

# Philosophy 101

Mackie — The Subjectivity of Value (III)

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## 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?

- 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