

PHILOSOPHY 101

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MACKIE'S ERROR THEORY

TWO KINDS OF METAETHICAL SKEPTICISM

Noncognitivism:

Moral discourse is concerned with expressing or describing states of the subject (semantic claim)

Error Theory:

- (i) Moral discourse makes descriptive claims of the objective world, but is systematically and uniformly *false* (semantic claim);
- (ii) There are no objective moral facts or properties (metaphysical claim)

OBJECTIVITY & ETHICS

If it turned out that there were no objective moral values, would that matter for our moral practices?

1. *Yes*
2. *No*
3. *Not sure*

THE CLAIM TO OBJECTIVITY

TWO SIGNS OF OBJECTIVITY

- The authority of objective ethical values
- The significance of objective ethical values

THE AUTHORITY OF ETHICS

- Ethical judgments purport to be authoritative because of features of the world, not because of features of the judging subject—moral judgments are 'categorical'
- Noncognitivism cannot explain the categorical authority of ethics

Someone in a state of moral perplexity, wondering whether it would be wrong for him [to engage in research related to germ warfare], wants to arrive at some judgment about this concrete case...The question is not, for example, whether he really wants to do this work, whether it will satisfy or dissatisfy him, whether he will in the long run have a pro-attitude towards it, or even whether this is an action of a sort that he can happily and sincerely recommend in all relevantly similar cases. Nor is he even wondering just whether to recommend such action in all relevantly similar cases. He wants to know whether this course of action would be wrong in itself. (Mackie, 72)

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ETHICS

- The possibility that there are no objective values seems to threaten the meaning or purpose of life in a way that it shouldn't if ethical claims didn't purport to be objective

COGNITIVIST SKEPTICISM – THE ERROR THEORY

TWO ARGUMENTS FOR THE ERROR THEORY

1. The Argument from Relativity/Disagreement
2. The Argument from 'Queerness'

THE ARGUMENT FROM DISAGREEMENT

1. There is an enormous amount of variation in moral views, which leads to disagreement concerning what to do/value
2. Moral disagreement is intractable in a way that other kinds of disagreement are not
3. \therefore The best explanation of the intractability of moral disagreement is that there is no objective fact of the matter concerning what to do/value

OBJECTIONS – LESS DISAGREEMENT?

- Deny premise (1) – the extent of moral disagreement is exaggerated
 - Differences in customs do not mean differences about values
 - Hinduism & veneration of cows vs. Catholicism and veneration of the Virgin Mary
 - Both religions are venerating similar values (e.g. the caretaker/maternal figure) but in very different forms leading to superficial behavioral differences (e.g. vegetarianism)

OBJECTIONS – INTRACTABILITY

- Deny premise (2) — moral disagreement is no more/less intractable than other forms of disagreement
 - The intractability premise assumes that realism → the resolvability of disputes
 - But the possibility of unresolvable disputes occurs in supposedly 'realist' domains as well
 - Fundamental disputes in physics may not be resolvable, even in principle (e.g. which string theory is correct)

- One or more of the interlocutors may be systematically and irredeemably mistaken
 - It is possible to have coherent but nevertheless totally mistaken beliefs
- Some moral disputes may have no uniquely correct answers
 - Moral ties
 - Incommensurable values
 - It ought to be possible in principle to show interlocutors who are not systematically mistaken that their dispute has no unique resolution

SUMMARY: AGAINST MACKIE ON DISAGREEMENT

- Reject premise (1)
 - The extent of moral disagreement is exaggerated
- Reject premise (2)
 - Moral disagreement is no more/less intractable than other forms of disagreement
 - One or more of the interlocutors may be systematically and irredeemably mistaken
 - Some moral disputes may have no uniquely correct answers

