

Philosophy 101

The Absurd

June 3, 2014

Review

Mackie's
Argument from
"Queerness"

Camus on the
Absurd

Nagel on the
Absurd

Review

Quiz

- ① T/F: Meta-ethics is concerned with what we ought to do
- ② T/F: Ethical non-cognitivism denies that moral language is descriptive or fact-stating
- ③ T/F: The Error-Theory says that (i) there are moral facts; (ii) moral language incorrectly describes the moral facts
- ④ T/F: The Argument from Disagreement claims that moral disagreement is very widespread

Ethics vs. Meta-Ethics

- **ethics** is about what we ought to do
- **metaethics** is about what we're thinking and doing when we think and talk about what we ought to do

Subjectivity and Objectivity in Ethics

Objective values: values that give reasons (or otherwise prescribe how we ought to act) regardless of what we (as individuals or as a culture) say, do, desire, or think

Subjective values: values whose reason-giving or prescriptive status depends in some way on what we (as individuals or as a culture) say, do, desire, or think

Two Kinds of Metaethical Skepticism

- Noncognitivism
- Error Theory

Two Kinds of Metaethical Skepticism

Non-cognitivism:

- ① moral language is not descriptive of the mind-independent objective world — it is not true or false
- ② moral language expresses or describes mental states or emotions

Problems with Noncognitivism

- ① NC has problems accounting for the seeming *authority* of ethical claims
 - ethical claims present themselves as *categorical*—as independent of the judging subject's desires or interests
- ② NC has problems accounting for the *significance* of the ethical in our lives
 - 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

Two Kinds of Metaethical Skepticism

Cognitivist Skepticism — The 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 Error Theory

- 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

Explanation of Disagreement

- Disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect people's adherence to and participation in different ways of life rather than their participation in those ways of life reflecting their antecedent adherence to a moral code
 - Monogamy vs. Polygamy

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

Mackie's Argument from "Queerness"

The 'Queerness' Argument

- 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

An Example — Platonic Forms

In Plato's theory the Forms, and in particular the Form of the Good, are eternal, extra-mental, realities. They are a very central structural element in the fabric of the world. But it is held also that just knowing them or 'seeing' them will not merely tell men what to do but will ensure that they do it, overruling any contrary inclinations (64)

An Example — Platonic Forms

- Objective values as both
 - *knowable*
 - *intrinsically motivating*

An Example — Platonic Forms

An objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it (77)

Mackie's "Internalist" Assumption

Internalism: objective values must be intrinsically motivating — knowledge of a moral requirement entails being motivated to follow that requirement

Mackie's "Internalist" Assumption

- Why assume Internalism?
 - Amoralism is a coherent possibility
 - perfect understanding of moral requirements
 - total lack of motivation to act morally

Rejecting Internalism

Externalism: The motivational force of value is a contingent psychological fact, depending on the psychological structure of an agent

Rejecting Internalism

- Normal human agents share common psychological features
 - e.g. capable of sympathy and empathy
- Widespread possession of a particular set of psychological features explains uniformity in the motivational structure of different agents

Replying to the Queerness Argument

- Reject premise (1) of the argument
 - Opt for an "Externalist" theory of motivation

Camus on the Absurd

Existence as a Philosophical Problem

*There is but one truly serious philosophical problem,
and that is suicide.*

Existence as a Philosophical Problem

- Why is the issue of suicide a *philosophical* problem?
 - fundamental philosophical questions are practical — they concern what we should *do*
- "Is life worth living?" is the most fundamental practical question
- Camus's Question: If life is absurd, then is life worth living?

The Absurd

- Why is life absurd?
 - human beings are driven to ask questions concerning existence for which there are no answers
 - Life is finite
 - The world is not fundamentally rational or intelligible
 - There are no objective values or purposes
- Can life be meaningful if there is no objective point or purpose to it?

Nihilism

Nihilism: denial of the existence of objective value; nothing is objectively wrong or right, good or bad

Two Questions

- ① Does the truth of nihilism entail that life is absurd?
- ② If life is absurd, does that mean it isn't worth living?

Camus's Position

- Life is absurd — we have expectations about the meaning/value of existence that cannot be met
- We have two options
 - ① escape
 - false consciousness
 - suicide
 - ② defiance

Camus's Position

Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. (Camus, 8)

Camus's Position

- Conscious affirmation of *both* the absurdity and the value of one's life
 - is this a psychologically realistic position?

Nagel on the Absurd

Situational Absurdity

In ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality (Nagel 1971, 718)

Nagel on the Absurd

The Absurdity of Life

The sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself (718).

Nagel on the Absurd

The Absurdity of Life

- Life is absurd when there is a *persistent* and *inescapable* mismatch between the aspirations of life and the conditions under which it is lived

Bad Arguments for Absurdity of Life

① Scale

- Spatial or temporal scales trivialize our activities

② Death

- Death interrupts any justification for our actions

③ Purpose

- There is no larger plan of which we are a part

The Scale Argument

- Life is absurd because nothing we do now will matter in a million years

Against the Scale Argument

- If time scale is the issue then it is also true that what happens in a million years doesn't matter to us now
- If timescale isn't the issue then it must be because nothing matters *now*, but why think that is true?

The Death Argument

- Our lives are full of various activities: school, work, family; but none of it matters because we will all die
 - The fact that our lives are finite entails that we have no justification/reason for our actions

Against the Death Argument

- Not all reasons for action depend on their connection to a later sequence of activities
 - reason to take medicine for a headache
 - reason to avoid pain in others
- The chain of justification must end somewhere, so why not *within* one's life?

The Purpose Argument

- Meaning within one's life depends on one's life *as a whole* having purpose

The Purpose Argument

The thought that you'll be dead in two hundred years is just a way of seeing your life embedded in a larger context, so that the point of smaller things inside it seems not to be enough-seems to leave a larger question unanswered. But what if your life as a whole did have a point in relation to something larger? Would that mean that it wasn't meaningless after all? (Nagel 1987, 97)

Against the Purpose Argument

- If one's life has a purpose because it helps bring about X we can still ask whether X has a purpose
- The same reasoning that makes our lives problematic makes any purpose into which our lives fit equally problematic

God and Purpose

- If God has a purpose in creating the universe (including us) wouldn't that be enough to make life meaningful?
 - we can still question the point of God's actions
 - we may not be able to understand the point of God's actions

Nagel's Argument for Absurdity

We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. It is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them (719)

Nagel's Argument for Absurdity

- ① Subjectively, we must take our lives and the choices we make as 'serious' and non-arbitrary
- ② Objectively, we also recognize that our choices are ultimately 'non-serious' or arbitrary
- ③ \therefore Life is absurd

Absurdity as the Human Condition

- Is the existence of objective values is irrelevant to whether life is absurd?
- Absurdity is due to our capacity to always step back and question what we value
 - subjectively, our lives matter to us
 - objectively, we can always question the point of anything

Absurdity as the Human Condition

I would argue that absurdity is one of the most human things about us: a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics...if a sense of the absurd is a way of perceiving our true situation...then what reason can we have to resent or escape it? ... If sub specie aeternitatis there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn't matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair. (Nagel, 726-7)

Absurdity as the Human Condition

- Recognition of the absurdity of life is distinctly human
 - Absurdity requires the capacity for self-reflection (mice don't have absurd lives)
- We should deal with absurdity through irony
 - Taking one's life less seriously will make it less absurd/more livable
 - Is this position psychologically plausible?