The Arguments of Michael Smith’s ‘What is the Moral Problem?’ (1994)

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What follows is a presentation of the arguments of Michael Smith’s ‘What is the Moral Problem?’, which is Chapter One of Smith’s The Moral Problem (1976). Smith’s chapter was written for a professional audience and thus assumes certain specialized vocabulary, background knowledge, and style of argumentation unfamiliar to introductory philosophy students. The goal of the present essay is to present Smith’s arguments in a way that makes them more accessible to such students.

However, this essay is not written in the format of a standard textbook presentation. In a standard textbook presentation, the arguments would be presented from the textbook author’s perspective—that is, from the perspective of someone who is merely relaying, without necessarily endorsing, the arguments of the original paper. This essay, by contrast, is simply written as if it is from Smith’s perspective. Hence, where an ordinary textbook might say something like “According to Smith, the Moral Problem is of central importance”, this essay will simply say, “The Moral Problem is of central importance”. By reducing the number of “voices” that stand between readers and the arguments, this style of presentation reduces cognitive load on readers, allowing them to engage more directly with the arguments.

What follows represents no more than my own (Dustin Locke’s) understanding of Smith’s arguments. It is entirely possible that Smith himself would not, upon examination, endorse everything that I have to say in what follows. I have tried to the best of my abilities to relay the arguments of Smith’s paper as I understand them. Readers who want to be sure they understand Smith correctly must go to the source. Finally, it is my understanding that under U.S. copyright law, this document constitutes a transformative, non-profit, educational, and thus fair use of Smith’s paper. Copyright holders with questions, comments, or concerns are encouraged to email me at dlocke@cmc.edu.
1. Ethics vs Meta-ethics

At some point in your life, you have debated a **moral question**. You may have debated whether your teacher’s grading policy was fair, whether sex outside of marriage is wrong, or whether it’s ever OK to tell a lie. And just as surely as you have debated moral questions, you have also made **moral judgments**. Perhaps you thought your teacher’s grading policy was unfair, that sex outside of marriage is not wrong, or that it’s sometimes OK to tell a lie. Or perhaps you thought the opposite of these things. Either way, you made a moral judgment—that is, a judgment to the effect that something was right/wrong/good/bad/fair/unfair/etc.

When you’re thinking about moral questions and making moral judgments, you are doing what philosophers call ‘ethics’. This essay is not about ethics. It is rather about something called ‘meta-ethics’. Where ethics involves moral questions and, in answer to them, moral judgments, meta-ethics involves taking a step back and asking more abstract questions about moral questions and moral judgments. I’m willing to bet that you have at some point in your life done meta-ethics, even if you didn’t know that was what you were doing. Perhaps one day you and your friend were discussing whether your teacher’s grading policy was fair. In so far as you were discussing that question, you were doing ethics. But then your friend may have said something like this:

‘Well, I know you think the grading policy is fair, but that’s just your opinion. Who’s to say what’s really fair?’

And in response you may have thought something like this:

‘Is fairness really just a matter of opinion? Or are some things fair and some things unfair, regardless of our opinions about them?’

As soon as you’re asking yourself this question—that is, as soon as your thoughts have moved away from the question of **whether this grading policy is fair** and towards the more abstract question of **whether fairness is simply a matter of opinion**—you’re doing meta-ethics. In general, there are three main meta-ethical questions.

1. **A question about moral knowledge.** How if at all can we know whether something is right/wrong/fair/unfair/etc.? For example, how if at all can we know whether sex outside of marriage is wrong?

2. **A question about the nature of morality.** Are moral qualities objective or subjective? Consider the non-moral quality of **being 29,000 feet tall**. This is an objective a quality of Mount Everest. Now consider the non-moral quality of **being delicious**. This is a subjective quality of ice cream—it is subjective because whether ice cream is delicious depends on the taste buds of the person in
question. Now consider the moral quality being wrong. Is, for example, the wrongness of telling a lie objective like the height of Mt. Everest or subjective like the deliciousness of ice cream?

3. **A question about the nature of moral judgments.** What are moral judgments? Are moral judgments beliefs—like the belief that Everest is 29,000 feet tall—or are they more like, say, preferences—like the preference for vanilla ice cream over chocolate?

In my view, the most important meta-ethical question is this last one: what are moral judgments? This question may seem odd to you. After all, we make moral judgments all the time, and so we seem to be quite familiar with them. However, if you’ve ever wondered whether ‘morality is just a matter of opinion’, you have, in effect, wondered about the nature of moral judgments. And you were right to wonder. As we’ll see below, when we think hard about the nature of moral judgments, we discover a deep philosophical puzzle I call ‘the Moral Problem’.

I will not defend a solution to the Moral Problem in this essay. Rather, my aim is merely to show you what the Moral Problem is and why it is so important. I will begin by discussing two concepts that are necessary for understanding the Moral Problem: the concept of belief and the concept of desire (section two). I will then introduce the Moral Problem (section three) and argue that the Moral Problem is the central organizing problem in meta-ethics (section four).

2. **Beliefs and Desires**

Before introducing the Moral Problem, I need to discuss the concepts of belief and desire. By ‘belief’, I don’t mean anything fancy. I just mean the commonplace sort of thing that all of us have lots of. For example, I believe that two plus two equals four, I believe that I am a philosophy professor, and I believe that the sun will rise tomorrow. You might protest, saying that I don’t merely believe, but rather know that I am a philosophy professor. Well, yes, I do know that I am a philosophy professor. But the first component of knowing is believing: if I didn’t believe I was a philosophy professor, I could hardly know that I was!

For our purposes, there are two important things to note about beliefs. First, the function of a belief is to represent the world as being one way rather than another. In this sense, beliefs are like maps or pictures. Suppose Thummim believes that the dining hall is serving tacos. The function of Thummim’s belief is to represent the world as being such that a certain facility—the dining hall—is serving a certain type of food—tacos. Moreover, since beliefs represent, they either correctly or incorrectly represent: if the dining hall is indeed serving tacos, then Thummim’s belief that the dining hall is serving tacos is correct, and if the dining hall is not serving tacos, then

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1 [Note from Dustin Locke. This essay is a rewrite of chapter one of Smith’s book *The Moral Problem*. In this initial chapter, Smith is merely concerned to set-up the Moral Problem. The rest of Smith’s book develops and defends his solution to the Moral Problem.]
Thummim’s belief that the dining hall is serving tacos is incorrect. So that’s the first important thing about beliefs: beliefs represent the world as being one way rather than another and are therefore capable of being correct/incorrect.

The second important thing about beliefs is that beliefs do not on their own motivate action. Consider again Thummim and her belief that the dining hall is serving tacos. Will Thummim go to the dining hall? From what we’ve said so far, we have no way of knowing. It will depend, among other things, on how Thummim feels about tacos. Does she like them? Does she like something else better? In order to be motivated to act one way rather than another—say, to go to the dining hall rather than the café—it is not enough that Thummim merely have beliefs about which places are serving which type of food. She must also have some sort of positive or negative attitudes towards the foods in question. So that’s the second important thing about beliefs: beliefs do not on their own motivate action.

What needs to be added to a belief in order to motivate action? A desire. Suppose Thummim has a desire for tacos. The function of this desire is to motivate Thummim to act in certain ways and not others. For example, if she has a desire for tacos, then Thummim will, all else being equal, go to wherever she believes she can acquire them. The ‘all else being equal’ qualifier is important. If it costs $10 to eat tacos at the dining hall, and Thummim’s desire to not spend $10 is stronger than her desire to eat tacos, then she might not go to the dining hall. I say ‘might’ because whether she will go will depend on other things as well—e.g., her desire to see her friends, and so on. What she ultimately ends up doing will depend on all of her relevant desires.

Now here’s something that can be confusing: we sometimes have beliefs about our desires. So, for example, Thummim may believe that she desires Tacos. According to the standard view, this belief would still not on its own be enough to motivate Thummim to action. If Thummim merely believes that she desires tacos, but does not actually desire them, Thummim will not be motivated to pursue tacos. Well, that isn’t exactly right: if Thummim desires that her desires be fulfilled, and she believes that she desires tacos, then she will be motivated to pursue tacos. But note that here again a desire is present: in this case, it’s the desire that her desires be fulfilled. **One way or another, a desire must be present for a belief to motivate action.**

Before moving on, there’s one more thing I need to say about desires: unlike beliefs, desires do not represent the world as being one way rather than another. Consider again Thummim’s desire for tacos. The function of this desire is not to represent the world as being one in which Thummim has tacos—rather, the

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2 You may feel that it is an insult to call someone’s belief incorrect. But you shouldn’t. To say that someone has an incorrect belief is not to say that they are stupid or anything like that. After all, even if Thummim’s belief is incorrect, she might have had very good reasons for believing that the dining hall is serving tacos—perhaps it’s Tuesday and the dining hall has always served tacos on Tuesdays in the past. If she has good reasons for her belief, but the belief nonetheless happens to be incorrect, we call this a justified but incorrect belief. Since Thummim’s incorrect belief might still be justified in light of the evidence she has, it is no insult at all to point out that Thummim’s belief is incorrect.
function of this desire is to motivate Thummim to make the world into one in which Thummim has tacos. Moreover, since desires do not represent the world as being one way rather than another, it makes no sense to ask whether a certain desire ‘correctly’ represent the world as being one way rather than another. Is Thummim’s desire for tacos correct? This question simply makes no sense.

Let me sum-up what I’ve just covered. First, beliefs represent the world as being one way rather than another, but they do not (on their own) motivate action. And second, desires motivate action, but they do not represent the world as being one way rather than another. Let’s put this in a handy table.

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3. The Moral Problem

Let us now turn to what I labelled meta-ethical question (3) above: what are moral judgments?

On the one hand, moral judgments appear to be beliefs. For starters, it is common to talk about moral judgments as if they are beliefs. For example, it is common to say something like “Jack believes it would be wrong for Jill to have an abortion”. When we say something like this, we seem to be attributing to Jack a certain belief—namely, the belief that it would be wrong for Jill to have an abortion—and to attribute this belief to Jack would seem to be to attribute to Jack a moral judgment.

Moreover, and more importantly, moral judgments seem to be capable of being correct or incorrect, and therefore seem to represent the world as being one way rather than another, which is exactly what beliefs do. Note that moral agreement and moral disagreement are a common feature of everyday life. But to agree with someone is to think that what they think is correct, and to disagree with someone is to think that what they think is incorrect. Hence, in so far as we engage in moral agreement and disagreement, we treat moral judgments as though they can be correct and incorrect. **But only that which represents can correctly/incorrectly represent.** So it would seem that moral judgments represent, which is exactly what beliefs do. This again suggests that moral judgments are beliefs.

Another feature of everyday life that is closely related to moral agreement and moral disagreement is moral deliberation. By ‘moral deliberation’, I mean discussions and debates—whether with other people or simply in our own heads—about whether something is good/bad/right/wrong/fair/unfair/etc.. The existence of moral
deliberation, like the existence of moral agreement and disagreement, suggests that moral judgments are capable of being correct or incorrect.

To see what I mean, let’s contrast deliberations to a different sort of discussion: negotiations. The goal of a negotiation is to reach a compromise that both parties are willing to accept. Suppose, for example, that Nahla wants to go out for dinner and Jocelyn wants to stay home. After mentioning their corresponding desires to one another, they may negotiate an agreement: for example, Nahla may agree that they’ll stay home for dinner, but only if Jocelyn cooks. Having reached this agreement, they don’t think of themselves as having arrived at the ‘correct’ answer to their question of whether to stay home. Rather, they think of themselves as simply having reached a compromise.

The goal of a moral deliberation, by contrast, is to reach the correct answer to a moral question. Suppose that Chen and Yan are discussing whether Yan should donate to an organization called ‘World Famine Relief’. The sort of discussion that Chen and Yan are likely to have will look importantly different from the sort of discussion that Jocelyn and Nahla have. Where Jocelyn and Nahla are simply trying to reach a compromise, Chen and Yan are trying to reach the correct answer to their moral question—that is, the question of whether Yan should donate to World Famine Relief. Chen and Yan suppose that there is a correct answer, and they are trying to figure out what it is.

If the goal of a moral deliberation is to arrive at a correct answer to a moral question, then it makes sense to ask whether a given moral judgment is correct—for example, it makes sense to ask, of the moral judgment that Yan should donate to World Famine Relief, whether this moral judgment is correct. But if moral judgments can be correct/incorrect, then, since only that which represents can correctly/incorrectly represent, moral judgments must represent, which is exactly what beliefs do. This suggests that moral judgments are beliefs.

On the other hand, moral judgments appear to have a power that beliefs do not have—namely, they appear to motivate action. Consider again Chen and Yan, who are discussing whether Yan should donate to World Famine Relief. At first Yan isn’t sure, but after some time, Chen convinces Yan that he should donate. ‘Yes,’ Yan says, ‘You’re right: I should donate some money to World Famine Relief.’ Note that Yan appears to be making a moral judgment. ‘Here’s the donation form,’ Chen says, ‘All you have to do is enter your credit card information.’ Now suppose Yan refuses. ‘No thanks,’ Yan says. ‘Why not?’ Chen replies, ‘Don’t you now agree that you should donate?’ ‘Yes,’ Yan replies, ‘I agree that I should donate to World Famine Relief. But I am not at all inclined to do so.’

At this point, we (and Chen) should wonder whether Yan really accepts the moral judgment that he should donate. We might suspect that Yan is just saying he accepts this judgment, perhaps to get himself out of the conversation with Chen. Or perhaps Yan is just acknowledging that according to the standards of his society, he should donate to World Famine Relief. But it’s one thing to think I should donate (this is a moral judgment) and
quite another to think *according to the standards of my society, which I don’t accept, I should donate* (this is not a moral judgment). In any case, in so far as Yan is not at all inclined to donate, we will suspect that he doesn’t really accept the moral judgment that he should donate. This is because we think that if he really did accept that moral judgment, then he would be at least a little bit, if not completely inclined to donate. In other words, we think that genuine moral judgments motivate actions—if you’re not at all motivated to act in accordance with your alleged moral judgment, then you don’t really make that moral judgment.

The idea that moral judgments motivate actions is a big problem for the idea that moral judgments are beliefs, for, as we’ve already discussed, beliefs do not motivate actions. So it seems that moral judgments cannot be beliefs after all! Putting this all together, we arrive at the puzzle I call ‘The Moral Problem’, which we can summarize as follows.

**The Moral Problem** is that moral judgments seem like they must be, but also cannot be, beliefs. It seems that moral judgments must be beliefs because moral judgments are capable of being correct or incorrect, and therefore seem to represent the world as being one way rather than another. But it also seems like moral judgments cannot be beliefs, because moral judgments (all on their own) motivate action, which beliefs do not do. In this respect, moral judgments seem more like desires.

The Moral Problem is, in my opinion, the central organizing problem in meta-ethics. What I mean by is that different meta-ethical theories are most naturally distinguished by how they relate to the Moral Problem. I explain how in the next section.

4. Meta-ethical Disagreement and the Moral Problem

Before proceeding, it will be useful to introduce some terminology.

**Meta-ethical Cognitivism** (henceforth, ‘cognitivism’) is the view that moral judgments are beliefs.

**Meta-ethical Non-cognitivism** (henceforth, ‘non-cognitivism’) is the view that moral judgments are not beliefs.

Since I’m going to introduce several different versions of these views, it will be helpful to start making a chart. I’ll call it

**The Chart of Meta-ethical Disagreement**
As we’re about to see, there are lots of different versions of cognitivism and lots of different versions of non-cognitivism. In my opinion, the Moral Problem is the reason there are so many different versions of each view. No matter which of these two views you endorse, the Moral Problem presents you with a challenge. If you endorse cognitivism, you must explain why it is that moral judgments appear to motivate actions. As cognitivists grapple with this half of the moral problem, they end up offering different versions of cognitivism. Similarly, if you endorse non-cognitivism, you must explain why it is that moral judgments appear to be correct/incorrect, and thus appear to represent. As non-cognitivists grapple with this half of the moral problem, they end up offering different versions of non-cognitivism. Let’s look at some of the different versions of cognitivism/non-cognitivism, and hopefully you’ll get a sense of what I mean.

We’ll start with cognitivism. One version of cognitivism is known as ‘reductive cognitivism’, or simply ‘reductivism’ for short.

**Chart of Meta-ethical Disagreement**

According to reductivism, moral judgments represent the moral properties of things, but moral properties can be reduced to non-moral properties. For example, Jack’s belief that Jill should not have an abortion represents Jill’s having an abortion as having a certain moral property—wrongness—but wrongness can be reduced to non-moral properties.
To understand what reductivism is, you’ll need to understand what it means to say that one thing can be reduced to other things. Roughly, it means that the one thing is nothing more than a certain combination of the other things. For example, water is just a certain combination of hydrogen and oxygen (H\(_2\)O). In this sense, water is nothing more than hydrogen and oxygen combined in a certain way—that is, water is not a separate substance that exists in addition to hydrogen and oxygen. Similarly, reductivists think that moral properties are nothing more than non-moral properties combined in a certain way.

To really understand reductivism, it will be helpful to look at one particular version of this view. We’ll look at the version known as ‘hedonistic reductivism’.

**Chart of Meta-ethical Disagreement**

According to **hedonistic reductivism**, the moral judgment that it is wrong to do X represents the world as being such that doing X would lead to less pleasure and/or more pain than some alternative action.

Very roughly speaking, what makes hedonistic reductivism reductive is that it reduces wrongness (a moral property) to pain and pleasure (non-moral properties). There are many other versions of reductivism—some reduce wrongness to God’s commands, others reduce wrongness to subjective preferences, others reduce
All these views have in common is that they say that moral properties (e.g., wrongness) are nothing more than a certain combination of non-moral properties.

Turning back to the Moral Problem, we can see that reductivists face a certain difficulty. To illustrate, let’s stick with our example of hedonistic reductivism. According to this view, Jack’s moral judgment that it would be wrong for Jill to have an abortion is a belief, and this belief represents the world as being such that Jill’s having an abortion would lead to less pleasure and/or more pain than Jill’s not having an abortion. This view has no problem explaining why Jack’s moral judgment is capable of being correct/incorrect—according to this view, Jack’s moral judgment represents the world as being a certain way, and Jack’s belief is therefore correct if and only if the world is that way. But that’s only half of the Moral Problem. The other half is to explain why moral judgments appear to motivate action. It is here that reductivists run into trouble. According to hedonistic reductivism, Jack’s belief that it would be wrong for Jill to have an abortion represents the world as being such that Jill’s having an abortion would lead to less pleasure/more pain than Jill’s not having an abortion. But believing that Jill’s having an abortion would lead to less pleasure/more pain will motivate Jack to act only if Jack desires to reduce pain and increase pleasure. But, as I noted in the previous section, moral judgments motivate action without accompanying desires. Hence, it seems that Jack’s moral judgment cannot be what hedonistic reductivism says it is.

This problem for hedonistic reductivism arises for all other versions of reductivism. No matter what properties the reductivist reduces moral properties to, they face the challenge of explaining how it is that beliefs that represent those properties could, without the aid of accompanying desires, motivate action.

In light of this problem, two different varieties of cognitivism have arisen: non-reductive cognitivism and error theory. I’ll plug these into our chart and then explain them.

**Chart of Meta-ethical Disagreement**

![Diagram](chart.png)
According to **error theory**, moral judgments are ‘empty’ beliefs.

According to error theory, our moral judgments are built on a massive delusion—namely, the delusion that moral properties are real. Error theorists think that in order for, e.g., wrongness to exist, wrongness would have to be a property such that merely believing that some action had that property would all on its own motivate someone to act one way rather than another. But, the error theorist insists, no property can be like that. Hence, the error theorists concludes that there are no moral properties—that is, no properties represented by our concepts of rightness/wrongness/etc. Thus, according to error theorists, any moral judgment to the effect that such and such is right/wrong/good/bad/etc., is false.

Finally, there is non-reductive cognitivism.

According to **non-reductive cognitivism**, moral judgments represent moral properties and moral properties cannot be reduced to non-moral properties.

According to this view, there is nothing to be said about what, e.g., wrongness consists in. On this view, wrongness cannot be reduced to pain and pleasure, the commands of God, subjective preferences, or any other non-moral stuff. On this view, rightness/wrongness/goodness/badness/fairness/unfairness/etc. are fundamental aspects of the world, just like, as physicists currently believe, mass and charge are fundamental aspects of the world.

The problem with non-reductive cognitivism is that it doesn’t seem to offer us any explanation at all of why moral judgments appear to motivate. Proponents of the view either insist that, appearances to the contrary, moral judgments don’t actually motivate, or else that they do, but that no explanation of why they do is possible. That answer might seem to you wholly unsatisfactory, and many proponents of non-reductive cognitivism will admit that it is. They will insist, however, that all of the alternative answers are simply implausible.

If you are unsatisfied with all of these views, then you are not alone. In light of the problems discussed above, some philosophers favor non-cognitivism, the view that moral judgments are not beliefs. There are many different versions of non-cognitivism, but we’ll just discuss two here: emotivism and plan-based non-cognitivism.

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**Chart of Meta-ethical Disagreement**
According to emotivism, to make a moral judgment is to have a certain sort of emotion. For example, to make the moral judgment that it would be wrong for Jill to have an abortion might be to feel a certain negative emotion towards Jill’s having an abortion.

According to another version of non-cognitivism, which I’ll call plan-based non-cognitivism, to make a moral judgment is to have a certain kind of plan. For example, to make the moral judgment that it would be wrong for Jill to have an abortion is to plan, if ever in Jill’s position, to not have an abortion.

As in the case of cognitivism, there are different versions of non-cognitivism because non-cognitivists in effect do not agree on the best solution to the Moral Problem. The half of the Moral Problem that all non-cognitivists face is the challenge of explaining why moral judgments appear to be capable of being correct or incorrect, and therefore appear to represent. This challenge can be seen very clearly in the case of emotivism: if a moral judgment is an emotion, then it would seem that a moral judgment cannot be correct or incorrect, because emotions cannot be correct or incorrect. Again, only that which represents the world as being one way rather than another can correctly/incorrectly represent the world as being one way rather than another, and emotions don’t seem to do that. Suppose, for example, that Bridget is happy. Does her happiness represent the world as being one way rather than another? It doesn’t seem so.

Proponents of plan-based non-cognitivism insist that their view has an advantage over emotivism in this regard. Here, very roughly, is what they say. They grant that plans do not represent the world as being one way rather than another, but they insist that something can be correct/incorrect even if it doesn’t represent the world.
as being one way rather than another. Proponents of plan-based non-cognitivism insist that to call something correct/incorrect is just to agree/disagree with that thing. And plans, they note, are the sort of thing that can be agreed/disagreed with. Consider again Jack, who makes the moral judgment that it would be wrong for Jill to have an abortion. Jill thinks Jack’s moral judgment is incorrect. If Jack’s moral judgment is just a plan, then for Jill to disagree with Jack is just for Jill to reject his plan, and that indeed is something Jill can do. Jack has a plan to not have an abortion if ever in Jill’s position, and Jill rejects that plan. That’s all very sketchy. But I hope it gives you some sense of how proponents of plan-based non-cognitivism try to explain how it is that moral beliefs are capable of being correct/incorrect, despite not being beliefs. In other words, I hope it gives you some sense of how proponents of plan-based non-cognitivism respond to the Moral Problem.

5. Conclusion: The Moral Problem is the Central Organizing Problem in Meta-ethics

Although our chart of meta-ethical disagreement is highly incomplete—note the spaces we have left for ‘many other views’—it should give you a sense of just how much disagreement there is amongst meta-ethicists. At the center of this disagreement is the disagreement between cognitivist, on the one hand, and non-cognitivists, on the other. This disagreement is driven by the fact that moral judgments appear to have the central feature of beliefs—they appear to be capable of being correct/incorrect, and therefore to represent—and yet it also appears that moral judgments have a feature that beliefs do not have—moral judgments appear to motivate action. This dual-nature of moral judgments is what divides cognitivists from non-cognitivists.

But this dual-nature of moral judgments is also, I think, responsible for the disagreement we see between varieties of cognitivism and between varieties of non-cognitivism. Cognitivists disagree with each other because, while they all agree that moral judgments are indeed beliefs, they disagree about the best way to explain the motivational aspect of moral judgments. Similarly, non-cognitivists disagree with each other because, while they all agree that moral judgment are not beliefs, they disagree about the best way to explain the fact that moral judgments appear to be capable of being correct/incorrect and therefore to represent. This is why, in my view, the Moral Problem is the central organizing problem in meta-ethics.