

Philosophy 101

Mackie — The Subjectivity of Value (IV)

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Arguments for the Error Theory

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 “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

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

Mackie's "Internalist" Assumption

- Against internalism
 - Amoralism is a coherent possibility
 - perfect understanding of moral requirements
 - total lack of motivation to act morally

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

Rejecting Internalism

Externalism: The motivational force of value is a contingent psychological fact, depending on the psychological structure of an agent

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

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 solution?

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Arguments for
the Error
Theory

Camus on the
Absurd

Nagel on the
Absurd

Nagel on the Absurd

Situational Absurdity

In ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality (Nagel 1971, 718)

Nagel on the Absurd

The Absurdity of Life

The sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself (718).

Nagel on the Absurd

The Absurdity of Life

- Life is absurd when there is a *persistent* and *inescapable* mismatch between the aspirations of life and the conditions under which it is lived

Bad Arguments for Absurdity of Life

① Scale

- Spatial or temporal scales trivialize our activities

② Death

- Death interrupts any justification for our actions

③ Purpose

- There is no larger plan of which we are a part