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Against Mackie's Error Theory: Value Agnosticism

Error theory is a second-order position which holds that although first-order moral judgments aim at the truth, they systematically fail to secure it. The error theoretical position is anti-realist (in that it assumes there are, ontologically speaking, no moral facts), and cognitivist (in that it assumes moral statements are verifiable expressions of beliefs). The error theorist claims that when we say "stealing is wrong," we are asserting that the act of stealing instantiates the property of wrongness – however in actuality nothing instantiates this property (because there are no objective moral facts) and therefore the statement "stealing is wrong" is untrue (Joyce). In essence, according to error theory, first-order moral discourse in general is infected with error given its concern with deciding which of many statements possesses the property of moral correctness, because in actuality there is no such property.

Mackie's Error Theory

Mackie holds firstly that "there are no objective values" (Mackie, 13). He states that he wants to hold a second-order moral scepticism (as opposed to a first order scepticism that would reject a particular morality, instead of the existence of morality in general). Taking for granted that there is a clear difference between what one might call 'cruel' and 'kind' actions, he questions whether it is clear that a 'cruel' action should be condemned for any objective reason. Mackie also distinguishes his position from a traditional first-order form of subjectivism which would suggest that saying "this action is right" means "I approve of this action" (Mackie, 14);

that is, that a position that suggests one ought to do whatever one thinks she or he should.

Mackie also makes clear that by saying that there are no objective values he leaves open the question of what moral statements are. He dismisses this open question as a problem with his argument regarding it as secondary; at the core of the argument is the negation, i.e. that moral statements do not address objective values. Mackie clarifies by saying, “the denial that there are objective values does not commit one to any particular view about what moral statements mean, and certainly not to the view that they are equivalent to subjective reports” (Mackie, 15).

Ultimately, Mackie posits that “although most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false” (Mackie, 18). Having explicated the implications for moral statements given that there are no objective values, he then presents his arguments against the existence of objective values.

Mackie’s Argument from Relativity

Mackie first presents an argument against objective values from relativity. This argument goes as follows: moral codes differ between groups; such differences are a truth of descriptive morality; these differences also indirectly support second-order subjectivism, in that these radical differences in first-order moral judgements between groups make it difficult to treat them as apprehensions of objective truths. For example, it is not reasonable to believe that when one culture practices monogamy and another practices polygamy, one has access to an objective moral truth whereas the other does not.

Mackie outlines what he calls a well known counter to this argument, namely that the items claimed to be universal in realist theories are not specific moral codes or practices, but very general basic principles which are recognized implicitly to some extent in all societies. That

is to say, a general principle combined with different circumstances present between groups would yield different social patterns or culture-specific rules in practice, so different practices between groups does not negate the possibility of objective values.

Mackie responds to this criticism by stating that in the case that there are these general principles, moral judgments are then only derivatively or contingently true; if circumstances had been different, different actions would have been right. Furthermore, he argues that most of the time, people do not compare others' actions to a general principle "for which widespread acceptance could be claimed" (Mackie, 19), but instead use a 'moral sense' or 'intuition' to make these moral judgments – which he would call a "travesty of actual moral thinking" (ibid.).

Mackie's Argument from Queerness

Following his argument from relativity, Mackie argues against objective values based on their queerness, were they to exist. His argument has two components, one metaphysical and one epistemological.

Metaphysically, Mackie suggests that if there were objective values, they would be entities or qualities of a 'very strange sort,' and would be completely different from anything else in the universe. As such, if we were to be aware of them, it would have to be through a special faculty of moral perception or intuition; a faculty utterly different from our ways of knowing anything else (Mackie, 19). Therefore, given the implausibility of both this faculty for understanding and the type of existence objective values would have, Mackie posits that they are so absurd as to cause us to reject their existence.

Epistemologically, Mackie rejects objective values because none of the ordinary accounts of knowledge acquisition provide an adequate answer to the question of how we can be aware of these values, given that they are of such a very strange sort.

Against Mackie's Arguments

Although seemingly convincing, upon further analysis, both Mackie's argument from relativity and his argument from queerness are unsatisfactory in demonstrating the absence of objective values.

The argument from relativity rests on the supposition that given we do not now have the ability to objectively determine that one group's practices or values are better or more righteous than those of another, we never will. I posit, however, that although we cannot yet make that determination, it does not follow necessarily that we will never be able to do so. For example, it is easy to imagine a number of different groups trying to succeed at the same goal (for example, landing a man on the moon) and for some number of those groups to correctly solve the problem, with others failing to do so. Similarly, one can imagine a number of different groups vying to discover the 'correct' set of moral values, with none presently having yet managed to achieve that goal; it does not follow from that circumstance that no group will eventually succeed, or that some groups will not be more successful than others in doing so.

In regard to his argument from queerness, it is not clear that the objective values which Mackie seeks to deny would have to be utterly different from everything else in the universe. I agree that objective values would have exist in some sort of abstract state unlike normal perceptible features of the world, however, this could be in the same abstract state (as Mackie acknowledges) as mathematical properties, quantum mechanical theories, theories of relativistic physics, etc. That is, objective values seem part of a set of similar facts that are unobservable to humans, counterintuitive, and not easily discoverable or accessible – however, given paradigm shifts and leaps forward in thinking, are eventually apprehensible to humans. It is easy to imagine a time before Einstein and relativistic physics; it seems equally plausible that objective

values could be much like relativistic physics, however remaining as yet undiscovered.

Objective Value Agnosticism

My opponent might suggest that in arguing against Mackie's support for his error theory, I have left something unfinished. That is, having shown it remains possible for objective values to exist (although we cannot at present access them), I have denied that they do not exist, but failed to demonstrate they do.

To this criticism, I would respond that my arguments outline what I would call 'third-order value agnosticism.' My position could be described as an 'error-theory error-theory'; that is, one that posits it is not coherent to have second-order arguments about whether it is coherent to argue about the first-order moral character of specific actions (given the unclear nature of the existence of objective moral values).

It will only be clear that objective values exist when we discover them, so until we discover them, they remain in an indeterminate state (where it is unclear whether they exist). Therefore, second-order arguments that aim to prove objective values do not exist are illogical, because it is only possible to show that objective values exist (not that they do not); if objective values are shown not to exist, that conclusion is indistinguishable from demonstrating that they have yet to be discovered. As such, error theories in general aim to complete a task which I argue is impossible, because of the abstract/queer nature of the objective values.

In conclusion, I find Mackie's arguments against the existence of objective values unconvincing. In accordance with the theory of value agnosticism I posited (which would suggest we cannot know whether objective values exist), Mackie's arguments do adequately show that we do not at present have access to objective values; however his arguments fail to demonstrate that objective values do not exist in what is a presently incomprehensible state.

Works Cited

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