

Philosophy 101

Ethics & Science (II)

April 8, 2014

Williams on Science & Ethics

Mackie & 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

Rejecting the Argument

- Reject premise (1)
 - extent & nature of disagreement is exaggerated
- Reject premise (2)
 - intractability is either not unusual or explainable in other ways

Williams on Disagreement

- Disagreement & convergence are important to understanding the difference between science and ethics
- The explanation of 'convergence' and its effect on belief is different for ethics than for science

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)

Two Explanations of Convergence

- ① Convergence is guided by the way the world is independently of us (science)
- ② Convergence is due to social, cultural, etc., facts, and not how the world is independently of us (ethics)

Better than Mackie?

- How is this better than Mackie's argument?
 - doesn't require assumptions about extent of disagreement or its intractability
 - allows that there are true first-order ethical judgments

Science & Convergence

- Science as describing the “way the world really is” independent of us
- Can we make sense of “the way the world really is”?
 - articulates a conceptual scheme that is maximally independent of any parochial way of describing the world

The Absolute Conception

a very natural interpretation of what scientific knowledge should be... takes [it] to be a system which represents the world as it is independently of any inquirer, using terms which to the greatest extent display that independence (Williams 1983, 344)

The Absolute Conception

We can select among our beliefs and features of our world picture some that we can reasonably claim to represent the world in a way [that is] to the maximum degree independent of our perspective and its peculiarities. The resultant picture of things, if we can carry through this task, can be called the "absolute conception" of the world. In terms of that conception, we may hope to explain the possibility of our attaining the conception itself, and also the possibility of other, perspectival, representations. (Williams, 138-9)

The Absolute Conception

- A representation of reality that is maximally free of any parochial peculiarities that a particular subject may have in their representation of the world
 - the world as described by sensory concepts vs theoretical physics

The Absolute Conception

- The Absolute Conception can explain how both itself and more parochial/perspectival representations are possible
 - physics & biology explain color perception

Science & the Absolute Conception

- Scientific inquiry is guided by “the way the world really is”
- The “way the world really is” is understood in terms of the absolute conception of it
- Scientific inquiry is understood in terms of convergence with the absolute conception
 - explanation of scientific objectivity in terms of fit with absolute conception

Science & the Absolute Conception

I say that the sky is blue, and my visitor from Mars says that it makes a humming noise. Are we agreeing? Certainly we don't mean the same thing, since I am talking about how the sky looks and he is talking about how it sounds. Yet when we reflect on these views we find that the things we both say have implications expressible in terms of a more absolute concept, that of wave-lengths. And when we look at those implications our judgments are found to converge. Here we find grounds for confidence that both of our perceptions are guiding us rightly: they are ways of knowing about the world. (Korsgaard, 108)

Ethics & the Absolute Conception

- Can we understand ethical inquiry as regulated by “the way the world really is”?
 - is there a parochial/absolute structure to ethical concepts?
 - ‘thick’ vs. ‘thin’ ethical concepts
 - cruel, mean vs. wrong, bad

Ethics & the Absolute Conception

- No plausible analogue in the ethical case
 - dispute about the way in which lying is impermissible (e.g. sinful vs. dishonorable) need not converge on its being *wrong*

Ethics & the Absolute Conception

- Thick ethical concepts constitute our 'social world'
 - express our culture's values
- Absolute conception in ethics is the conception of which social world is best for humans to live in
 - question for the social sciences (anthropology, sociology, psychology)

Science & Ethics

- Ethical reflection (along with history, anthropology, psychology, etc.) shows us the possibility of alternative social worlds
- The acknowledgment of alternative social worlds undermines our capacity to privilege any particular one

Science & Ethics

- Reflection on our use of particular thick ethical concepts can undermine our confidence in those concepts
- We can lose ethical knowledge by no longer being able to apply the concepts that used to be characteristic of our ethical point of view

Science & Ethics

- Reflection on scientific concepts does not yield the possibility of alternative legitimate scientific frameworks
- Scientific frameworks converge on how things are
- Objective explanations have different effects on our theoretical as opposed to ethical beliefs