

Meta-ethics is the branch of philosophical ethics that asks how we understand, know about, and what we mean when we talk about what is right and what is wrong. Earlier, the Scottish philosopher David Hume had put forward a similar view on the difference between facts and values. For example, Aristotle implies that less precise knowledge is possible in ethics than in other spheres of inquiry, and he regards ethical knowledge as depending upon habit and acculturation in a way that makes it distinctive from other kinds of knowledge. Studies of how we know in ethics divide into cognitivism and non-cognitivism; these, respectively, take descriptive and non-descriptive approaches to moral goodness or value. The ontology of ethics is about value-bearing things or properties, that is, the kind of things or stuff referred to by ethical propositions. Non-descriptivists and non-cognitivists believe that ethics does not need a specific ontology since ethical propositions do not refer. Realists, on the other hand, must explain what kind of entities, properties or states are relevant for ethics, how they have value, and why they guide and motivate our actions.