

NEW EDITIONS / НОВИ ВИДАННЯ

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PRINCIPIA METAETHICA: THE ALPHABET OF MORAL THEORIES.

Chrisman, M. (2023). *What is this thing called Metaethics?* Abingdon: Routledge.

The second edition of *What is this thing called Metaethics?*¹ was published in 2023. This book is a part of Routledge series of textbooks named “What is this thing called?” designed for students. Matthew Chrisman, a professor at The University of Edinburgh, is a qualified specialist in ethics, epistemology, philosophy of language, and political philosophy. He has fully revised his work since 2017, when the first edition was published. This version contains actual cases as examples, and also has a new improved structure. I find this book interesting to look at because it is helpful in studying metaethics. It is also a rare occasion when you can discover most of the prominent ethical theories in one book that has historical philosophy references and demonstrative illustrations. In Ukraine, moral philosophy is a popular topic for various researchers. But what about metaethics exactly? In my opinion, it isn’t really explored. Of course, the majority of Ukrainian philosophers has heard about George Edward Moore, but do they really know much about the history of metaethics or contemporary metaethical studies? Only in recent years, metaethics became more or less interesting for Ukrainian community. Yaroslav Shramko, a Ukrainian professor at Kryvyi Rih State Pedagogical University, published his article on metaethics in 2021 [Shramko 2021]. Nowadays, it may be the one and only high-quality systematic work on the topic in Ukraine. By the way, the author of the article refers to the first edition of Chrisman’s book. It seems that this philosophical area can become a good ground for further researches to emerge. So to better understand the thing we are talking about, let’s look closer at this question: what is metaethics? Or shall we ask what is it exactly we are talking about when we explore metaethics?

In the *Introduction*, we can find a motive that will appear further in the text. It says that there are normative and applied ethics. Normative ethics seeks theories of what is to be morally right or wrong, while in applied ethics we search for a particular practical decision in our day-to-day life [Chrisman 2023]. But when we talk about metaethics we

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¹ Contents: Preface to the Second Edition; Introduction; 1. Four Key Issues; 2. Naturalism; 3. Nonnaturalism; 4. Error Theory and Fictionalism; 5. Expressivism; 6. Summary and Chart; 7. Theories That Are Hard to Classify in Traditional Terms; 8. Refocusing Metaethics?; Glossary; Index.

provide reflections on much more abstract and broad topics. It concerns ethical judgments and so-called nature of morals, and furthermore – nature of reality itself. Hence, metaethicists explore the second-order questions, which investigate the foundations of ethical theories both normative and applied.

One of the most interesting parts of this book is the first chapter, *Four key issues*. Chrisman argued that there are four major philosophical fields from which metaethical theory emerge as complete. Those are questions about ethics' intersections with ontology, epistemology, philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. By describing every point from the list, we get a fairly comprehensive understanding of the principles of metaethics. I would note here that the author seems to regard metaethics primarily as a method rather than as a philosophical field.

Now we can look at the author's discussion of the main theories. Those are Nonnaturalism, Expressivism, Error theory, and Naturalism. Apart from these, many other theories were presented after a close inspection of the basic ones. Those honorable mentions are: ecumenical expressivism, hybrid cognitivism, constructivism and some other interesting ideas. The author calls those theories as such that it is hard to classify in traditional terms. So what is the tradition of metaethics? I would like to return to this question later in the text.

Refocusing metaethics is another great chapter of the book. In my opinion, it is great to pay an attention to the relation of metaethics and normative ethics. Metaethics is not the solitary system of knowledge. It reacts with normative theories and applied ethics as well. Also, Chrisman notes that metaethics is thriving within ethics [Chrisman 2023]. This statement may be the illustration of the biggest reason why metaethics should be studied – at least because it's useful nowadays. And of course there are much more reasons that won't be less convincing. In order to think of ways in which metaethics can be applied to connecting issues, the author brings up topics of thick ethical concepts, ethics of belief, and metanormative theories. Those three fields are perfect examples of issues needed to be processed by metaethical reflections. Because it may be not so easy to resolve some problems with complex ethical terms, knowledge and beliefs, and status of normative judgments.

The structure of the text is aptly designed. A distinct useful part of the work is the glossary, as are numerous chapter summaries. These elements make the book an excellent guide for studying metaethics. Not only can you check every definition of highlighted terms, but you can also access a concise recap at the end of every part.

In the text you will find reviews of many ethical theories. Chrisman gives the examples that can be divided into three big sections: the Ancient, Modern and Contemporary metaethical inquiries. For instance, a case with Plato's *Euthyphro* vividly shows a typical metaethical examination deep in history [Sayre-McCord 2023]. In my opinion, the most important background reference of the book is Humean theory. Not only did Hume contributed to a future projects with Hume's Law, but also outlined a theory of motivation. And there are much more great references in the text: from T. Hobbes to A. J. Ayer, G. E. M. Anscombe and many others. I also need to point out the mentions of the twenty-first century researches that provide readers with a current discourse.

Some aspects of this book made me think of philosophical and methodological problems, such as the origin of metaethical concept. A part called *Moorean Arguments* caught my eye. Here the author recalled the origin of G. E. Moore's nonnaturalism mentioning H. Sidgwick [Chrisman 2023]. This part explains the specifics of the cornerstone ideas

that founded metaethics. *Principia Ethica* [Moore 1993] is considered a first work of metaethical traditional method. Maybe there were lots of metaethical problems throughout history, but I suppose original metaethics is exclusively post-Moorean. Chrisman's structure implicitly raises the question whether a definitive canon of metaethics does exist within the scope of current researches and theories. In other words, what is this thing in metaethics we call traditional? It's obvious that the overwhelming majority of moral philosophers are critical to the moral intuitionism. Although, almost every time, it is possible to clearly identify a common metaethical subject.

In order to categorize metaethical theories, we may use various different criteria. However, in my opinion, when we talk about moral ontology and moral epistemology, these thoughts are already moving into some linguistic and mental position. For example, G. E. Moore's *The Refutation of Idealism* [Moore 1997] (which is also available in Ukrainian translation since 2023 [Moore 2023]) demonstrates an author's view on consciousness that is implemented in his moral theory. Both the *Principia Ethica* and *The Refutation of Idealism* were published in 1903, so I assume we can state that the ideas from those texts are complementary, since I didn't find contradictions between theses of the two works. Although it's impossible to say that the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind aren't important for metaethics, I suggest that the division of realism/antirealism and corresponding cognitivism/noncognitivism represent the essential metaethical framework. Nevertheless, it might be more difficult to categorize all the metaethical thoughts only by two groups, which have many "isms" in common. And it would be also useful to examine the variety of ways the metaethical conceptions intersect. Therefore, it was a good decision to articulate the four key metaethical issues anyway, at least for the sake of studying and clarity.

So does it make a big difference to study metaethics rather than to do historico-philosophical research? In other words, can we say that metaethics had always been a part of any ethical doctrine, even in Ancient philosophy? It depends on our view: whether we consider metaethics a method (or a tradition/school) of analytical philosophy or a field of philosophical problems. It is really useful to look at various terrains to understand the root of metaethical approach. However, the history of metaethics does begin in the twentieth century. I think that historical contexts, when applied to the ethics, offer us many opportunities for further explorations. In order to teach this important and fascinating area of philosophy, it appears that history significantly contributes to the understanding even of the practical dimension of metaethics.

As a philosophy student, I find it hard yet interesting to define metaethics. It requires understanding of analytic philosophy, logic, linguistic turn, ethics in general, and many other things. It seems to me that we should treat metaethics both as a philosophical movement (historico-philosophical view) and as a method of ethical inquiry (more of practical philosophy view). Obviously, a clear and sharp methodology of metaethics was developed during the twentieth century. But let's not forget that it doesn't mean there were no metaethical problems in the past. In other words, the subject matter of metaethics was approached by many philosophers, from the most ancient to the latest.

Although there is no such chapter in this book, which would provide a historical reconstruction, we can still see all the examples and references to Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Hume, Kant etc. You won't find the accent on chronology of metaethics, but thanks to this work you surely will understand the metaethical ground of many theories, both past and contemporary.

This book is an outstanding work on metaethics. It covers many contexts and contains a comprehensive vision on the core of contemporary moral philosophy. I am positive that it can be helpful for everyone who is interested in practical philosophy, both students and teachers. Obviously, it will especially resonate with those studying metaethics. But also, I would extremely recommend this work for those thinking metaethics is an outdated doctrine from the last century. The book shows how metaethics can be studied now, and what can be gained from studying it.

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