

Philosophy 101

Science & Ethics

April 3, 2014

Mackie's Error Theory

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

Mackie's "Internalist" Assumption

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

Rejecting Internalism

- 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

Review: Disagreement & Queerness

Against the Disagreement Argument:

- 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

Review: Disagreement & Queerness

Against the Queerness Argument

- Reject the 'internalist' assumption
- Opt for 'externalism' about moral motivation

Williams on Science & Ethics

Williams vs. Mackie

- Like Mackie, Williams argues for a form of meta-ethical skepticism
- *Unlike* Mackie, Williams argues that there can be first-order ethical knowledge
 - Williams's skepticism is based on the differences between science and ethics and how reflection on those differences can undermine ethical knowledge

Disagreement & Convergence

Disagreement & Convergence

- Is there something special about ethical disagreement?
 - Mackie: Yes
 - widespread
 - intractable

Disagreement & Convergence

The tradition is right...not only in thinking that there is such a distinction [between ethics and other subjects], but also in thinking that we can come to understand what it is through understanding disagreement.

However, it is not a question of how much disagreement there is, or even of what methods we have to settle disagreement...The basic difference lies rather in our reflective understanding of the best hopes we could coherently entertain for eliminating disagreement in the two areas. It is a matter of what, under the most favorable conditions, would be the best explanation of the end of disagreement: the explanation—as I shall say from now on—of convergence. (Williams, 135)

Disagreement & Convergence

- Is there something special about ethical disagreement?
 - Williams: Yes
 - the explanation of 'convergence' and its effect on belief is different for ethics than for science

Why Compare Ethics to Science?

- Scientific knowledge is paradigmatically objective
- Scientific knowledge is central to our understanding of the world
- Ethical knowledge is also central and seemingly objective

Disagreement & Convergence

In a scientific inquiry there should ideally be convergence on an answer, where the best explanation of the convergence involves the idea that the answer represents how things are; in the area of the ethical, at least at a high level of generality, there is no such coherent hope. (Williams, 136)