



UNIVERSITÄT
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Objectivism

Ethics

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2 Today

- I. Realism
- II. Constructivism
- III. Naturalism and Non-Naturalism
- IV. Objections to Realism

3 What do philosophers believe?

Meta-ethics			Morality		
Moral realism	1067	62.1	Non-naturalism	272	26.6
Moral anti-realism	449	26.1	Naturalist realism	324	31.6
Other	202	11.8	Constructivism	213	20.8
Moral judgment			Expressivism	109	10.6
Cognitivism	1133	69.3	Error theory	54	5.3
Non-cognitivism	339	20.7	Other	119	11.6
Other	169	10.3			

<https://survey2020.philpeople.org/>

Moral Realism

5 Overview

Objectivism has three features, and there are three related forms of **Subjectivism**:

1. **Cognitivism.** Moral concepts and judgments aim to capture something about reality
2. **Existence.** Some moral claims are true
3. **Universality.** If moral claims are true, they are true for everyone

We can now define three types of **Objectivism**

1. **Constructivism.** Moral claims are objectively true because they would be agreed upon in an impartial, ideal procedure or would be recognised by an ideal observer
2. **Naturalist Realism.** Moral claims are objectively true because morality rests on natural facts
3. **Non-Naturalist Realism.** Moral claims are objectively true because they rest on non-natural facts

Moral Realism: There are mind-independent moral facts ('morality is real').

6 The Phenomenological Argument for Moral Realism

- Contrast different tastes (e.g., ice cream) with a disagreement over an objective matter (e.g., the height of Mt Everest)
 - If we disagree about the former, then serious debate comes to an end; not so in the latter case
 - Reasoned argument is possible about the latter, but not really about the former
 - It seems we can make mistake about factual questions, but not (really) about matters of taste
- Thinking and arguing about morality is more **like** a factual disagreement than a disagreement in taste
- Inference to the best explanation: morality is in some way objective

7 Moral Realism

The **moral realist** believes that there are **mind-independent moral facts** that make moral claims true ('morality is real')

- Mind-independent: independent from my or our beliefs, desires, etc.
- Consider an analogy with natural facts:

'Iron possesses 26 protons and 26 electrons'	'Lying is morally wrong'
Aims to say something true (not express an emotion)	Aims to say something true (not express an emotion)
True just in case it is a fact that iron possesses 26 protons and 26 electrons	True just in case it is a fact that lying is morally wrong
We are often in a position to know this fact	We are often in a position to know this fact
True independent from whether we (or anyone) believe it	True independent from whether we (or anyone) believe it

Questions? Comments?

9 Moral Realism and Liberalism

Question. Are the following two positions compatible?

MORAL REALISM. There are mind-independent moral facts.

HARM PRINCIPLE. We should not interfere with people's lives as long as they do not harm others, even if this means people make inferior choices.

Answer. Yes. The harm principle might simply be mind-independently morally true. In detail, imagine that we think

OBJECTIVISM ABOUT LIFE CHOICES. Some choices are objectively better than others.

AUTONOMY MORE VALUABLE THAN WELFARE. Autonomy—that is, the ability of people to make their own choices—is objectively more important than welfare.

These two principles together might yield **HARM PRINCIPLE**.

10 Moral Realism and Subjectivism about Welfare

Question. Are the following two positions compatible?

MORAL REALISM. There are mind-independent moral facts.

SUBJECTIVISM ABOUT WELFARE. Someone's life is going well for that person just in case they experience positive mental states, or if their preferences are fulfilled.

Answer. Yes. Subjectivism introduces **first-order mind-dependence**: A's life is going well because A has certain mental states or preferences.

- This is compatible with **second-order mind-independence**: *that A's life is going well because A has certain mental states* **is independent** from A's mental states.
- Realism claims that there is second-order mind-independence. This is compatible with first-order mind-dependence. (See also last week on contextualism.)

Constructivism

12 Kantian Constructivism

- Kant: rational people, using the categorical imperative, reach the same results
 - ⇒ Kant accepts cognitivism: moral claims do not express emotions
 - ⇒ Kant rejects error theory: some moral claims are true
 - ⇒ Kant accepts universality: if moral claims are true, they are true for everyone
- What is the categorical imperative based on? Our shared rationality
 - ⇒ Morality is, in some sense, internal to humanity
 - ⇒ Morality is not based on moral facts (overlap with subjectivism!)
 - ⇒ Still, morality is objective: we cannot 'choose' morality
- Why constructivism? It gives us objectivity and avoids scepticism, without committing us to the idea that 'morality is out there'

(Note that it is controversial whether Kant was a constructivist.)

13 Voluntarism



Voluntarist Constructivism: Moral norms are those norms that people actually agree upon, following some procedure.

- Objection 1: This gets us back to a form of relativism, as people in different contexts will agree upon different norms etc.
- Objection 2: Actual people are often irrational, evil, ... and actual procedures are often bad, irrational, ...; thus, why should actual procedures be our guide?

14 Rawlsian Constructivism

Rawls: imagine that people are situated in an '**original position**' behind a '**veil of ignorance**'; they have to choose principles of justice in this position

'The parties in the original position do not agree on what the moral facts are, as if there already were such facts. It is not that, being situated impartially, they have a clear and undistorted view of a prior and independent moral order. Rather (for constructivism), there is no such order, and therefore no such facts apart from the procedure of construction as a whole; the facts are identified by the principles that result.' (Rawls 1980: 568)

Rawlsian Constructivism: Moral norms are moral norms **because** they **would have** been chosen in the Original Position, i.e., a suitably constructed choice situation.

Alternatives: ideal speech situation (Habermas); ideal observer (Firth)

15 Hypothetical Constructivism



Hypothetical Constructivism: Moral norms are those norms that would be selected by a hypothetical procedure which fulfils certain conditions (e.g., people are perfectly rational, know all relevant facts, impartial, not biased, etc.)

But how do we select the conditions that characterise the hypothetical procedure?

16 Problems for Constructivism



- Option 1: The conditions are chosen to get the right results \Rightarrow but then moral norms exist before the constructive procedure! No longer constructivism
- Option 2: The conditions are chosen independent from results; whatever the procedure yields is morality
 - Problem 1: Uncontroversial conditions like 'all information' are not enough to deliver any particular results (e.g., the result could be both Kantianism or utilitarianism)
 - Problem 2: What reason do we have to choose one set of conditions over another?

Questions?

18 Upshots

- There are different versions of constructivism (e.g. Rawls, Habermas, possibly Kant)
- There are versions of constructivism which are more subjectivist—e.g., which deny universality (e.g. Street)
- Constructivism is supposed to avoid some of the controversial elements of moral realism while also keeping its advantages (e.g., objectivity)
- But it is not clear that constructivism is an independent position (Enoch)

Naturalism and Non-Naturalism

20 The Location Problem

- Constructivism tries to be neutral about moral facts (or even denies that we need them), but this probably cannot be done
- Realism: there are moral facts. The moral facts make moral claims true.
- But now we face the metaphysical **location problem (Jackson)**: **where are the moral facts?** what kind of facts are they?
- There are two main answers
 - **NATURALISM (Naturalist Realism)**. Moral facts are natural facts, or reduce to natural facts.
 - **NON-NATURALISM (Non-Naturalist Realism)**. Moral facts are non-natural facts, and are not reducible to non-natural facts.

21 Aristotelian Naturalism

- Remember Aristotle's view: something is good if it realises its natural function
 - ⇒ Aristotle accepts cognitivism: claims about functions are true or false
 - ⇒ Aristotle rejects error theory: some claims about functions are true
 - ⇒ Aristotle rejects relativism: functions are independent from observers
 - ⇒ Aristotle rejects constructivism: functions are not 'constructed' by us or through some procedure, but are observed through the natural sciences
- Aristotle accepts **Naturalism**: moral facts are (or rest on) natural facts; we can discover what the 'functions' of things, living beings, humans, etc. are in a 'natural' way
- Neo-Aristotelianism still a popular position, although not the only naturalist realism

22 Problems for Naturalism

Imagine a robot **knows all natural facts** about an event

- They know all physical facts about it (e.g., how the knife stopped the heartbeat)
- They know all mental facts about the participants (e.g., what everyone thought, felt, intended during the event)
- They know all social facts about the event (e.g., how this event is seen in this society, whether the law would classify it as ‘murder’)
- They also know all relevant past facts (e.g., prior history of the participants)
- They can make perfect predictions (e.g., about consequences of the event)
- They have a complete and accurate theory of physics as a background

Discussion

Does the robot have enough knowledge to tell us whether the action is morally right or wrong?

24 Moore's Open Question Argument

Imagine that I asked: 'Is "mother" equivalent to "parent who is a woman"?' This question would **betray confusion**: it is not an open question amongst competent speakers of English.

1. Suppose that the predicate "good" is equivalent to "maximises pleasure".
2. Thus, someone who seriously asked, "Is an x which maximises pleasure also good?" would betray confusion.
3. But: seriously asking "Is an x which maximises pleasure also good?" betrays no conceptual confusion.
4. Thus, "good" is not equivalent to "maximises pleasure".

This reconstruction is adapted from Miller, *Introduction to Metaethics*, ch. 1

25 Moore's Open Question Argument, Generalised

This argument generalizes for any moral term M and any natural term N:

1. Suppose that the moral predicate M is equivalent to natural predicate N.
2. Thus, someone who seriously asked, “Is an x which is N also M?” would betray confusion.
3. But: seriously asking “Is an x which is N also M?” betrays no conceptual confusion.
4. Thus, no moral term is equivalent to a natural term.

This reconstruction is adapted from Miller, *Introduction to Metaethics*, ch. 1

26 Non-Naturalism

- Moore's conclusion: Moral terms cannot be defined in terms of natural terms
- Morality cannot be reduced, or explained in terms of, anything else
- Moral properties are a fundamental part of reality: they cannot be explained in terms of anything else, and are not reducible to other parts of reality
- Ethics is autonomous: science can never yield ethical conclusions

27 Analytic Identities

- An identity is **analytic** if one can determine that two terms have the same meaning merely through reflecting on the meaning of both terms
 - Grandfather = The father of a parent
 - However, some analytic identities are not immediately obvious and require significant conceptual insight
 - Two complex mathematical terms might be identical, but it might require a long proof to show that they are (e.g., Taniyama-Shimura Conjecture: every rational elliptic curve is a modular form in disguise)
- ⇒ Even if two terms are analytically identical, asking whether they are might be an open question

Thus, we might advocate **Analytic natural realism**. Moral properties are analytically identical with natural properties (although the analytic identity might not be immediately obvious).

28 Synthetic Identities

A **synthetic identity** is one which cannot be established on the basis of conceptual analysis alone

- Example (A): Water is H_2O
 - Water is the stuff that flows in rivers, falls from clouds, which we drink, etc.
 - H_2O is a molecule consisting of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom
 - For most of human history, (A) was unknown
- Example (B): “The second [...] is defined by taking the fixed numerical value of the caesium frequency, $\Delta\nu_{\text{Cs}}$, the unperturbed ground-state hyperfine transition frequency of the caesium 133 atom, to be 9,192,631,770 when expressed in the unit Hz, which is equal to s^{-1} .” (from *The International System of Units*)
 - We have pre-scientific knowledge of what a second is
 - (B) makes precise what a second is; but (B) does not state an analytic identity

29 The OQA and Synthetic Identities

- It is not confused to ask
 - I know that this is the stuff that flows in rivers, falls from clouds, etc., but does this stuff consist of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom?
 - I know that this is the time unit which is 1/60 of a minute, but does this time unit correspond to 9192631770 oscillations of a caesium-133 atom?
- Similarly, if goodness is synthetically identical with maximising pleasure, then it is not confused to ask, “I know this is pleasure-maximising, but is it good?”
- **Synthetic natural realism.** Moral properties are synthetically identical with natural properties.

Questions?

Objections to Realism

32 The Argument from Queerness

An argument from Mackie, broadly construed, against non-naturalism:

1. If there were objective moral values, they would be entities or properties of a very strange ('queer') kind.
2. In particular, these entities or properties would have to-be-doneness built into them, unlike anything else in the universe.
3. We should avoid multiplying entities or properties beyond necessity.
4. There is no convincing reason why we would need to posit moral properties.
5. Therefore, we should deny that there are objective moral values.

33 Answering the Argument from Queerness

Reply 1. Why would something seeming weird count against thinking it exists?

“The world *is* a queer place. I find neutrinos, aardvarks, infinite sequences of objects, and (most pertinently) impressionist paintings peculiar kinds of entities; but I do not expect nuclear physics, zoology, formal semantics or art history to pay much regard to that.” (Platts 1980)

Reply 2. The background of Mackie’s argument is a kind of naturalism: only natural things exist. But some properties can also not be fully explained in a naturalist way, such as mathematical objects like numbers and self-consciousness.

Reply 3. We do have good reason to posit moral properties, namely that they best explain what moral discourse and deliberation is about.

34 The Argument from Disagreement (Enoch)

1. There is deep, wide-ranging disagreement in moral matters (across cultures and historical eras, as well as within them).
2. What best explains such disagreement is that moral opinions do not reflect ... an objective, independent moral reality, but rather perspectives, cultures, ways of life, or something of the sort.
3. Therefore, moral opinions do not reflect ... an objective, independent moral reality, but rather perspectives, cultures, ways of life, or something of the sort.
(From the first two claims, by inference to the best explanation.)

35 Answering the Argument from Disagreement

Against premise 1. There really is not as much disagreement as it first appears; at any rate, there is not as much disagreement over fundamental values

Against premise 2. The realist **can** give an explanation of disagreement compatible with realism—e.g., people's perspectives are distorted by self-interest, cognitive biases, inattention, imprecise language, ...

36 Debunking Arguments

- The general structure of a debunking argument is the following (Kahane):
 - **Causal premise.** S's belief that p is explained by X.
 - **Epistemic premise.** X is not a reliable epistemic process.
 - Therefore, S's belief that p is unjustified.
- Toy Example
 - You believe that the earth is flat because you read it on a random blog.
 - Reading stuff on random blogs is not a reliable epistemic process.
 - Therefore, your belief that the earth is flat is unjustified.
- Complex Example (Marx)
 - Capitalists' beliefs in private property rights, free contract, meritocracy, liberalism, etc. is explained by their material interests and class position in capitalist society.
 - A belief-forming process that is driven by material interests is not a reliable epistemic process.
 - Therefore, the capitalists' beliefs in private property rights, etc. is unjustified.

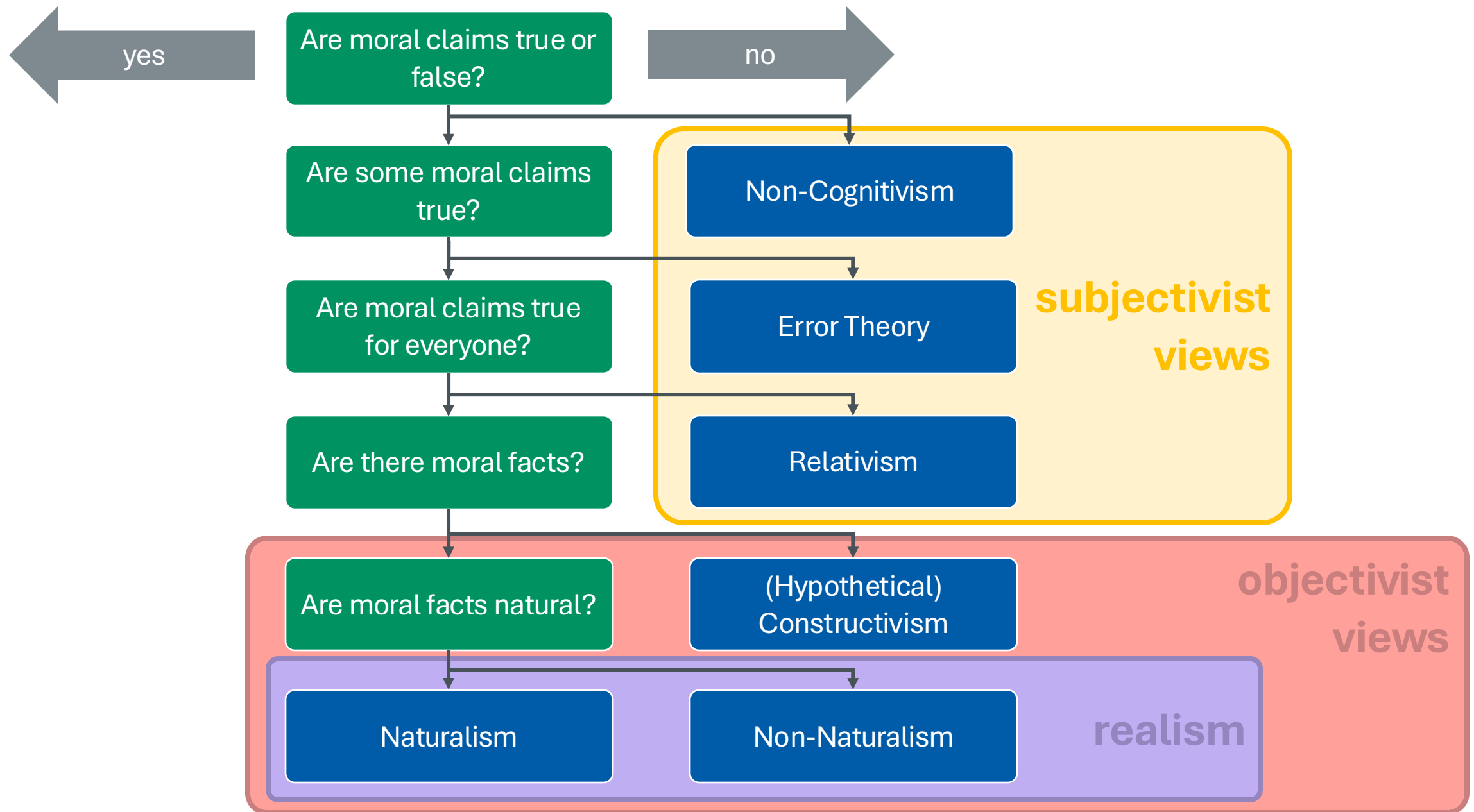
37 Evolutionary Debunking Arguments (Kahane, Vavova)

1. **Causal premise.** Our evolutionary history explains why we have the moral beliefs we have.
2. **Epistemic premise.** Evolution is not a truth-tracking process with respect to moral truth.
 - A. Evolutionary processes tracks **evolutionary fitness**—beliefs induced by evolution will increase our chances of survival.
 - B. Fitness-enhancing beliefs and moral truths **come apart**—e.g., morality requires us to make sacrifices that do not increase our chances of survival.
3. **Therefore,** none of our moral beliefs is justified.

38 Responding to Evolutionary Debunking

Deny Epistemic Premise, part B. Morality *is* fitness-enhancing, at least on a group level. E.g., cooperation and burden-sharing increase the survival chances of a group. E.g., pain is morally bad; evolution selects for beings which avoid pain, and thus believe that pain is morally bad.

Deny Causal Premise. Evolution might aim at fitness, but in the process, it might have given us moral reason **as a by-product**. What explains our moral beliefs is that we have used moral reason, even though we have been created by evolution.



40 Readings & Tutorials

- **Tutorial Reading:** Enoch, David. 'Why I am an Objectivist about Ethics (And Why You Are, Too)'.
- **Background Reading:** Brink, David. *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. Chapter 2, 'Moral realism and moral inquiry'.
- **Next Week:** Moral Epistemology; Reviewing; Q&A