**Meta-Ethics**

**Section 1 – Background to Meta-Ethics**

**Definition of Meta-Ethics**

* **Basic Definition:** Meta-Ethics seeks to understand the meaning of ethical terms like ‘good’, ‘bad’, ’right’ or ‘wrong’ e.g. when a moral agent states: “Forgiveness is Good” – what does the moral agent mean by the word ‘good**’.**

**The difference between Meta Ethics & Normative Ethics**

### **Meta-Ethics** – Is the study of ethical language e.g. what does the word ‘good’ actually mean.

* **Normative Ethics –** Is the term used to describe different moral codes of behaviour e.g. the principles we might put into action, the rules by which we might live, the criteria we might use when making a moral judgement etc. Natural Law, Situation Ethics, Utilitarianism, etc. are also examples of normative theories of ethics.
* **The Difference** - In a nutshell the difference between the two ethics is that **Normative Ethics** guides us in how to be good or bad but **Meta-Ethics** tell us what good and bad actually mean.

**Key Words in Meta-Ethics**

* The two main positions in Meta ethics are the cognitivists and the non-cognitivists. It is important to understand these two terms before we study meta-ethics:

**Cognitivism:**

* Cognitivists believe that moral agents can have moral knowledge i.e. ethical statements are about facts and therefore, moral statements can be proved true of false.
* Or put another way cognitivism is the view that ethical sentences express propositions (a proposition is a meaningful declarative statement). Therefore, cognitivists believe ethical language is an objective view of ethics, which are verifiable through considering the evidence.
* Therefore, cognitivists believe that it is possible to define and verify ethical terms like ‘good.’
* You will consider two cognitive approaches: **Naturalism** and **Intuitionism** (a.k.a. Ethical Non-Naturalism)

**Non-cognitivism:**

* Non-cognitivism is the meta-ethical view that ethical statements do not assert propositions; that is to say, they do not express factual claims or beliefs i.e. they cannot be verified as true nor false. Therefore, be impossible for a non-cognitivist to define moral terms. Ethical statements are merely expressions of one’s opinions or preferences
* Therefore, ethical language is not the subject of cognition and thus it is not possible to verify an ethical statement using facts.
* Moreover, ethical statements are not propositional like non-ethical statements and therefore, it is not possible to define good
* You will consider one non-cognitive approach: **Emotivism** a.k.a. Ethical Non-Cognitivism (though there is a second non-cognitive theory called **Prescriptivism**)

**Section 2 - Meta-Ethical Cognitive approach 1: Naturalism**

**Overview of Naturalism**

**What Naturalism is not:**

* Naturalism teaches that there is nothing outside of this world, therefore, there is no supernatural authority on morality (e.g. God). The naturalist's view on ethics is that ultimately, goodness and right are natural properties and can be located in the natural world.

**Explanation of Naturalism:**

* Ethical Naturalists believe that ethical language like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are facts (cognitive).
* Therefore, according to an Ethical Naturalist a moral statement is as factual as a non-moral statement. Both these statements can be verified or falsified with reference to evidence.
* Therefore, ethical statements are objective because moral agents are relying on evidence to illustrate ethical language, not human opinion or preference.
* Moral statements are therefore also universal. This is because Ethical Naturalists believe that if two (or more) moral agents were to consider the evidence, objectively, on what makes something good or bad, they would both (all) come to the same conclusion

**Example of Naturalism:**

* For example, consider the two statements:
1. ‘Hitler committed suicide in 1945’
2. ‘Hitler was a bad person’
* The first statement is a non-moral factual (c**ognitivist)** statement because it is determined by evidence. However, Ethical Naturalists would also say that the second moral statement is also **cognitivist.** This is becausemoral agents **c**an look at the evidence to see if Hitler was cruel, deceitful etc. If he was we can conclude ‘Hitler was a bad person’ and thus this is also a cognitive statement.
* Therefore, Ethical Naturalists would argue when moral agents use ethical words like ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ they are only using them when they can back them up with empirical evidence (facts) i.e. when I state: ‘Hitler was a bad person’ - I mean ‘I can prove Hitler was a bad person’ (a propositional statement).
* Ethical Naturalists believe that above propositional statement (‘Hitler was a bad person’) is objective because it relies solely on evidence and not on a moral agent’s opinion and/or preference. Moreover, it will be a universal statement because every moral agent looking at the evidence objectively would conclude the same propositional statement ‘Hitler was a bad person’

**Additional principles of Naturalism:**

* Ethical Naturalists claim that just as statements can be proven with evidence, so same applies for false statements; e.g. ‘Hitler was a good person’ i.e. there is plenty of evidence to the contrary.
* For an Ethical Naturalist it is possible to go from what “is” to what “ought” to be e.g. evidence illustrates that sharing is good for society, therefore, people ought to share.
* Ethical terms can also be defined using non-ethical terms e.g. we might say something is right (moral term) if it makes the majority of people happy (non-moral term).

**The Contribution of F.H. Bradley to Naturalism**

* Bradley was initially interested in understanding the meaning of human existence. However, he rejected several existing understandings of the meaning of human existence; such as Jeremy Bentham’s ideas on hedonism and pleasure (see notes on Utilitarianism)
* Bradley eventually concluded the meaning of human existence was related to self-realisation within the community (the moral agent was a member of). As Bradley stated: **“yes, we have found ourselves, when we have found our station and its duties, our function as an organ of the social organism.”**
* He argued the way to realise our true-self (and thus the meaning of our existence) was through empirical observation. We had to observe our family and our community. We should then adopt the values of our community.
* This Bradley believed places the moral agent firmly in the concentrate scientific universe because everything we learn and then do is based on the empirical community/world around us.
* Finally, Bradley argues we should find our place in this empirical community/world, based on our observations. Once we find our role then it is our duty to perform this function with hard work and obedience.

**F.H. Bradley’s Naturalist Theory**

* The above theory by Bradley is a Naturalist theory because, firstly, it is based on objective empirical factual study (cognitive) not on opinion and/or preference.
* Bradley then adds that: **“To be a ‘good’ person, we must know our station and its duties, once your position in life is decided, you have to perform the function of that station.”**
* What Bradley is saying is that ethical terms like ‘good’ are cognitive i.e. Bradley would claim his statement above is propositional. This is because it is based purely on objective empirical factual study (cognitive) not opinion and/or preference.
* He further argued that all moral agents, faced with the same evidence, would conclude the same thing. Therefore, it is universal.

**Challenges to Naturalism**

We will consider three challenges to the meta-ethical theory of Naturalism:

1. **David Hume’s Law (the is-ought problem)**
* Hume criticised Naturalism by stating you cannot move from facts (what ‘is’) to making ethical statements (which are based on what people ‘ought’ to do). Hence this criticism is known as the ‘is-ought problem’
* For example, you cannot move from a factual/cognitive statement about the world like “John **is** dead because he was murdered” to an ought ethical statement such as “You ought not to murder people because it is bad.”
* This is because Hume believed there are only two types of factual (and thus meaningful) statements that exist:
* Synthetic Statement: A statement concerning factual experience
* Analytical Statement: A statement that is self-evident from the definition
* Moral “ought” statements fit neither of these types and are therefore moral statements cannot be based on fact (and therefore lack meaning). If Hume is right and moral statements cannot be based on facts, then Naturalism must be wrong
1. **George E. Moore’s (G.E. Moore's) Naturalistic Fallacy**
* In his 1903 book ‘Principia Ethica’ Moore argued that ethical terms like ‘good’ were indefinable.
* This is because ethical words are similar to colours i.e. yellow is indefinable; yellow is just yellow and is almost impossible to describe to someone who does not know the colour yellow. Moore argues the same applies to ethical terms like ‘good’.
* This is because ethical terms are, according to Moore, not complex. This means you cannot break them down further to express them empirically i.e. ‘Good’ is just ‘good’ as ‘yellow is just yellow’. Therefore, Moore argues that ethical terms are indefinable.
* Moore calls the claim by Ethical Naturalists, that moral term can be defined, the naturalistic fallacy (flawed, a false notion.) As Moore states: “If I am asked ‘what is good?’ my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter or if I am asked ‘how is good to be defined?’ My answer is that it cannot be defined and that is all I have to say about it”
* According to Moore we can only know ethical terms through intuition. However, that is the next meta-ethical topic, so I will not go through that here (see later notes)
1. **The Open Question Argument (moral facts cannot be reduced to natural properties).**
* **G.E.Moore** alsoargued ethical terms like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cannot be used as factual statements because you cannot define words like good and bad.
* This because any attempt to find a definition will reduce or limit the idea of goodness or badness e.g. if we say ‘bad’ means ‘cruel’ then we have limited the meaning of bad.
* This is because, as Moore points out, words like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are examples of open questions i.e. ethical words like ‘good’ are not closed questions that can be defined in a simple straight-forward way like ‘what is the colour of my bedroom wall?” Any attempt to do this with ethical terms would limit their meaning.
* Therefore, ethical terms cannot not be defined and therefore the Ethical Naturalism is wrong.

**Section 3 - Meta-Ethical Cognitive approach 2: Intuitionism**

**Overview of Intuitionism**

**Explanation of Intuitionism**

* Intuitionism is also known as ‘Ethical Non-Naturalism’.
* Intuitionists argues that moral agents use ethical terms, like ‘good’ and ‘bad’, as expressions of their ‘moral Intuition’.
* Intuitionists, such as G.E. Moore, argued that we all naturally possess a moral intuition (sometimes called a sixth sense) that recognises moral terms like ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Intuition, according to Moore, is an innate ability possessed by all moral agents. The process of intuition is often defined as ‘the act or faculty of knowing or sensing without the use of rational processes ..’you just know’.’
* Although moral agents cannot explain how they know something is good, human beings do still recognise goodness when they see it e.g. it is like seeing the colour yellow, we intuitively recognise it, but we cannot define it or falling in love; we know it but cannot define it.

**Example of Intuitionism**

* We can say “Mother Theresa is a good person” because it is self-evident, there is a unique and indefinable quality which she possesses which we are able to recognise through our intuition (sixth sense).

**Further explanation of Intuitionism**

* Therefore, ethical terms like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are only useful for expressing our Intuition about certain ethical situations they are not facts (empirical evidence) in the traditional sense.
* However, intuitionists like Moore, still believes that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ do express inner facts – they are not just opinions. Moore believed all moral agents have the same intuition (intuition is universal) and therefore all moral agents sense ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in the same way.
* Therefore, Moore still saw terms like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ as cognitivist. This is because they could still be used to convey facts about ethical terms like good and bad e.g. my intuition tells me Mother Theresa is a good person, therefore, everyone’s intuition must say the same. Therefore, it must be a fact that Mother Theresa is a good person.
* One outcome of the above is that morality, like with Naturalism, is objective. This is because intuitionism is based on moral agents innate, universal intuitionism. Therefore, ethical language is based on a universal concept and not opinion or preference (subjective).
* Moore argues that all moral agents possess the same intuition because it is an innate ability. However, he does concede that intuition needs a mature mind to recognise it correctly, all the time. Therefore, intuitionism is not always an infallible guide to ethical language.

**The Contribution of H.A. Prichard to Intuitionism**

* H.A. Prichard (1871-1947) built on Moore’s work on Intuitionism. Prichard agreed with Moore’s intuitionist principles that moral terms like ‘good’ were indefinable, yet recognisable through our intuition.
* However, Prichard’s focus was on the term ‘ought to do’. Like Moore’s Naturalistic Fallacy criticism of ethical terms, like ‘good’, Prichard also believed that ‘ought’ had no definition (again a little like colours, such as yellow). Therefore, moral agents cannot empirically study what they ‘ought’ to do.
* However, he observed that moral agents were able to recognise what we ‘ought to do’ in a certain moral situation. This Prichard believed was due to a moral agent’s innate intuition.
* Prichard argued that once our intuition indicted what action we ‘ought to do’ in a moral situation; then it became our duty (‘ought to do’ becomes ‘must do’) to carry out this action.
* This means that our sense of duty comes from our intuition about a particular moral action. Interestingly, Prichard was stating that our intuition was guiding us to follow a set of deontological actions, whereas Moore believed our intuition considered the impact of the consequences of our actions (teleological in nature).
* Prichard does have a place for reason in his meta-ethical theory. He distinguished between:
* General Thinking (Reasoning): moral agents use reason to assess the facts of a moral situation e.g. a woman is 12 weeks pregnant, when seeking an abortion.
* Moral Thinking (Intuition): based on an immediate intuition about the right action to do e.g. deciding whether the action of abortion is right in this situation.
* Finally, Prichard, like Moore before him, argued that moral intuition was an innate universal ability. However, he also recognised some people will have a clearer moral intuition than others as their ‘moral thinking’ has developed more. However, he does not clearly explain why or how we can develop moral thinking. Perhaps through education.

**The Challenges to Intuitionism**

**1. No proof of moral intuition exists;**

* Many philosophers don't think that there are such things as objective moral truths, moral statements are not factual statements about how the world is. Also we could never *know* the truth, even if it existed objectively, because knowledge requires testing in a properly scientific fashion, and that is not available for moral statements.
* Intuitionists fail to explain why intuition is universally applicable to ethics. It is argued that there is no intrinsic reason why human intuition should be taken as the basis of moral judgements. People have intuitions that it will rain tomorrow, but the forecast is not based on these intuitions. Many scholars argue that Moore never adequately explained why one particular and fallible human experience should form the sole basis of morality.
* Moreover, there could be explanations for so-called ‘Intuitionism’:
* A religious person could claim that moral intuition is, in fact, the voice of God guiding them.  For example, in Christianity, there is the belief that the Holy Spirit guides human moral choices.
* A Sociological perspective could be that moral intuition comes mainly through social conditioning.  This could present a variety of problems for Intuitionism.  For example, social conditions vary between cultures, therefore the moral intuition cannot be universal or innate (it is learnt as we grow within our community).  This does not make Intuitionism a reliable guide to moral language because all our intuition is, is a reflection of the morals of our community.

**2. Intuitive ‘truths’ can differ widely**

* Prichard accepted that people have different morals, and suggested this is because some people have developed moral thinking further than others, however, moral intuitions seems to come largely from social conditioning and cultures. It is hard to see how such intuitions can be a reliable guide to objective ethical truths.
* Bowie states in his book Ethical Studies "Intuitionists don't agree on the moral principles that they maintain are self-evident. Moore was essentially teleological  in his contention in that the good is whatever maximises happiness for most. Ross emphasised the important of duty, rejecting the teleological approach." Sidgwick said that if there was significant disagreement about the truth of some apparently self-evident moral proposition, then that casts doubt on whether that proposition really is self-evident
* If there are real objective moral truths, then they are presumably the same for everyone. Yet different people come to different conclusions faced with the same ethical problems. People clearly seem to have different levels of intuition as they disagree about moral behaviour – e.g. some think that speeding on the motorway is fine others do not.
* A recent academic study in the UK demonstrated that the legal belief in a jury having a broadly similar understanding of the moral concept of honesty might be far from true; among those questioned, less than half thought it dishonest for a carer to persuade an old person to change their will in the carer’s favour. Therefore, we may not have an innate moral sense.  This, ties in with point 3.
* A virtue ethicist would agree and say that what we consider to be right should be based on certain virtues that we have cultivated and not just 'intuition'.
* This is a major criticism of Intuitionism in that moral agents do not seem to recognise ‘goodness’ in the same way.  If the cognitive Intuitionism holds then all moral agents should morally judge the same ethical scenario in the same way.
* However, it is clearly evident they do not e.g. some moral agents would argue that the recent attempt by Catalonia to break away from the rest of Spain was ‘bad’ and that this what their intuition indicates.  However, other moral agents looking at the same events would argue that their intuition tells them that this was ‘good’.
* Therefore, Moore and Prichard are wrong to say we have the same intuitive ideas on good and bad.  It is clear that intuition is not universal. Of course, Moore and Prichard try to get around this by claiming that different people have different intuition abilities – some more developed than others.  However, this can seem like a ‘cop out’.

**3. No obvious way to resolve conflicting intuitions**

* How can we decide between conflicting intuitions? If they contradict each other, both cannot be right?
* If two people faced with the same moral dilemma have different intuitions about what to do, how do you decide which intuition is correct?
* Therefore, intuitionism takes a very monist view.  However, as we have illustrated, above, intuitive moral views can vary between moral agents.  However, intuitionism has no ‘plan B’ for when this happens.  There are no criteria to resolve when moral agents have conflicting intuitions about the same moral situation.
* Later intuitionists, like W.D. Ross, tried to address this by introducing ‘prima facie duties’.  Ross argued that moral agents have to use their intuition to choose one of seven prima facie duties – allowing some flexibility into Intuitionism.

**Section 4 - Meta-Ethical Non-Cognitive approach 1: Emotivism**

**Overview of Emotivism and the contribution of A.J. Ayer**

**Background to Emotivism**

* The philosopher behind Emotivism is **Alfred Ayer (A.J. Ayer)**. Emotivism is an example of a non-cognitive theory.
* Ayer rejects Moore’s and Prichard’s assertion that there is some sort of universal innate (born with intuition) sense of ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Ayer claimed this was wrong as moral agents do appear to have different ideas on ethical terms such as ‘good’.
* Emotivism is an ethical theory that is in keeping with the theory of ‘logical positivism’. Logical Positivism was devised by a group of philosophers that met in Vienna called the ‘Vienna Circle’. As part of the theory they devised ‘the verification principle’ to conclude whether language was meaningful or not. According to the principle there are only two types of meaningful statements:
1. Analytic statements: a proposition that is true by definition e.g. all bachelors are men.
2. Synthetic statements: a proposition that is not true ‘in itself’ but can be verified with empirical evidence e.g. all men have hearts.
* Under the above supposition all ethical language is rendered meaningless, since it is neither analytical or synthetic i.e. it is non-propositional and cannot be verified or falsified using empirical experience.

**Explanation of Emotivism**

* A. J Ayer agreed with the theory of Logical Positivism that moral language was meaningless.
* Therefore, Ayer created Emotivism (also called ‘Ethical Non-Cognitivism’) because he claimed that moral terms like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ do not express objective cognitive facts in anyway.
* In his 1935 book on language ‘Truth and Logic’ he gave the following example of why moral language was meaningless:
* Moral statement: ‘Adultery is wrong’
* This statement is not true in itself (analytic) therefore does not have meaning in that way!
* This statement cannot be verified as true or false empirically (synthetic) therefore it cannot be true this way either
* Therefore, this statement is meaningless, as it doesn’t actually say anything!
* He therefore concluded that moral statements are no more than expressions of emotions. His theory is sometimes called ‘the hurrah/boo theory’ as making moral judgements is the same as saying ‘Hurrah’ or ‘Boo’ to something.
* Therefore, Ayer claimed that ethical statements are no more than expressions of our own personal emotions e.g.
* When we say: ‘Stealing is Bad’ we mean we personally don’t like stealing or stealing brings us pain. We could express this emotion as: ‘Boo to Stealing’
* When we say: ‘Giving to Charity is Good’ we mean we personally approve or gain joy from giving to charity. We could express this emotion as: ‘Hurrah to Giving to Charity’.
* In a nutshell the terms ‘good’ or ‘bad’ are no more than expressions of our own individual feelings or emotions of approval and disapproval for a certain action. They do not attempt to define what good or bad is, just our emotionally response to ethical situations.
* Therefore, emotivism accepts that moral disagreements can and will occur because emotional responses to moral actions are not universal or innate. Therefore, it is only natural that moral disagreements will occur.
* However, A.J. Ayer furthered his theory by stating that, **"ethical terms do not serve only to express feelings. They are calculated also to arouse feeling, and so to stimulate action."** Therefore, as well as sharing your opinion on something you are also encouraging others to feel the same and do something about it!

**Contribution of C.L. Stevenson to Emotivism**

* Ayer’s work was developed by C. L. Stevenson (1908-1979). Stevenson best explains why Emotivism is not necessarily the same as subjectivism.
* Stevenson argued that meaningful ethical discussions could still take place since people’s subjective opinions are often based on objective facts. For Stevenson, ethical statements are based upon firm, justifiable beliefs about the world and the way in which it should work, and their purpose is to share attitudes based on beliefs about the world.
* Therefore, emotivism is more than just a simple expression of emotion. This is because Stevenson disagreed with Ayer on the verification principle for ethical language. He thought that moral language worked partly in terms of scientific terms but not fully to justify a Naturalist approach.
* Therefore, Emotivism is not just based on preference/opinion (subjective)

**The Challenges to Emotivism**

1. **No basic moral principles can be established;**
* Emotivism would dismiss all normative ethics like Natural Law, Situation Ethics, Utilitarianism etc. This is because Emotivism accepts that all moral statements are meaningless (Ayer’s version at least).
* Therefore, when Natural Law states that moral agents should follow the secondary precepts or when Situation Ethics states that moral agents should create agape consequences; these are all meaningless principles according to Emotivism.
* This would potential leave moral agents guideless (in a state of antinomianism). This could lead moral agents to become amoral or society to descend into anarchy.
1. **Ethical debate becomes a pointless activity**
* Emotivism does not allow for moral debate. This is because this argument is basically stating that if two people have different emotions, about whether an action is good or bad, then they must be both right.
* For example, if I say, ‘stealing is good’ and someone else says ‘stealing is bad’ we are both right because it is just how we feel emotionally!! There are no grounds for moral debate.
1. **There can be no universal agreement that some actions are wrong.**
* Emotivism does not give morality a set of absolutes. For example, murder is wrong, rape is wrong etc. This seems to go against a moral agent’s common-sense view of ethics.
* Mel Thompson stated: “You cannot reduce morality to a set of cheers and boos.”