

# Philosophy 101

## Mackie — The Subjectivity of Value (III)

April 1, 2014

# Metaethics & Skepticism

# 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

## 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*

## Cognitivist Skepticism — The Error Theory

# 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

- 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?

## 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

## Other Alternatives — Intractability

- Deny premise (2) — moral disagreement is no more/less intractable than other forms of disagreement
  - The intractability premise assumes that realism  $\rightarrow$  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”

## 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

## 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

## 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