Introduction

What is Metaethics?

Does Metaethics have an impact on Ethics?

Does Metaethics Matter?
What is Metaethics?

- Metaethics and ethics are sometimes assumed to be the same, but this is not true.
- Ethics and metaethics have distinct functions.
- Ethics focuses on what we **ought to or should do**.
- Metaethics focuses on what we **mean** when we say “I should do x” or “I ought to do y”.
What is Metaethics?

• Moral philosophy is sometimes used as an umbrella term for normative ethics, practical ethics, and metaethics.

• But often, philosophers will talk about metaethics as a separate discipline.

• Why?

• Because whereas normative ethics and practical ethics usually go hand in hand, metaethics asks different types of questions than normative or practical philosophy.
What is Metaethics?

- Normative ethics focuses on different ethical theories: utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics.

- It tells us, usually in an abstract way, what the right thing to do is, what good actions are as opposed to bad ones.

- In other words, it gives us a guiding framework for our actions.
What is Metaethics?

• Practical ethics applies normative theory to the real world.

• We might apply consequentialism to environmental ethics.

• We might apply deontological ethics to the abortion debate.
So where does metaethics come in?

- Normative and practical ethics, though different, are also both first-order theories.
- They are ultimately concerned with what we ought to do (abstractly, or in application).
What is Metaethics?

- Metaethics, in contrast, is concerned with second-order questions.
- Metaethical theories don’t tell us what we ought to do, it tells us what we mean when we engage in first order ethics.
What is Metaethics?

• Metaethics considers ethics from a metaphysical, epistemological, and semantic point of view.

• Some metaethical theories focus on epistemology more than metaphysics, but they all generally have an interest in exploring ethics from a slightly removed perspective.
What is Metaethics?

What kind of topics/questions does metaethics engage in?

• Do objective moral values exist?
• Is there such a thing as moral truth?
• Is moral right and wrong relative to agents?
Does Metaethics have an impact on Ethics?

- Philosophers, as expected, disagree about how distinct ethics and metaethics are.

- J. L. Mackie, for example, argues that metaethics and ethics are entirely distinct.

- He focuses on the first order and second order distinction we just discussed.
Mackie suggests that the metaethical theory you hold has no impact on what ethical theory you hold.

“These are first order moral views, positive or negative: the person who adopts either of them is taking a certain practical, normative, stand. By contrast, what I am discussing is a second order view, a view about the status of moral values and the nature of moral valuing, about where and how they fit into the world. These first and second order views are not merely distinct but completely independent: one could be a second order moral sceptic without being a first order one, or again the other way round. A man could hold strong moral views, and indeed ones whose content was thoroughly conventional, while believing that they were simply attitudes and policies with regard to conduct that he and other people held. Conversely, a man could reject all established morality while believing it to be an objective truth that it was evil or corrupt” (1977, p. 16)
Does Metaethics have an impact on Ethics?

• Mackie, as we will see, uses this clear cut distinction to show why he can give a metaethical error theory but carry on engaging with and discussing first order ethics.

• But perhaps we should be suspicious here.

• Is it always the case that metaethical theories and ethical theories are compatible?

• Would it make sense to be an emotivist (who claims moral judgements express emotive attitudes like “Boo! Murder” or “Hurray! Donating to Charity”) and a Kantian?
Does Metaethics have an impact on Ethics?

• Mackie argues that moral discourse, which assumes moral values are prescriptive, independent of us, non-natural and so on, is a false discourse.

• We might worry that Mackie wants to make two incompatible claims.

1. There is a clear cut distinction between ethics and metaethics, such that one can hold their preferred metaethical view and it has no bearing on their normative ethical views.

2. Ethical discourse assumes that ethics is realist, non-natural, prescriptive but this is false. When we talk in this way, we talk in error.

• It seems like if you take an error theory view about metaethics, that this does have an impact on your first order moral talk.
Does Metaethics have an impact on Ethics?

Does Mackie really make a mistake?

- Mackie might respond by claiming that metaethics and ethics are distinct in their function.
- They both try to do different things.
- But this doesn’t seem to help too much.
- Metaethics tell us what the words and concepts that we use in ethical discourse mean, those meanings can have an impact on our normative views.
Does Metaethics Matter?

- Imagine you're having a debate with a friend over whether it's morally wrong to kick trees for fun.
- Your friend thinks it is morally wrong; trees are good for the environment, hurting a tree might damage it!
- You think your friend is ridiculous; who cares about kicking a tree, it won't feel it!
Does Metaethics Matter?

• There is a normative debate to be had here.

• Your friend might give consequentialist reasons for their view.

• You might give Kantian ones.
Does Metaethics Matter?

• But there is also a metaethical debate to be had.

• What do you each mean by “morally wrong”?

• What if your friend understands “morally wrong” to mean reference to their disapproval of kicking trees (Emotivism).
Does Metaethics Matter?

• What if you understand “morally wrong” to mean that there is a moral fact, independent of your beliefs or sentiments about whether kicking trees for fun is wrong (Moral Realism).

• Metaethics matters because if we don’t know what we mean, we’ll end up talking past one another.
Does Metaethics Matter?

- Debates which seem intractable might not be so hard to solve if we understood, first, what people meant by the terms they use.

- We can’t simply assume we all have the same meanings in mind.
Recap & Key Questions

- What is metaethics?
- Can we draw a clear line between metaethics and ethics?
- Does metaethics matter?

For more on this topic: https://psyche.co/ideas/marge-and-homers-ice-cream-argument-or-why-metaethics-matters