

# Philosophy 101

## Mackie — The Subjectivity of Value (II)

November 20, 2014

**Review**

The Claim to  
Objectivity

The Error  
Theory

The Argument  
from Relativ-  
ity/Disagreement

# Review

# The Ethical and the Metaethical

- ① First-Order (Ethics)
- ② Second Order (Metaethics)

- **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

## Question 1

Is the sentence 'it is morally wrong to cause unnecessary pain'  
true or false?

- A. *True*
- B. *False*
- C. *Neither True or False*

## Question 2

Is there an objective fact of the matter whether it is morally wrong to cause unnecessary pain?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. *Not sure*

## Question 3

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

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. *Not sure*

# Varieties of Skepticism

- First-Order (ethical): skepticism concerning prevailing moral views
- Second-Order (metaethical): skepticism concerning particular features of morality



# 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

# Two Kinds of Metaethical Skepticism

## 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*

# The Analogy with Color

- The naive use of color language suggests that color terms refer to properties of the world which exist totally independently of observers
  - The naive use presumes that color language picks out “primary qualities”
  - Our scientific picture of the world suggests that colors are, at best, secondary qualities
  - All naive color discourse is false

# The Claim to Objectivity

## Two Signs of Objectivity

- Mackie denies that non-cognitivism is a plausible theory of ethical thought & judgment
- Two arguments:
  - the authority of objective ethical values
  - the significance of objective ethical values

## Two Signs of Objectivity

- 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'
  - non-cognitivism cannot explain the categorical authority of ethics

## Two Signs of Objectivity

*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)*



# Two Signs of Objectivity

- 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

# The Error Theory

# Two Arguments for the Error Theory

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

## The Argument from Relativity/Disagreement

## Mackie's Argument

- 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

# 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