

Philosophy 101

Mackie — The Subjectivity of Value (III)

April 16, 2015

Review Questions

Questions

- 1 T/F: Meta-ethics is concerned with what we ought to do

Questions

- ② T/F: Ethical non-cognitivism denies that moral language is descriptive or fact-stating

Questions

- ③ T/F: The Error-Theory says that (i) there are moral facts; (ii) moral language incorrectly describes the moral facts

Cognitivist Skepticism — The Error Theory

Error Theory:

- ① Metaphysical claim: there are no objective moral facts or properties
- ② Semantic claim: Moral discourse makes descriptive claims, but is systematically and uniformly *false*

Two Arguments for the Metaphysical Claim

- ① The Argument from 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

An Alternative Explanation of Disagreement?

- There are objective ethical facts and some individuals or cultures enjoy better epistemic access to those facts than others

An Alternative Explanation of Disagreement?

- Mackie's Reply: Disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect people's adherence to and participation in different ways of life not the other way around
 - Monogamy vs. Polygamy
 - does one culture have better access to moral facts regarding marriage or do their views on marital facts simply reflect the particular development of that institution in their culture?

Other Alternatives — 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)

Other Alternatives — 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)

Other Alternatives — Intractability

- one or more of the interlocutors may be systematically and irredeemably mistaken
 - it is possible to have coherent but nevertheless totally mistaken beliefs

Other Alternatives — Intractability

- 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

The Argument from “Queerness”

- ① If there were objective values/ethical facts they would have to be intrinsically prescriptive or action-guiding
- ② Intrinsically action-guiding entities are strange — they are unlike any other entities that we think exist
- ③ It is possible to explain ethical behavior without appeal to the existence of such strange entities as objective values/ethical facts
- ④ \therefore There are no objectively and intrinsically action-guiding values/ethical facts