Metaethics: The Main Questions

Metaethics: What is morality, or "right"?
Normative (prescriptive) ethics: How should people act?
Descriptive ethics: What do people think is right?
Applied ethics: Putting moral ideas into practice

1. Are moral claims truth-apt?
Can they be true or false, the way statements can, unlike questions or commands?

no

No: Non-cognitivism
Moral sentences express attitudes or issue prescriptions; they don't state facts. Expressivism, emotivism, quasi-realism, universal prescriptivism (p. 3).

yes

Yes: Cognitivism. 2. Are any moral claims true?

no

No: Moral error theory
Moral claims try to state facts, but there are none to state, so every positive moral claim is false (p. 3).

yes

Yes. 3. Does their truth depend on anyone's attitudes, choices or agreements?
Actual or idealized: a person's, a culture's, an ideal observer's, a god's, or the outcome of a procedure of reasoning.

yes

Yes: Anti-realism (cognitivist forms)
Some moral claims are true, but what makes them true depends on attitudes, choices or agreements (p. 2).

- **Subjectivism and relativism**
  True for a speaker, a group or a culture.
- **Constructivism**
  Oughts are built, not found: what correct reasoning from the standpoint of agents who value would arrive at. Rawls, Korsgaard, Street.
- **Ideal observer and divine command**
  True if an impartial, fully informed observer would approve; or if a god commands it.

no

No: Realism. 4. Are moral properties natural properties?
Some moral claims are true, and what makes them true doesn't depend on anyone's attitudes (p. 2).

Yes: Ethical naturalism
Moral facts are natural facts, found by inquiry like other facts. Railton; Boyd, Sturgeon.

No: Ethical non-naturalism
Moral facts are real but not natural, and can't be reduced to natural ones. Moore, Parfit, Huemer.

Three questions that cut across the tree

Moral epistemology: how do we know?
Intuitionism (some moral truths known directly) or sentimentalism (through emotional response). Pairs with most views above (p. 2).

Moral skepticism: can we know?
A question about knowledge, not facts: whether any moral belief is justified (p. 3).

Moral universalism: does it bind everyone?
Some ethic applies to all. Realists and anti-realists can both hold it, and so can non-cognitivists (prescriptivism) (p. 2).

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Metaethics: Cognitivism

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Thin moral concepts
more general: good, bad, right and wrong

Thick moral concepts
more specific: courageous, inequitable, just or dishonest

Centralism: thin concepts come first, and thick ones are built from them plus description (R. M. Hare, Simon Blackburn).

Non-centralism: thick concepts are a sufficient starting point for understanding thin ones, because they can't be split into a purely descriptive part plus a thin evaluation. Its defenders argue that this undercuts any sharp division between facts and norms (Bernard Williams, John McDowell, Hilary Putnam).

Cognitivism

Moral claims are truth-apt: they can be true or false, unlike questions or commands.

Ethical anti-realism (cognitivist forms)

Some moral claims are true, but what makes them true depends on attitudes, choices or agreements, actual or idealized.

Ethical subjectivism

A moral claim is true if it fits the attitudes of a speaker or group.

Moral relativism
Nobody is objectively right or wrong in moral disagreements.

Cultural relativism
Norms are understood in terms of culture.

Constructivism

Oughts are built, not found. Moral truths are what correct reasoning, from the standpoint of agents who value, would arrive at.

John Rawls, Christine Korsgaard, Sharon Street.

Ethical realism

Some moral claims are true, and what makes them true doesn't depend on anyone's attitudes.

What realists hold

1. Semantic thesis: moral predicates refer to moral properties, so moral statements represent moral facts and express propositions that are true or false.

2. Alethic thesis: some moral propositions are true.

3. Robust realists add a metaphysical thesis: those facts and properties are not relevantly different in status from ordinary non-moral ones. Minimal realists hold 1 and 2 only.

Ethical non-naturalism

Moral properties are real but not natural properties, and can't be reduced to them.

G. E. Moore, Derek Parfit, Russ Shafer-Landau.

Ethical naturalism

Moral properties are natural properties, known the way other facts are. Inquiry into the world can increase moral knowledge as it increases scientific knowledge.

Reductive: Peter Railton.
Non-reductive (Cornell realism): Richard Boyd, Nicholas Sturgeon.

Moral universalism (cuts across realism and anti-realism)

Some system of ethics applies universally, to "all." Not all forms are absolutist or value monist; some are value pluralist. It can also take a non-cognitivist form, universal prescriptivism (p. 3).

Value monism

All goods are commensurable on a single scale of value (classical utilitarianism).

Divine command theory

An act is right because a god commands it. Anti-realist in the sense of p. 1: it depends on a will.

Ideal observer theory

A moral claim is true if an impartial, fully informed ideal observer would approve of it (Roderick Firth). Depends on idealized attitudes.

Value pluralism

There are many goods, and they can conflict; no single scale settles every conflict. Pluralists can be realists or not (W. D. Ross, Isaiah Berlin).

How we know: moral epistemology (pairs with any view on this page)

Ethical intuitionism: some moral truths are known directly, without inference from other beliefs (W. D. Ross, Michael Huemer).

Sentimentalism (moral sense theory): moral beliefs are formed through emotional responses to experience (Francis Hutcheson, David Hume).

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Metaethics: Non-Cognitivism, Error Theory and Skepticism

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Moral skepticism (a separate question: about knowledge, not facts)

a) moral knowledge is impossible; b) no moral belief is justified (Walter Sinnott-Armstrong).

Pyrrhonian moral skepticism: suspend judgment. We can't tell whether any moral belief is justified, so we neither affirm nor deny that it is.

Dogmatic moral skepticism: affirms that moral beliefs are unjustified and gives reasons, such as the truth of error theory.

Non-cognitivism

Moral sentences are not truth-apt: they don't state facts, so there is no moral knowledge to have. Moral claims are imperatives, expressions of emotion, or expressions of "pro-attitudes."

Expressivism

Moral sentences don't describe the world; they express an evaluative attitude toward what they evaluate.

Avoids error theory: nothing false is asserted, because nothing is asserted.

Universal prescriptivism

Moral sentences work like imperatives, but universalizable ones: a moral judge is committed to the same judgment in any situation with the same relevant facts.

A non-cognitivist moral universalism (R. M. Hare).

Emotivism

Moral sentences express feelings: "hurrah!" or "boo!" (A. J. Ayer, Charles Stevenson).

Quasi-realism (Simon Blackburn)

Starts from expressivism, then earns the right to talk of moral truth, facts and knowledge without realist metaphysics. We project attitudes onto the world, and can speak as realists do.

The supervenience argument: two situations alike in every natural respect can't differ morally. Blackburn argued that realists can't explain why this must hold, while expressivists can: consistency in our attitudes requires it.

Moral nihilism

Nothing is morally right or wrong; there are no moral facts. Morality may be a set of rules and recommendations with psychological, social or economic advantages, but without universal or even relative truth.

Moral error theory (J. L. Mackie)

Moral language is truth-apt (cognitivism), but there are no moral facts, so every positive moral claim is false. "Torture is wrong" is false; "torture is not wrong" comes out true.

Combines the cognitivist thesis about moral language with the nihilist thesis that there are no moral facts.

Global falsity

Moral claims assert facts that don't exist.

Mackie's argument from queerness: moral properties would have to be intrinsically motivating, and there is good reason to think nothing is.

Presupposition failure

Moral claims presuppose moral facts. Since there are none, the claims are neither true nor false.

Still truth-apt in form, so not non-cognitivism.

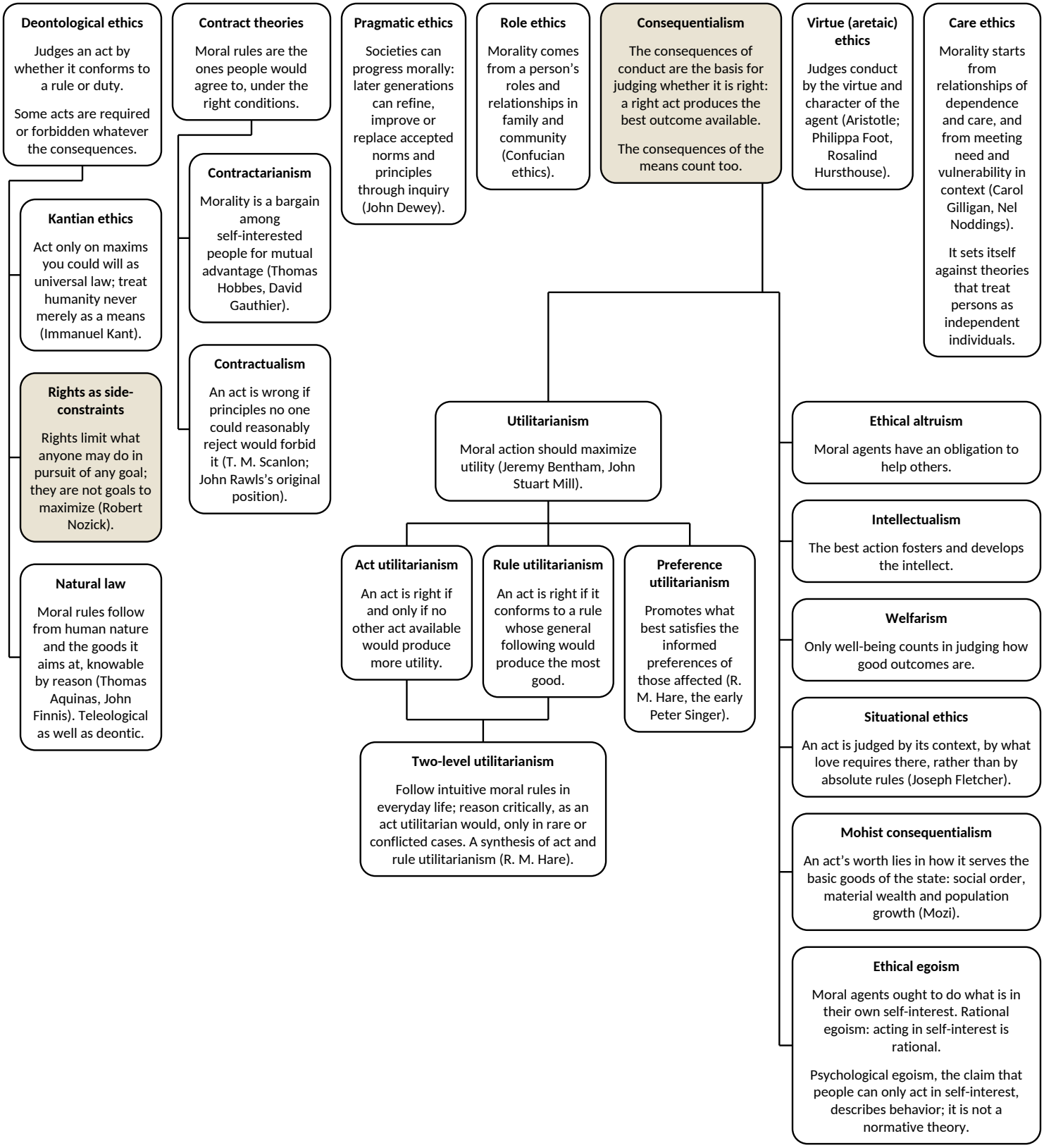
Moral fictionalism

If error theory is right, what then? Keep moral talk as a useful fiction, the way people talk about a novel's plot without believing it (Richard Joyce, Mark Kalderon).

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Normative Ethics

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