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What Is Metaethics?

1.1 Starting thoughts

There are plenty of things that happen in this world that people think are morally right and morally wrong, morally good and morally bad. As you sit, now, reading this book, we can imagine that somewhere in the world someone is sharing their sweets with someone else. Similarly, some adult is binding some child’s feet in very tight and uncomfortable ways, causing the child (muted) distress. Someone else is putting their elderly parent into a care home so they can go and live in a different country. Someone else is dumping chemicals poisonous to humans into the sea. Someone else has taken the day off work to go to read at their child’s school. Someone else is testing drugs on various animals in a laboratory to make sure they are safe for humans to use. Someone else is helping to decide whether a country should invade a neighbouring state. And so on.

We often pass moral judgement on these and many other sorts of activity and action. We may do so when chatting in a pub or bar, when reading a news story, or when watching the television. And, when we pass such judgement, our minds might wander in various ways to think about the things we are judging and what our judgements amount to. For example, we might become very interested in the issue of research on animals and think hard about whether this is justified. Similarly, we may ask whether a war can ever be just and, if so, what conditions have to be fulfilled for it to be morally permissible. These and many other questions are of
great practical concern and have a quite specific point. They are
good examples of questions asked in *applied ethics*.

As we think through such issues, our minds might wander and
we might ask questions of a more general and abstract nature. For
example, perhaps we note that many actions are morally wrong
and we want to work out what it is about these actions that makes
them so. Perhaps, we may think, there is something that all of the
wrong actions have in common – some aspect or feature of them
that unites them and justifies our classifying each and every one
of them as morally wrong. Perhaps we think there is something
about the effects and consequences of the actions that makes
them wrong, and from that we choose to focus on specific types of
effect. Perhaps, alternatively, we ignore the consequences entirely
and think about the various action types there are. From that,
we might devise a set of ideas to show why it is that *these* sorts of
action – stealing, lying, killing – are wrong, whilst *those other* types
of action – sharing, caring, aiding – are morally right. Alternative
to all of this, we might wonder why we should be so fixated on
deciding what should be done rather than working out what sort
of moral person we should be in general. These and other ques-
tions in the neighbourhood are the lifeblood of *normative ethics*.

(I have done something already that a few writers may think
controversial: I have separated normative ethics from applied
ethics. There is clearly some link between the two, for some writ-
ers might try to defend the wrongness of war, say, from within a
certain normative perspective such as consequentialism. I use
this division only for convenience’s sake here; I am not wedded
to it. Indeed, I am about to introduce a third main area of ethi-
cal enquiry. Although I am more wedded to its distinction from
the other two, I am not going to discuss how distinct it is in this
book.)

This book is not concerned with either applied or normative
ethics. Instead, our focus will be on a different set of questions
and ideas, questions and ideas that constitute *metaethics*. Imagine
that two people – Duncan and Helen – are discussing something
they have heard about, such as a country’s policy to limit severely
the numbers of children any family can have. Let us also imag-
ine that whilst both acknowledge that there are good reasons to