What does it take to be a moral realist?

Moral realism is the combination of intuitionism with moral realism whereby moral knowledge rests on self-evident moral truths sui generis (classes in its own) & not reducible to any natural facts or properties. 

Nihilism:

Nihilists affirm (1) but reject (2). When nihilists make claims about acts being right/wrong they intend to make claims about the way the world is. In other words, they intend to say something capable of being true or false. However, no sentence really is true. Therefore, people err when they presuppose “rightness” or “wrongness” as features that acts could possess. Though nihilists conceive the world as value-free, devoid of any moral nature, an individual can hardly sincerely continue to assert falsehoods once one knows them to be falsehoods. Thus, moral thought/talk takes on the status of religious thought & talk once one becomes a convinced atheist.

Expressivists or Non-Cognitivists:

Expressivists reject both (1) and (2). Thus, the sentence we use when we make moral claims are not used with the intention of saying something that is even capable of being either true or false. We do not use them to make claims about the way the world is. Therefore, we do not presuppose rightness and wrongness are features that acts could possess. We use moral sentences to express our feelings about acts, people, states of the world, and the like. When we say “Murder is wrong” it is as if we are saying “Book for murder!” Though Nihilism & Expressivism share a conception of the world as value-free, devoid of any moral nature, expressivists believe moral thought does not take on the status of religious thought. Because of a value free world, one is free to make moral claims (nothing more is presumed).

For Emotivists moral language is subjective: expressive of emotions/feelings but there is no truth/falsity; moral language is imperative (it commands, “Murder is wrong.”); moral language aims at persuading (language has a magnetic force, aiming at influencing another person’s actions: “This is right” means “I approve of this; do as well”). Remember, moral statements are said to be without truth-value (are neither true nor false): they have no cognitive content.

Moral claims are actually true if they are factually right; moral judgments describe moral facts.

QUESTIONS & TWO CRITICISMS

Are values are essentially different from facts? Are values derived from facts? Can value statements (“Murder is wrong.”) be true or false just as factual statements are (“The apple is red.”)? If sentences ascribe rightness & wrongness are capable of being true or false, then is Expressivism refuted? If any sentences are able to ascribe rightness and wrongness to actions really are true, is Nihilism refuted? Consider the following two criticisms:

1. Moral Realism can’t seriously explain moral conflicts.
2. Moral truths cannot be observed or justified in the same way as material facts (e.g., scientific method). The mere fact that moral facts might be compatible with natural facts does nothing to support the idea that we could learn about the moral facts (e.g., David Hume argued that no moral conclusion follows non-problematically from non-moral premises; no “ought,” follows from an “is” – without the help of another (presupposed) “ought”). There is no valid inference from non-moral premises to moral conclusions unless one relies on a moral premise. If, then, all that science can establish is what “is” and not what “ought” to be, science cannot alone establish moral conclusions. Thus, Hume suggests that there is something wrong in arguing from facts to values: “Hume’s Fork” or the “naturalistic fallacy.” “(1) Fact; (2) Therefore, value” or “(1) is (2) Therefore, ought.” Moore goes further & states that ethical characteristics are different in kind from non-ethical ones, & thus, we cannot deduce ethical propositions from non-ethical ones. Moore concludes that value can’t be identified with a natural property; it must be definably ostensibly as a non-natural one, resembling a Platonic form, that we all know by intuition (non-natural moral realism).

Non-natural moral realism is the combination of intuitionism with moral realism whereby moral knowledge rests on self-evident moral truths sui generis (classes in its own) & not reducible to any natural facts or properties.

Ethical naturalism: moral rules designed to guide actions which change over time. Thus, ethical concepts (e.g., “harm,” “to person”) change. Moral realism grounds ethics & moral rules can be rationally discovered/measured via analysis of the changing nature of ourselves, our needs & our society. Naturalism can either be subjective (truth originates in individual or social decision) or objective (truth is independent of individual or social decision). Ethical judgments are degenuine assertions of fact & thus, can be justified empirically. In contrast:

Ethical non-naturalism: (either Intuitionism or Religious revelation) states that ethical terms can’t be defined in factual terms, the refer to non-natural properties & thus, can’t be derived from empirically confirmed propositions; either intuition alone or divine revelation provides justification.

Expressivists (non-cognitive) say intuitive speculation is meaningless. They accept Thesis 1 but deny 3 & 4. Thesis 2: they agree that evaluative claims refer to a non-natural world, but there is no way to find out whether there is a non-natural world & no way to know whether they refer to anything at all. Thus, evaluative language is meaningless or non-cognitive: use the term “meaning” in a way that does not depend upon whether a sentence is true or false. Ayer: meaning of sentence found in its method of verification. All meaningful sentences are either tautologies (A is A) or empirically verifiable. The apple is red: true or false. Natural moral rules are non-nonsensical (e.g., “murder is wrong”).

Metaethics is philosophizing about the very terms and structure of ethical theory.