

30 Other Moral Theories: Subjectivism, Relativism, Emotivism, Intuitionism, etc.

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Metaethics includes moral theories that contain assumptions which answer some metaphysical and epistemological questions about moral goods and values. The metaphysical questions (such as *What are, and how do moral goods and values exist?*) are about the nature and existence of moral goods and values. Epistemological questions (such as *Can we know moral goods and values? If so, what are the sources of knowledge about them?*) regard sources of knowledge about moral goods, values and criteria of moral evaluations.² Assumptions of ethical subjectivism, relativism, decisionism, emotivism and intuitionism are exemplary answers to these questions. We call their answers “normative assumptions.”

There are at least three good reasons to ask and answer such questions. First, without answering them, moral judgments remain ambiguous. For example, if I say, “Action X is wrong,” the judgement has several meanings. To specify its sense, I should clarify my normative assumptions. For example, I can assume metaphysical subjectivism (anti-realism) or realism in metaethics. According to the former assumption, my above judgment about X is not about reality; it is about my or someone’s opinion. In this case, the exact meaning of this judgement is: *someone evaluates X as morally wrong*. If I assume the counter-assumption of metaphysical realism (anti-subjectivism), I mean that it is true that X *has the property of moral wrongness*.

Second, these assumptions are conducive to peculiar practices. To specify the practice, which follows from moral judgments, one has to determine some normative assumptions. For example, if I take the assumption of epistemological subjectivism (agnosticism) – I believe that no one can have any knowledge about moral goods and values; I mean that morality is a matter of preferences, which have no ground in knowledge. In practice, it means that one should not search for knowledge about goods and values to validate moral preferences, because such knowledge is not possible. If I believe in epistemological anti-subjectivism (realism), I assume that humans can possess some (precise or approximate, dubitable or indubitable) knowledge about goods and values, I should investigate my moral preferences and accommodate them to my knowledge. In practice of the public sphere, ethical epistemological subjectivists postulate accommodating the public morality and the law to individual or group preferences. Ethical epistemological anti-subjectivists search for knowledge about moral principles and attempt to adopt public morality and the law to the principles.

Third, the ambiguity of moral judgments is conducive to misunderstandings and violent conflicts. To avoid them, one should clarify one’s normative assumptions. People can disagree about normative assumptions. If the opposing groups do not clarify their normative assumptions, they can struggle

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² Metaethics “investigates where our ethical principles come from, and what they mean. Are they merely social inventions? Do they involve more than expressions of our individual emotions? Metaethical answers to these questions focus on the issues of universal truths, the will of God, the role of reason in ethical judgments, and the meaning of ethical terms themselves.” (Fieser, n.d.)

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against each other without knowing the matter of their disagreement. Mutual misunderstanding limits chances for dialogue, negotiations and consensus. In this case, the conflict turns irrational and violent. When people do not understand each other, their power becomes the decisive argument in their dispute, and their confrontation is the way to test this argument. Therefore, mutual misunderstandings are conducive to violent conflicts. For example, defenders of human rights sometimes fight each other over how to promote human rights, because of different normative assumptions that conceptualise human rights by answering questions such as: *Who is human? Why should one respect human rights?* When the opposing groups do not clarify their answers to these questions, opponents do not understand the position of the other party. If their defenders specify their normative assumptions, their concept of human rights becomes comprehensible to other groups, and their mutual understanding is conducive to dialogue, negotiations and a consensus.

To illustrate the role normative assumptions in communication, we present a conversation between John (J) and Mary (M). John maintains that lying is morally wrong. Mary wants to understand his position. For example:

M: *Why is lying morally wrong?* (Q1)

J: Because when you lie, you disrespect human dignity, which deserves respect.

M: *Can you prove your position?* (Q2)

J: No but you can intuit its truth: you can reach some evidence about it if you activate your intuition.

In the above conversation, John presents assumptions of ethical personalism and intuitionism. According to his personalism, human dignity is the moral good. His intuitionism is the assumption that people can know this good by intuition. In this chapter, we consider possible further questions of Mary and alternative answers of John.

Some regulatory definitions

In this text, “morality” means a system of moral norms and rules, which compose a moral code of conduct (conduct of moral code). In this meaning one can use the term “either descriptively to refer to some codes of conduct put forward by a society or some other group, such as a religion, or accepted by an individual for her own behaviour or normatively to refer to a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational persons” (Gert, 2012). In the descriptive sense, “morality” means a **fact** of personal preferences, decisions, actions, evaluations according to some (moral) conventions of preferring, decision-making, acting, evaluating (Wreen, 2018, pp. 351–353). In the normative sense, “morality” means ideal – a pattern for the fact of morality.

We mean the strict sense of the “moral code.” In this sense, it comprises only moral norms and rules. In a broad sense, it also contains “moral principles ... ideals, virtues, goals, aims, and values, and at least ideally integrates all such components into a unified, workable whole, a ‘way of life.’ Order, structure, coordination, and integration, in other words, are important features of a moral code, as is an explanation and justification of both the content and structure of the code.” (Wreen, 2018, pp. 345–246)

We distinguish moral principle(s) from moral norms and rules. By “moral principle” or the “principle of morality” we mean the most precious (intrinsic, autotelic, most appreciated) goods according to a given hierarchy of values. Moral norms and rules operationalise the idea of moral principle. Moral norms are criteria to evaluate acts regarding their compliance with the moral

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principle(s). Moral rules specify the proper way to respect and promote the moral principle(s). Normative assumptions (of a theory) determine the hierarchy of goods/values and, in this way, specify the normative morality.

We distinguish moral principle from moral value: Moral value consists in respecting the principle of morality by intentions and actions. Intentions that respect it, are morally good (have the value of moral goodness) and actions that respect the principle of morality are morally right (have the value of moral rightness). The opposite of these values are anti-values of moral badness (of intentions) and moral wrongness (of actions). Consequently, we distinguish moral values (Lat. *bonum morale*) from moral (honest) goods (lat. *bona honesta*). Moral values are qualities of human acts. Moral goods are objectives of human acts. Such goods are considered most precious according to a hierarchy of goods adopted by a person. For example, if John assumes that human dignity is the moral good, he maintains that it is at the top of the hierarchy of goods (human dignity is more precious than any other good). According to this assumption, when someone intends respecting human dignity, his/her intention is morally good (it has the moral value of moral goodness); when he/she respects human dignity by his/her actions, they are morally right (they have the moral value of moral rightness). According to the anti-relativist theory of moral goods, they are precious regardless of personal preferences. According to the relativist theory of moral goods, they are precious because someone appreciates them. See, section “*What are the criteria of moral assessment? Normative relativism versus anti-relativism in metaethics*”.

In this text, the term “hierarchy of values” and “hierarchy of goods” means the system of preferences (Hansson & Grüne-Yanoff, 2018). We use the terms “value” and “good” interchangeably. However, in some contexts, the “value” means something precious for someone, and the term “good” means something precious regardless of personal preferences.

How do moral goods and values exist? Metaphysical realism versus anti-realism (subjectivism) in metaethics

In the above conversation, Mary can ask for more information about human dignity. For example, she can ask:

M: *Is human dignity something real?* (Q3)

M: *Do all humans possess their dignity?* (Q4)

John can offer two answers to the 3rd question: the answer of metaphysical realism and anti-realism (subjectivism) (Harrison, 1967b; Kim, 2006; Sayre-McCord, 2011). According to supporters of **metaphysical realism** in metaethics, moral goods are real, because they exist autonomously – regardless of any personal preferences:³ something is good or not good regardless of personal opinions, decisions, or emotions about it. According to this position, moral goods are **intrinsic** to some beings, situations, or states of affairs.

If John takes this position and maintains his personalism, he means that human dignity is intrinsic to persons and precious regardless of any human acts about it. If he abandons his personalism, he can specify the moral good differently, according to alternative conceptions of moral good within the theory metaphysical realism in metaethics. For example, he can maintain that love (agapism), happiness

³ We use the terms “existential autonomy,” “existential heteronomy” and “purely intentional objects” in their sense as defined by Roman Ingarden (Ingarden, 1983, 1989).

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(eudaemonism) or pleasure (hedonism) is intrinsically good.

If John abandons metaphysical realism, he takes the position of **metaphysical subjectivism (anti-realism)** and maintains that moral goods are not real, they exist solely by the power of human intentions.⁴ According to this assumption, human acts make something good by intending it, for example, by respecting, aiming at, wanting, or evaluating it. If John takes this position, he should give a negative answer to the 3rd question.

The above standpoints of ethical realism and antirealism do not determine the answer to the 4th question. Ethical realists can assume that all human beings have dignity or that only some humans, who meet some conditions of personhood, have their dignity. Ethical subjectivists may agree with this answer, by showing that only humans who are appreciated by someone have their dignity. However, some ethical anti-realists may assume that all humans deserve respect, because respecting them is a prerequisite for rational intentions, like Immanuel Kant shows in his conception of the categorical imperative.

The two above conceptions lead towards distinct theories of moral value. In their contexts John should offer distinct answers to the question:

M: *Is lying morally wrong or it just seems morally wrong to some people?* (Q5)

The theories of ethical realism and antirealism in metaethics differ in their answer to the above question. Supporters of **metaphysical realism** in metaethics maintain that moral judgments are about “moral facts” and can be true or false in the correspondence sense of truth (Harrison, 1967b, 1967a). They are either “natural (objects that are knowable only through experience), non-natural (but not supernatural) or theological (or supernatural)” (Campbell, 2015) This position can also have a name “ethical objectivism” (Harrison, 1967a). The position implies that there are some sources of knowledge about moral values. According to this position, John may say, that it is **true** that lying is wrong.

Ethical metaphysical subjectivists (anti-realists) claim that moral values are purely intentional predicates with no existential autonomy; they exist by the “power” of human acts (beliefs, feelings, decisions, attitudes or preferences). As Jonathan Harrison puts it, according to ethical subjectivist theories, “... moral predicates are not possessed by actions or actors in the absence of people who pass judgments upon them or who respond to them with such feelings as admiration, love, approval, detestation, hate, or disapproval” (Harrison, 1967b, p. 78). According to this approach, human acts “create” moral values. We put the term “create” in quotation because it does mean creating something real. It means creating purely intentional objects. In this context goods or values are purely intentional objects, which exist by the “power” of the intention. According to this position, moral judgements are not about any reality; they are about human evaluations or reactions. As Harrison writes, “A subjectivist ethical theory is a theory according to which moral judgments about men or their actions are judgments about the way people react to these men and actions — that is, the way they think or feel about them” (Harrison, 1967b, p. 78).

If John takes the position of metaphysical antirealism, he should not say that it is true that lying is wrong. He should rather say that *some people believe that it is morally wrong*. In this case, Mary should ask him:

⁴ In this text, terms “intention” and “intentionality” denote the relation between human acts and their intentional objects (Brentano, 1973; Husserl, 2001; Jacob, 2010). (Brentano, 1973; Husserl, 2001; Jacob, 2010)

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M: *What human acts can make something good or bad, right or wrong? (Q6)*

There are two anti-realist answers to this question: If John takes the position of metaphysical **decisionism** in metaethics, he believes that human decisions can “create” moral goods and values. If John assumes metaphysical **emotivism** in metaethics, he believes that human emotions bring values into existence. However, he should also be clear about whose decisions or feelings can create moral values. For Mary can ask:

M: *Whose acts can make something morally good or valuable? (Q7)*

John can make some optional assumptions to answer her questions. For example, **individual metaphysical subjectivists** in metaethics maintain that each agent “creates” his/her goods and values. For example, Jean-Paul Sartre presents this position. In his opinion, each decides his/her hierarchy of goods by his/her decisions, which are existential commitments.

Theories of **group subjectivism** present the assumption that a group of people “creates” values, by implicit or explicit consensus about them. In this case, John should convince Mary that there is a consensus of our society to respect property rights and she should respect the consensus.

According to the assumption of **universal subjectivism**, respecting moral values is the preconditions for rational actions. For example, Immanuel Kant presents a peculiar combination of metaphysical antirealism and universalism in metaethics. (Harrison, 1967b, p. 87; Tatarkiewicz, 1919, p. 22).

Therefore, to answer the Question 1 in the context of metaphysical subjectivism in metaethics, John can say that:

J: *You should not lie, because lying is not compatible with your existential commitment (individual metaphysical subjectivism).* (In this case, Mary can agree or say that she has no existential commitment to respecting human dignity and she sees no incompatibility between lying and respecting persons at least in some situations.)

M: *Why should I respect persons, if it is not my existential commitment? Why should not I lie, when the truth is more harmful to a person than a lie? (Q8)*

J: *You should respect the consensus of our society, which requires you not to lie (group metaphysical subjectivism).* (Mary can see no reasons to respect the consensus of her group.)

M: *Why should I respect the consensus of my group? (Q9)*

J: *Truthfulness is the prerequisite for rational intentions. You should be rational, therefore, you should not lie (universal metaphysical subjectivism).* (Mary may see no reason to believe that lying contradicts rational decisions.)

M: *Why is truthfulness the condition for rational decisions? (Q10)*

To answer these questions of Mary, John can offer a couple of assumptions concerning sources of moral knowledge and criteria of moral assessments. We discuss his possible answers in the two

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following sections.

If and how can we get knowledge about moral goods and values? Sources of moral knowledge. **Epistemological realism versus subjectivism (anti-realism) in metaethics**

If John takes the position of metaphysical realism in metaethics, he can offer several answers to Question 9 by indicating natural or supernatural sources of moral knowledge. The natural source of knowledge can be the reason (the position of epistemological rationalism) or emotions (the position of epistemological emotivism). For example, Plato, Aristotle, and Immanuel Kant maintain that human reason can allow us to know moral goods and values. According to Max Scheler, emotions mediate human knowledge about moral goods values. Supernatural knowledge is the effect of illumination or revelation. For example, St. Augustine maintains that moral knowledge is the gift of God – the effect of His illumination (Stump & Kretzmann, 2001).

Ethical intuitionism presents a peculiar answer to the Question 9: “One of the most distinctive features of Ethical intuitionism is its epistemology. All of the classic intuitionists maintained that basic moral propositions are self-evident—that is, evident in and of themselves—and so can be known without the need of any argument.” (Stratton-Lake, 2016)

The above answers present the position of **epistemological realism in metaethics**. According to this standpoint, humans can get knowledge about moral goods and values. The opposite assumption is **epistemological subjectivism (antirealism)** in metaethics. According to this standpoint, a human cannot know moral goods and values. He/she can only maintain opinions or beliefs about them.

If John takes the position of epistemological subjectivism, he can specify it according to his answers and Mary can repeat questions 8-10 endlessly. The position of epistemological subjectivism is conducive to faulty circular reasoning of (Lat.) *circulus vitiosus* or (Lat.) *regressus at infinitum*. To continue the discussion the interlocutors should agree on some criteria of moral assessment. To do it, they should decide if they take the position of normative anti-relativism or relativism in metaethics.

What are the criteria of moral assessment? Normative relativism versus anti-relativism in metaethics

The assumption of metaphysical anti-relativism (absolutism) is opposite to metaphysical relativism. These assumptions are about relations between the human mind and moral goods (values) and can have different meanings depending on the relationships they indicate. In this chapter, we consider only **normative** anti-relativism and relativism, which are assumptions about the validity of moral norms.⁵

Normative **anti-relativists** maintain that the validity or truth of moral judgments does not depend on any opinions, decisions or feelings. To specify this position, John can indicate some sources of moral knowledge according to some assumptions of ethical epistemological realism.

According to the assumption of **normative anti-relativism in metaethics**, some moral norms are valid regardless of personal preferences. According to the premise of normative relativism, moral norms and assessments are valid because someone maintains them. Normative **relativists** believe that human acts (decisions or emotions) specify the criteria of moral assessments: “Moral relativism is the view that moral judgments are true or false only relative to some particular standpoint (for instance, that

⁵ We do not consider metaphysical theories (which can get the name of relativism) that show how goods or values exist in relation to human acts. We focus on the normative version of anti-relativism and relativism.

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of a culture or a historical period) and that no standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others” (Westacott, 2012).

Consequently, an ethical relativist denies that there is any one correct moral evaluation and he/she holds that there is no rational way of justifying one moral evaluation against another (Brandt, 1967, p. 75). This standpoint implies that conflicting moral judgments may be equally and simultaneously valid (true, right, sound). (Beauchamp, 2009; Brandt, 1967, p. 67; Campbell, 2015)

To justify ethical relativism, its proponents point to the fundamental disagreement between people about criteria of moral assessments. Relativists explain this disagreement by assuming that “moral claims contain an essential indexical element, such that the truth of any such claim requires relativisation to some individual or group” (Joyce, 2015).

Metaphysical relativism in metaethics can be more or less radical regarding applicability of moral norms. The position can account to ethical particularism or generalism in metaethics:

Ethical relativists can take the position of either ethical particularism or generalism: Moral particularism at its most trenchant, is the claim that there are no defensible moral principles, that moral thought does not consist in the application of moral principles to cases, and that the morally perfect person should not be conceived as the person of principle ... Ethical generalism is the view that the rationality of moral thought and judgement depends on a suitable provision of moral principles. (Dancy, 2013).

Therefore, if John maintains the position of particularism, he does not mean that lying is wrong in all possible situations. He should try to convince Mary that lying is wrong in a particular situation. For example, he can take the position of act utilitarianism to show that lying is wrong when it has bad consequences. If he takes the position of generalism he will try to convince her not to do it in all situations. For example, he can take the position of rule utilitarianism to convince Mary, that the norm of truthfulness is more socially useful than the rule of lying. However, he needs to present some evidence for this argument. To do this, he has to make use of some sources of moral knowledge, which implies the position of epistemological realism in metaethics.

According to ethical relativists, human acts (like emotions or decisions) specify criteria of moral assessment. Theories of ethical relativism differ regarding the question *Whose and what acts specify criteria of moral evaluation?* For example, Władysław Tatarkiewicz (1919, p. 22) notes that ethical relativist theories differ in their claims concerning whose opinions, decisions or feelings count for the validity of moral criteria. According to **individual ethical relativism** “If someone thinks it is right (wrong) to do A, then it is right (wrong) for him to do A.” (Brandt, 1967, p. 76). **Group (sociological) ethical relativism** is “a metaethical thesis that the truth or justification of moral judgments is not absolute, but relative to some group of persons” (Gowans, 2012). It implies that:

If the moral principles recognized in the society of which X is a member imply that it is wrong to do A in certain circumstances C then it is wrong for X to do A in C. This principle says, in effect, that a person ought to act in conformity with the moral standards of his group. (Brandt, 1967, p. 76)

Universal ethical relativists assume that some moral principles and norms outline necessary (*a priori*) relations that occur between a person and her acts; these relations imply some intersubjective criteria of moral assessment. For example, Kant shows that the categorical imperative outlines the

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universal (*a priori*) prerequisites for rational decisions. (Gowans, 2012; Hill, 2007; Tatarkiewicz, 1919, p. 22; Westacott, 2012).

Relativistic theories differ in their answer to the question *What kind of human acts specify criteria of moral assessment?* **Emotivist relativists** believe that emotions do it. **Decisionist relativists** maintain that human decisions specify criteria for moral evaluations.

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For Review and Discussion:

1. What are the differences between moral realism and anti-realism? How do they approach normative ethics differently?
2. What is the difference between moral relativism and moral objectivism? How do they approach normative ethics differently?
3. What role should our intuitions play in doing ethics? What is the impact of your view for how we should structure our societal laws?