whether actions, institutions, people, situations and many more things are right and wrong, good and bad, in the first place. The world is full of many things, from trees and tables, to colours and sounds, corporations and states, electrons and elephants. One of the key questions of metaethics is whether it makes sense to add moral values to this list. Just as we might think of an action, such as a stabbing, as having the properties of being swift and being surprising, we might ask whether it has any moral properties such as wrongness or cruelty. Relatedly, just as we might say that there is something about the world that makes it true, and not just a matter of personal opinion, that someone's hair is brown (namely, her brown hair), we might say that there is something about the world that makes it true that someone is wicked (namely, the wickedness of her character).

## 2

This central question is a question of metaphysics as it concerns whether something exists. This gives metaethics its name: we are concerned with the metaphysics of moral reality. From this central question arise a number of other questions that interest metaethicists. Many of these questions are metaphysical in nature also, but we shall see that issues in the philosophy of language and in moral psychology are key ingredients in current metaethics as well. In this introduction we will lay out a few of these questions. §§ 3–10 describe many of the main positions and ideas you will encounter in this book. In § 11 we list a few questions it will be useful to bear in mind as you read through the book and how you should approach metaethics. We end in § 12 with some general metaethical reading and some final advice.

## SOME QUESTIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

### 3

We have had one central metaethical question, *Do moral properties exist?* Let us imagine we answer 'yes'. If we do so, then in some sense of the phrase we will be *moral*

*realists*. ‘Realism’ is often associated with two further terms that you will encounter, namely ‘cognitivism’ and ‘descriptivism’. The former identifies a claim about the sort of mental state that a typical moral judgement is used to express. When I say, “John is kind”, supposedly my words express a belief, a state that is a way of saying, “*This* is what the world is like”. As such, we assume that I am trying to cognize or know what the world is like. It is clear what the relationship between realism and cognitivism is. If one assumes that there really are moral properties, then it is natural to think that beings such as ourselves have the ability to make knowledge claims about them, even if we might, at times, get things wrong. As we shall see throughout this collection, ‘realism’ and ‘cognitivism’ are sometimes used interchangeably, although strictly they express different ideas. ‘Descriptivism’ expresses a claim about the language that is typically used when people give moral judgements or, more accurately, is a philosophical claim about how moral language should best be understood, presumably based on much of our experience when we hear people making judgements. The claim is that just as moral judgements should best be understood as expressions of belief, so moral language should best be understood as an attempt to describe something about the world. When I say “John is kind” I am attempting to say something about what John is like. And in attempting this, I can, of course, speak correctly or incorrectly. My language reflects or expresses a supposed belief I have, that John is kind, and whether I speak truly or not depends on whether, in fact, John is kind.

This realism–cognitivism–descriptivism triumvirate is a classic position in metaethics, but as yet we have only scratched the surface. We have yet to appreciate how the different parts contrast with other philosophical claims and, thus, we have yet to appreciate what it is to be, say, a descriptivist. To begin with, however, let us focus our attention on realism, for that term is used in many complicated ways in metaethics and understanding it will help us a lot.

## 4

How might someone support the claim that moral properties exist? How might they support moral realism? Someone might begin by pointing to our normal everyday language and practices and claim that they reflect the idea that such properties exist. Just as we might say, “That person’s hair is brown”, we might say, “That person is wicked”. We seem to be doing the same thing in both cases, namely ascribing properties to things. We ascribe properties with our language, and this includes moral language. As such, it makes sense to think that, in some fashion, moral properties exist. If we do not, then we are going to have to revise radically our understanding of moral language, and the arguments for this view will have to be very good. This train of thought might continue and people might emphasize some of the ideas from § 1 to show how integral

to our lives it is to assume that moral properties exist. We naturally think that one can go right and wrong in one's judgements and that actions can be more or less appropriate, say. We think that there is, for instance, such a thing as moral progress – a moving closer to the moral truth. If we do not assume this, there would be no point to moral debate, or at least the point of moral debate would be revealed as being something radically different from what we ordinarily take it to be. Instead of it being an attempt to get at the truth and convince others that you speak truthfully, it is simply an exchange of people's personal opinions about the issue, or some power game where you try by various means to convince the other person to feel how you do. Likewise, if we do not assume the existence of moral properties and the standards based on them, then the whole system of law would break down, or at least change radically. Instead of thinking of punishment as being a legitimate activity following someone's breaking some moral or social rule, the law – that is any system of law – would be revealed as simply a system whereby people are punished *only because* they act differently from how the people in power (perhaps on a whim) want them to act. Normally we would think of such legal systems as being corrupt and the very opposite of just, but such moral claims could not be made about them if we do not assume the existence of moral properties and standards.

Notice that something important has emerged in this train of thought. Not only have we uncovered some starting reasons why moral properties might be thought to exist – why we should be moral realists – it seems that if they exist they better exist independently of any individual judge or group of judges or, indeed, anyone. After all, what seems important is that when moral properties generate moral standards, norms and rules, such resulting things are the arbiters of how people should act and think. It is no good basing such arbiters simply on what any and every individual thinks, for then the purpose of them being arbiters of correctness and incorrectness is lost and we return to a situation where 'anything goes'. It makes, in fact, little sense calling them arbiters at all. We will return to this idea in § 7.

Suffice it to say, this train of thought, or something like it, stands as the best positive argument in favour of thinking that moral properties exist. Any further thoughts in support tend to be directed against arguments and ideas provided by those who think differently.

## 5

However, being a moral realist invites further questions; for example, we might ask *What is the relationship between moral properties and nonmoral properties?* We deliberately word this question vaguely because it invites so many different answers and approaches. The general idea is this. We can talk of actions, and people, and other such

things as being kind and cruel. But actions, say, have other features. They can be swift, and frequent, and pleasurable, and performed on a Tuesday. Supposedly, we can describe the world and all that it contains in nonmoral language. Indeed, not only can we describe the world and our actions using everyday nonmoral terms, we can also describe the world using more technical language, such as the language used by the natural and physical sciences. When we start to think like this, we might wonder what the relationship is between someone having an electro-chemical reaction in their brain that caused their limbs to move in such-and-such a manner at such-and-such a time, and the fact that we describe the resulting action as kind. (And we might wonder whether nonmoral features, such as swiftness, are reducible to properties studied by physics and biology.) Might it be that kindness is to be identified with, or reduced to, or constituted by, a nonmoral property or set of such properties? Or is the supposed property indicated by the term 'kindness' irreducible in this fashion? Of course, no one argues that this proposed sort of recharacterization is possible now. The supposition is only that it is possible in principle. Notice that even if one wishes to recharacterize the moral world in this fashion, some people might still count this as a realist and cognitivist position. There really are moral properties and there really are things in virtue of which "John is kind" turns out to be true. It is just that moral properties are not quite what we expected them to be. They are just nonmoral or natural properties. (However, some people feel uneasy with calling the resulting position moral realism precisely because this recharacterization requires such a radical change in our thought.)

What these initial thoughts give us is a way of introducing two broad families of realist position that go by the names *naturalism* and *nonnaturalism*. (We will assume, for argument's sake, that both sides can claim the label 'realism' and, although we have distinguished the nonmoral from the more narrow natural above, more often than not 'natural' is used as a synonym for all types of nonmoral feature and we use it in this way from now on.) Unfortunately, simply calling yourself a naturalist or a nonnaturalist is not enough to identify your position exactly. To explain, consider two possible positions on the extremes. The first is clearly nonnaturalist. The claim is that moral properties exist and are in no way, even in any individual situation, reducible to, or identifiable with, or constituted by any sort of natural property or set of such properties, such as swiftness or physical properties. Thus, goodness, say, is considered to be a metaphysically *sui generis* property. (This Latin phrase means 'of its own kind'.) The second position is clearly naturalist. The idea is simply that moral properties, either now or in the future, can be identified with a natural property or set of such properties. This reductionism might license our continued use of moral terminology, but this is only for convenience's sake. (Within this reductionist camp, there might be a further splintering of positions. One group might seek to say that whatever natural property goodness is, it is so for all groups and societies. Other reductionists might say that what we can do is identify the role or function that the term 'good' plays in moral thought



generally and then allow that it is possible that different societies and groups could identify different specific natural properties that play the goodness role or function. Indeed, one could be a 'functionalist' in this sort of way and leave it open as to whether the thing that plays the goodness role has to be a natural property. It could be a religious or magical property such as 'Is commanded by God' or 'Is the work of Merlin'.)

Having got our two extreme positions, characterizing the middle ground is tricky. Consider the following possible position. One assumes that for any particular example of kindness there is some natural property or set of properties that one can isolate and identify as constituting the kindness. Perhaps the kindness simply is the sharing of sweets by an agent when she sees that someone is upset, or perhaps (to give an extreme example) the kindness is some complex physical state relating to atoms moving in various ways. But, the key idea is that across all situations and actions that are deemed kind there is no one natural thing, or even set of such things, that all of the kind things have in common. Kindness is multiply realizable, so much so that there is an infinite number of ways in which an action can have natural features that constitute its being kind. In other words, kindness is irreducibly complex. Notice that this is consistent with moral supervenience. Moral supervenience is roughly the claim that if something is a natural way, then it must be a moral way (one could not imagine that two actions could be naturally identical and not morally identical). It is clear we have consistency here since moral supervenience allows that two or more things could be morally identical (all are kind, say) without being naturally identical, that is they could be kind but for different reasons. Notice also that this middle position is different from the nonnaturalism described above, for this extreme position denies moral supervenience or any other such relation that ties the existence of moral properties into the existence of natural properties. Now, this middle position in its various guises is quite popular in metaethics. What is troublesome for the newcomer to the field is that some people call this general position 'naturalism' and some call it 'nonnaturalism'. And more troublesome is that there appears to be justification for both labels. After all, we are not assuming that moral properties are free-floating properties that exist independently of the natural world, hence why many people are concerned to make sure that such a position is consistent with supervenience. But it is also nonnaturalistic, since the idea is that the moral is *sui generis* in some respect, since it cannot be identified with one single natural property, nor even with a set of such properties. There is a particular way of conceptualizing the world that is of its own kind, and cannot be captured in a natural fashion. Is there any way of distinguishing further positions that are committed to irreducibility such that we can apply the labels 'naturalism' and 'nonnaturalism' sensibly? Rather than talk of possible positions, it is clear that writers who favour this sort of middle position have great differences of emphasis. Some theorists more than others might be impressed by what modern natural science, say, can do and might favour the label 'naturalism' because of this. Others who favour the label 'nonnaturalism'