

Moral Realism

What you need to know:

The origins of moral principles: reason, emotion/attitudes, or society.

The distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism about ethical language.

Moral realism

There are mind-independent moral properties/facts.

Moral naturalism (cognitivist) - including naturalist forms of utilitarianism (including Bentham) and of virtue ethics.

Moral non-naturalism (cognitivist) - including intuitionism and Moore's 'open question argument' against all reductive metaethical theories and the Naturalistic Fallacy.

Issues that may arise for the theories above, including:

Hume's Fork and A J Ayer's verification principle

Hume's argument that moral judgements are not beliefs since beliefs alone could not motivate us

Hume's is-ought gap

John Mackie's argument from relativity and his arguments from queerness.

Possible Exam Questions

Explain some explanations for the origins of moral principles. (5 marks)

What is the difference between moral realism and moral anti-realism? (3 marks)

What is the difference between moral cognitivism and moral non-cognitivism? (3 marks)

Explain how utilitarianism is a moral naturalist theory. (5 marks)

Explain how virtue ethics is a moral naturalist theory. (5 marks)

Outline intuitionism. (5 marks)

Explain moral naturalism and Moore's criticism of it. (12 marks)

Explain Moore's 'open question' argument. (5 marks)

What did Moore mean by a 'naturalistic fallacy'? (3 marks)

Key terms

Moral Realist: There are mind-independent moral properties/facts.

Moral anti-realist: There are no mind-independent moral properties/facts.

Moral cognitivism: Ethical language is composed of propositions which have a truth value

Moral non-cognitivism: Ethical language does not have a truth value

Moral naturalism: Moral properties/facts are natural properties of the world.

Moral naturalism (cognitivist)

Naturalism is a type of moral realism that argues that moral properties/facts are natural properties in the world. It leads to a cognitivist view of moral language since our ethical judgements are true or false insofar as they correctly (or incorrectly) refer to those natural properties in the world.

Utilitarianism: (Bentham): Utilitarianism defines good in terms of a natural property: pleasure.

Virtue Ethics: Aristotle does not reduce moral terms to naturalistic properties, but it is based on natural facts.

- 'the Good' is the thing humans most value, and we can empirically determine this by looking at what people strive for (i.e. they strive for eudaimonia). It is a natural fact about human behaviour.
- 'the Good' can be determined by the kind of thing we are. He argues that to live a good life as a human means fulfilling your function as a human (reason). Our function is a natural fact about us.

John Mackie's argument from relativity

P1: There are differences in moral codes from society to society

P2: Accompanying these radical differences are disagreements between people about moral codes

P3 Moral disagreements may occur because:

There is an objective truth about the matter, but people's perceptions of it are distorted

There is no objective truth about the matter

C: the best explanation of moral disagreements is that there are no objective moral values.

Moral Realism

The Naturalistic Fallacy

- Good is indefinable (it is simple and unanalysable)
- Moral naturalists attempt to define good in natural terms
- Naturalism is guilty of the naturalistic fallacy

Intuitionism

Moore maintains the 'autonomy of ethics' (i.e. ethical judgements are unique and cannot be analysed in non-moral or natural terms). In his view:

- Good is indefinable
- There are objective moral truths
- We know these moral truths by intuition (This faculty is appealing to unique, non-natural properties)

