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.

<u>Virtue Ethics:</u> 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

Moore's 'open question argument'

Moore's "open question argument" attempts to prove that moral properties cannot be reduced to any non-moral properties, that they are their own unique sort of properties. Moore's distinguishes between an open question and a closed question: a closed question is a question whose answer is decided by the meanings of the concepts involved in the question whereas an open question is a question whose answer cannot be decided in this way.

P1: Naturalists claim 'good' = N (a natural property e.g. pleasure)

P2: Naturalists claims that if X is N then X is good

P3: To ask, is X really good should be a meaningless question

P4: However, to ask, is X really good is NOT a meaningless question. It is an open question.

C1: X cannot be the same as Good

C2: Good cannot be the same as N and moral naturalism is false

Hume's Fork and moral realism

P1: Moral realists are cognitivists who believe moral judgement can be true or false.

P2: There are two types of knowledge: relation of ideas and matters of fact.

P3: Moral judgements are not a relation of ideas because they are not tautologies

P4: Moral judgements are not matters of fact because there is no way to verify the truth of moral judgements

C: Cognitivists are wrong to claim moral judgements can be true nor false



Moral judgements are not beliefs since beliefs alone could not motivate us (Hume)

P1: Moral judgements, such as 'it is good to help other people', motivate us to act

P2: Beliefs and reason can never motivate us to act

C1: Moral judgements cannot be beliefs

C2: Moral judgements cannot be true or false as they are not beliefs (so cognitivism is wrong)

C3: Moral judgements (like desires) have their source inside us. They do not represent something independent of us (so moral realism is incorrect)

Hume's is-ought gap

P1: Judgements of reason describe what is the case

P2: Judgements of value describe what ought to be the case

P3: Judgement of reason and judgements of value are entirely different from each other - there is a gap between 'is' and 'ought'

C: You cannot draw conclusions about value ('ought') based on premises about reason ('is') - you cannot derive an 'ought' from an 'is'.

This presents a problem for realism, as if moral judgements are mind-independent I should be able to infer them from descriptive statements. As I cannot do this, moral realism is false.

A J Ayer's verification principle

A statement is meaningful (factually significant/truth-apt) if and only if either:

· it is an analytic statement (tautology) or,

• it can be empirically verified (it is factually meaningful) either in the sense that...

its truth could be conclusively empirically verified in practice (strong version) its probable truth could be empirically verified in principle (weak version)

All moral judgements fail this criteria. Therefore, moral judgements are meaningless.

John Mackie's argument from queerness.

Accepting moral realism, involves too many strange implications

Realists have a strange ontology: moral facts or moral properties exist (somewhere)

Realists have a strange epistemology: We can detect these facts/properties

Moral values are strange: They make us act in certain ways. Other properties don't do this!

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, nonnatural properties)



