

# Philosophy 101

## Mackie's Error Theory/The Absurd

December 2, 2014

Philosophy 101

Mackie's Error  
Theory/The  
Absurd

Mackie's  
Cognitivist  
Skepticism

Camus on the  
Absurd

## Mackie's 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

## 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 '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

## Summary

- Should we accept Mackie's error theory?
  - Neither the argument from disagreement nor the argument from 'queerness' shows that moral values/facts do not exist
  - Absent further argument we might be justified in accepting moral 'realism' as the 'default' position



## 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?

## 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?