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# Metaethics Explored

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# *Metaethics Explored*

Paul Davis

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## **A Note on the Author**

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Paul Davis is tutor in philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, and formerly lecturer in the philosophy of sport at the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff. His doctoral thesis is on free will, and he has published on consciousness, ethics, and ethical and aesthetic issues in sport.

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# Chapter 1. Introducing the Issues

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## 1.1 Some Everyday Moral Utterances

- 'He's a good person.'
- 'That was a terrible thing to do.'
- 'She's basically honest.'
- 'He can be mean.'
- 'Hitler was evil.'
- 'One should love one's neighbour.'
- 'She brought a lot of good into the world.'
- 'Slavery is wrong.'
- 'That was a courageous thing to do.'
- 'It's wrong not to keep appointments.'
- 'Suicide is never permissible.'
- 'Others must always be treated with respect.'
- 'One should never tell a lie.'
- 'Euthanasia can sometimes be justified.'
- 'You ought to apologise for that.'
- 'Eating animals is fine.'
- 'Her behaviour was a bit "off".'
- 'Treating people like that is not acceptable.'
- 'You ought to return your library books on time.'
- 'I must try to be more sensitive to the feelings of others.'
- 'That would be a nice thing to do.'
- 'That wasn't a very nice thing to do.'
- 'The poverty and starvation in the world is unacceptable.'
- 'That was callous.'

The above are examples of moral judgements. There seems nothing exotic about any of them. Some of them might be wrong, and disagreement seems possible in many or even all cases. But they seem like ordinary things to say.

## 1.2 What are they about?

But what sort of judgements are moral judgements? How can we set about discovering whether they are true or false? Indeed, are they true or false? Are there moral facts? Is moral argument just a species of rational argument? If not, then what is going on in moral argument? In short, what is this thing, morality? This book will explain and discuss a range of answers to the above cluster of questions. Questions such as these are the territory of metaethics.

The current metaethics scene is rich and diverse, and characterised by the same flat divergences of view that can be found in any area of philosophy. Michael Smith offers a brisk summary of six of these divergences.<sup>1</sup> First, some hold that moral practice presupposes moral facts that don't exist. Others deny that moral practice involves any such presupposition. Second, some hold that moral facts exist and that they are ordinary facts. Others hold that moral facts exist, but that they are facts of a unique kind. Third, some hold that moral facts exist and are part of the causal explanatory network. Others hold that there are no moral facts at all. Fourth, some hold that there is an internal or necessary connection between moral judgement and the will. Others hold that there is no such connection. Fifth, some hold that moral requirements are requirements of reason. Others hold that it is not necessarily irrational to act immorally. Sixth, some hold that morality is objective, that there is a single, 'true' morality. Others hold that there is not a single true morality. We will be discussing some of these divergences in the course of this book.

Metaethics was once sharply distinguished in philosophy from normative ethics. The popularity of the distinction accompanied a broader feeling that philosophy might be nothing but the analysis of language. Metaethics was supposed to be concerned with the meaning and justification of moral judgements (e.g. are moral statements about facts?), whilst normative ethics was more concerned with substance, e.g. right and wrong, good and bad, ought and ought not. However, some subsequent philosophical arguments tended to undermine the distinction by suggesting that questions of substance cannot be separated from questions of meaning. The six points of divergence set out above should be sufficient to suggest that we cannot confidently do normative ethics without thinking about metaethics. And, indeed, much recent work in moral philosophy is impossible to classify as exclusively metaethical or normative. For instance, Mackie's landmark book on ethics prescribes principles of conduct that Mackie explicitly regards as continuous with the metaethical treatment he offers

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1 M. Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Blackwell, 1994), 3–4.

first.<sup>1</sup> Basic textbooks in moral philosophy, similarly, tend to contain reflections on both metaethics and normative ethics. This book, again, will have things to say on what would previously have been parcelled out to ‘normative ethics’.

Metaethical questions might seem not to matter. We can all think of people that we regard as morally good and whom we think are liable to have thought fleetingly at most about any of them. Some philosophers have suggested too that very different answers on our cluster of metaethical questions can coexist with identical moral views and responses. However, Smith’s six points of divergence alone suggest that metaethical questions cannot be dismissed. Furthermore, it is worth pausing a little upon significant consequences of some of the questions we have already seen.

### *Moral Facts, Moral Truth, and Moral Knowledge*

We have seen, for instance, that the status of ordinary moral utterances as judgements is controversial. Smith includes the question of whether moral facts exist among his six points of metaethical divergence. According to Emotivism, for instance, moral statements are, despite appearances, not genuine judgements (see 3.6). They do not comment on facts, but express emotions or seek to create an influence. Therefore, they are neither true nor false, not even approximately so. There are considerable consequences if an account such as this is correct. How are moral ‘views’ formed or altered? Not by looking at moral facts, for sure. What is moral disagreement about? The belief that we attempt to morally persuade others by citing moral features is mistaken. There are no specifically moral phenomena. And if moral statements cannot be true, there must be significant consequences, at the least, for moral knowledge. How, if at all, is moral knowledge possible? Some other accounts, however, assert the existence of moral facts. Furthermore, we can know these, and therefore have moral knowledge. There are different ideas about what moral facts consist in, as we will see especially in the next chapter. And these different answers only reinforce the significance of metaethics. For instance, different accounts of what moral facts consist in result in different accounts of what moral disagreement is ultimately about. Indeed, when the push of ethical disagreement comes to shove, we might regularly find that a difference of metaethical outlook is in play, casting suspicion on the suggestion that metaethics needn’t make a significant difference to moral views.

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1 J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Oxford University Press, 1977).