Introducing metaethics

Ethical language is talk about right and wrong, good and bad. ‘What is the status of ethical language?’ is a question about what statements like ‘Murder is wrong’ or ‘Courage is good’ mean. What is it that ethical language is doing? Are these statements of fact? Can ethical claims be true or false? Or are they something else, such as expressions of our approval or disapproval of certain actions or character traits? Our questions raise issues in metaethics.

WHAT IS METAETHICS?
Normative ethical theories provide an account of which actions, motives and character traits are right or good. They are intended to provide guidance on how to live. Metaethics, by contrast, does not do this. It asks about what morality is, philosophically speaking. It asks questions in philosophy of language, as we have just seen, but we can’t answer those questions without also thinking about metaphysics, epistemology and philosophy of mind.

1. Metaphysics: suppose we think that ethical language states truths. Are these truths objective? Are they mind-dependent or mind-independent?
2. Epistemology: if there are ethical truths, how do we discover what these truths are? On the other hand, suppose we deny that ethical statements are true or false, arguing that they are expressions of subjective feeling. In that case, is there such a thing as moral reasoning? Can we provide reasons that justify our actions?
3. Philosophy of mind: what is it to hold a particular moral view, e.g. that murder is wrong? If ‘murder is wrong’ states a truth, then moral views are factual beliefs. On the other hand, if ‘murder is wrong’ expresses a feeling, then moral views are attitudes of approval or disapproval (or something similar). Is holding a moral view a matter of being motivated to act in certain ways, e.g. not to murder? If it is, what does this imply about the nature of morality?

COGNITIVISM AND NON-COGNITIVISM
Theories of what morality is fall into two broad families - cognitivism and non-cognitivism. The distinction is now understood by philosophers to depend on whether one thinks that moral judgements express beliefs or not.

Cognitivism claims that ethical language expresses ethical beliefs about how the world is. To believe that murder is wrong is to believe that the sentence ‘Murder is wrong’ is true. So ethical language aims to describe the world, and so can be true or false.

Non-cognitivism claims that ethical language does not try to describe the world and cannot be true or false. It does not express beliefs, but some other, non-
cognitive mental state. Different non-cognitivist theories disagree on exactly what this mental state is, but it is usually an attitude or feeling.

**Mental states and ‘direction of fit’**

We can understand the difference between a cognitive mental state and a non-cognitive mental state in terms of the idea of ‘direction of fit’. A man goes shopping, taking his shopping list with him. When shopping, he uses his list to guide what he puts in his basket. At the end of the shop, what is in his basket should ‘fit’ his list. If it doesn’t, the mistake is with the basket, and the basket should be changed to fit the list. Now suppose that the man is being followed by a store detective. She makes a list of each thing that the man puts in his basket. At the end of the shop, her list should ‘fit’ his basket. If it doesn’t, the mistake is with her list, and the list should be changed to fit the basket.

The shopper’s list is a list of what he wants. Desires have a ‘world-to-mind’ direction of fit. We seek to change the world to fit our desires and thereby satisfy them. They are not true or false, but represent how the world should be. By contrast, the detective’s list is a list of what she believes is in the shopper’s basket. Beliefs have a ‘mind-to-world’ direction of fit. We change our beliefs to fit the world, and thereby have true beliefs. They represent how the world is, not how we want it to be.

So which direction of fit do moral views have? Is the thought ‘Murder is wrong’ a belief about how the world is, or is it like a desire to make the world a place in which there is no murder? Both answers are plausible and both answers face challenges.

**Issues**

Non-cognitivists argue that moral judgements are, like desires, motivating. Holding the view that murder is wrong involves being motivated not to murder. But, they continue, factual beliefs are not motivating. The sun is 93 million miles from the Earth - so what? Believing that fact inclines me to do nothing in particular at all. Because moral views are motivating, they are not beliefs, but non-cognitive attitudes.

Cognitivists can respond that some beliefs, including moral beliefs, are motivating. Or they can argue that moral beliefs aren’t motivating. Instead, caring about what is morally good or right is motivating. It is possible, therefore (but perhaps psychologically very unusual), to believe that murder is wrong and not be motivated to refrain from murdering because one simply doesn’t care about morality.

Cognitivism argues that what is right or wrong is something we can be mistaken about. It isn’t just ‘up to us’ whether murder is wrong. People who think that murder is just fine are mistaken and vicious. Morality isn’t simply a matter of taste. Non-cognitivism, therefore, faces the challenge of explaining why we make a distinction between morality and personal taste. Is non-cognitivism going to lead to scepticism or nihilism about morality, the view that there is no right and wrong (really)?
Non-cognitivism can argue that it is a simpler theory. It has a simpler metaphysics and a simpler epistemology. Cognitivism needs to explain how moral claims can be objectively true or false. Are there moral properties ‘in the world’? What kind of property could they be, and how can we find out about them? Issues of rationalism and empiricism arise here.