

# Moral Anti-Realism

## What you need to know:

There are no mind-independent moral properties/facts.

Error Theory (cognitivist) - Mackie

Emotivism (non-cognitivist) - Ayer

Prescriptivism (non-cognitivist) - Richard Hare

Issues that may arise for the theories above, including:

whether anti-realism can account for how we use moral language,

including moral reasoning, persuading, disagreeing etc.

the problem of accounting for moral progress

whether anti-realism becomes moral nihilism.

## Mackie's Error Theory (cognitivist)

### Mackie's ontological claim

Something is objective if one of these is true:

- Its either true or false
- Its about the world 'out there'
- It describes something that is mind independent

Moral judgements do not fulfil these criteria, so they are not objective

### Mackie's semantic claim

Mackie believes we have made an error:

It is not a linguistic error - we are not misusing language

It is an error that occurs from internalising cultural values as if they are out there in the world.

We are brought up to believe that moral rules are objective. In fact, for the rules to have any authority we have to believe that they are absolute and objective

So, moral values are subjective (anti-realist), but when we use language about morality we are making a truth claim - claiming to be objective (cognitivist)

## Key terms

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

**Moral nihilism:** to reject morality and its values

## Possible Exam Questions

Outline error theory. (5 marks)

Outline emotivism. (5 marks)

Outline prescriptivism. (5 marks)

What is moral anti-realism? (3 marks)

Explain the criticism that moral anti-realism cannot take account of how we use moral language. (5 marks)

Explain the criticism that moral anti-realism cannot account for moral progress. (5 marks)

Explain the criticism that moral anti-realism leads to moral nihilism. (5 marks)

# Moral anti-realism

## Emotivism (non-cognitivist) - Ayer

Moral terms are expressions of emotions, like saying 'boo' (at things we do not like) and 'hooray' (at things we do like)

Emotivists regard moral judgements as expressive rather than descriptive. These judgements do not point us to facts, but they influence our behaviour by conveying strong feelings of approval or disapproval.

## Prescriptivism (non-cognitivist) - Richard Hare

Hare thinks Moore's open question argument is correct in demonstrating that moral terms like 'good' cannot be defined in naturalistic terms. However, he disagrees with Moore in concluding that, therefore, moral terms describe a non-natural, moral property.

Hare argues that moral judgements:

- are not propositions (making claims about the world) but prescriptions, so terms like 'good' or 'right' are used to recommend and guide action.
- Contain prescriptions that are universalisable
- Are rational, in that:
  - We can ask and answer questions about moral conduct
  - We can look for facts that support our moral judgements
  - We can aim for consistency in our moral judgements
  - We can highlight logical contradictions in the moral judgements of others.

## Issues with moral anti-realism

Issue 1: whether anti-realism can account for how we use moral language, including moral reasoning, persuading, disagreeing etc.

We use moral language every day - it plays a critical role in our personal relationships, communities, education system etc. Its uses include moral reasoning and decision making; commanding, telling and guiding; disagreeing and arguing; persuading and influencing action.

A moral realist and cognitivist can account for these uses because there are moral facts about which they are disagreeing, reasoning etc. But anti-realists who are non-cognitivists struggle to account for these uses

Emotivism can only account for how moral judgements are used in persuading  
It cannot account for moral judgements in commanding and guiding, disagreeing and agreeing

Prescriptivism: Warnock points out that morality is not always concerned with prescribing - it is also about advising, confessing, resolving

Issue 2: Problem of accounting for moral progress

An anti-realist cannot say there has been moral progress because there is no objective standard we can use to assess whether or not our moral code is an improvement

Issue 3: Does anti-realism become moral nihilism?

It could lead to moral nihilism in this way:

P1: There are no objective, mind-independent moral facts or properties (moral anti-realism)

P2: If there are no objective moral facts then there is nothing that is morally wrong

C: If there is nothing that is morally wrong then we can do anything we like (moral nihilism)