

Introduction to Cognitivism

1. What is cognitivism?

The field of ethics has three branches: meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics; cognitivism is located in the first of them and is one of several different meta-ethical beliefs (including non-cognitivism, moral objectivism, and moral relativism). Meta-ethics is concerned with investigating whether or not morality exists (i.e. whether or not the words "right" and "wrong" describe reality); on the assumption that it does, normative ethics is concerned with how to make moral decisions (i.e. how to decide which actions are right and wrong). Different applied ethics take these normative ethical principles and put them into practice in real-world situations (e.g. animal ethics, applied ethics, and sexual ethics).



A murder scene: most cognitivists agree that evil is somehow a feature of acts like murder.

2. How does cognitivism work?

Cognitivism is the meta-ethical belief that ethical statements make claims about reality so are either true or false. Considering how non-ethical statements work can help illuminate cognitivist claims. For example, the statement, "The Empire State Building is the world's tallest building", declares something about reality, namely, that the distance between the top and bottom of the Empire State Building is greater than the distance between the top and bottom of any other building on Earth. The fact that the statement is false is irrelevant (at the 1939 New York World's Fair, it happened to be true). Cognitivists argue that ethical claims work in much the same way; they make claims about reality that are either true or false.

Some cognitivists (e.g. intuitionists and naturalists) claim that ethical statements refer to mind-independent reality so are objectively true or false (which is known as realism). For example, both intuitionists and naturalists may argue that claims like, "The intentional killing of an innocent human being is evil", refer to a real but unobservable feature of acts like murder called "evil". Even though human beings cannot see evil, some cognitivists claim that ethical statements like the one above attempt to describe something about the nature of reality. Alternatively, some cognitivists (e.g. ethical subjectivists) claim that ethical statements do not make claims about mind-independent reality but instead make statements about subjective reality (i.e. states of mind); these cognitivists subscribe to anti-realism. For example, ethical subjectivists may argue that the claim, "I think stealing someone else's property is always wrong", refers to a real idea that exists in someone's mind. Although different types of cognitivist argue that ethical claims work in different ways, they all accept that they are attempting to describe existent features of reality.

Meta-Ethics

A branch of ethics concerned with determining the nature of ethics and the meaning of ethical statements.

Cognitivism

The belief that ethical statements make claims about reality so can be categorised as either true or false.

Realism

The belief that ethical statements make claims about mind-independent reality so are objectively true or false.

Anti-Realism

The belief that ethical statements do not make claims about mind-independent reality so are either meaningless or subjective.

3. Why is cognitivism important?

Cognitivism is an important meta-ethical position for several reasons. First, it is commonsensical: most people accept that ethical statements are meaningful, just as they accept that legal or medical statements are. Although some philosophers deny the existence of things like good, evil, right, and wrong, this denial does not agree with most people's lived experiences. It strikes the majority of people as common sense that good and evil exist and that ethical statements about them are meaningful. Second, it is connected; in other words, cognitivism is interrelated with other beliefs or positions in meta-ethics. For example, cognitivists are more likely than non-cognitivists (who mostly argue that ethical statements are meaningless nonsense) to believe in moral objectivism, which is, broadly speaking, the belief that there are unchangeable ethical facts (similar to mathematical ones). Cognitivism is important because it has a bearing on several other beliefs. Finally, it is consequential: cognitivism affects normative and applied ethical positions, which means it eventually has a real impact on how people behave. For instance, naturalism, which is the belief that good and evil are derived from specific natural features of the universe (like the existence of pain and suffering), leads, for many, to the adoption of utilitarianism. The acceptance or rejection of cognitivism eventually results in the promotion of very different normative ethical theories.



The Empire State Building: cognitivists claim ethical statements refer to real things.

George Thinks

Meta-ethics can be pretty mindbending, but of all the meta-ethical positions out there, cognitivism is probably one of the more straightforward. Of course, it comes in several different varieties (most notably intuitionism and naturalism, which are both widely known), and this can confuse the issue. But there's really only one essential thing to remember: cognitivists believe that ethical statements declare something about the nature of reality (either what's going on out there (in the world) or what's going on in here (in our heads)); consequently, it makes sense to label ethical statements as either true or false. If you're able to wrap your head around this fundamental point, then you'll find it a lot easier to make sense of the different types of cognitivism (and, of course, non-cognitivism). As for my personal position, I have a lot of sympathy with cognitivists. Although I think there are some problems with the position, it certainly appears to me that there are, objectively, right and wrong ways to behave and, given this belief (i.e. moral objectivism) it's almost impossible for me to avoid being a cognitivist by default.

