

Philosophy 101

Meta-Ethics & the Error Theory

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Meta-Ethics &
the Error
Theory

Approaches to
Ethics

Value and
Objectivity

The Claim to
Objectivity

The Error
Theory

Approaches to Ethics

The Ethical and the Metaethical

- ① First-Order (Ethics)
- ② Second Order (Metaethics)

- **ethics** is about what we ought to do
- **metaethics** is about what we're thinking and doing when we think and talk about what we ought to do

- Claims/questions concerning what is good/bad, right/wrong:
 - "Should I give money to the poor?"
 - "Murder is wrong"
- what is morally required
 - one ought to help those in need

Ethics

- what is morally permissible
 - eating meat
- what things are of value
 - friends, family, work
 - character traits — virtues/vices
 - honesty, loyalty vs. cruelty

Metaethics

- Metaethical claims are not about what is right/wrong, good/bad, or of value
- Metaethics asks questions about and makes claims concerning ethical values, judgments, and behavior

Example Metaethical Topics

- Language: what is the function of moral discourse?
- Metaphysics: what is the nature of moral facts or properties
- Epistemology: what are the conditions for knowledge in ethics?
- Moral Psychology: what kinds of psychological states are characteristic of moral thought and behaviour?

Value and Objectivity

Subjectivity and Objectivity in Ethics

Objective values: values that give reasons (or otherwise prescribe how we ought to act) regardless of what we (as individuals or as a culture) say, do, desire, or think

Subjective values: values whose reason-giving or prescriptive status depends in some way on what we (as individuals or as a culture) say, do, desire, or think

Varieties of Skepticism

- First-Order (ethical): skepticism concerning prevailing moral views
 - typically is itself a moral view
 - involves a kind of condemnation of prevailing morality

Ethical & Metaethical Skepticism

- Second-Order (metaethical): skepticism concerning particular features of morality
 - moral knowledge
 - existence of moral values/properties/facts
 - truth of moral judgments

Two Kinds of Metaethical Skepticism

- Noncognitivism
- Error Theory

Noncognitivism

if I say to someone, 'You acted wrongly in stealing that money,' I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, 'You stole that money.' In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, 'You stole that money,' in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker. (Ayers 1936, 107)

Noncognitivism

- moral language is not descriptive/fact-stating — it is not *about* anything
 - moral claims are equivalent in meaning to reports of the judger's own feelings or attitudes
 - "Murder is wrong" → "I don't like murder" or "Boo! Murder!"
 - moral claims are equivalent in meaning to prescriptions or commands
 - "Murder is wrong" → "Don't murder!"

The Error Theory:

Metaphysical claim: there are no objective moral facts or properties

Semantic claim: Moral discourse makes descriptive claims, but is systematically and uniformly *false*

The Analogy with Color

- The naive use of color language suggests that color terms refer to properties of the world which exist totally independently of observers
 - The naive use presumes that color language picks out "primary qualities"
 - Our scientific picture of the world suggests that colors are, at best, secondary qualities
 - All naive color discourse is false

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The Claim to Objectivity

Two Signs of Objectivity

- Mackie denies that non-cognitivism is a plausible theory of ethical thought & judgment
- Two arguments:
 - the authority of objective ethical values
 - the significance of objective ethical values

Two Signs of Objectivity

- The authority of ethics
 - ethical judgments purport to be authoritative because of features of the world, not because of features of the judging subject—moral judgments are 'categorical'
 - non-cognitivism cannot explain the categorical authority of ethics

Two Signs of Objectivity

The question is not, for example, whether he really wants to do this work, whether it will satisfy or dissatisfy him, whether he will in the long run have a pro-attitude towards it, or even whether this is an action of a sort that he can happily and sincerely recommend in all relevantly similar cases. Nor is he even wondering just whether to recommend such action in all relevantly similar cases. He wants to know whether this course of action would be wrong in itself. (Mackie, 72)

Two Signs of Objectivity

- The significance of ethics
 - 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

The Error Theory

Two Arguments for the Error Theory

- ① The Argument from Relativity/Disagreement
- ② The Argument from 'Queerness'

The Argument from Relativity/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 \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"

- 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

- 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