

Philosophy 101

Mackie – The Subjectivity of Value

March 18, 2014

Approaches to Ethics

The Ethical and the Metaethical

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- 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

Ethics

- 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

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

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- Language: what is the function of moral discourse?
 - descriptive/fact-stating?
 - similar to beliefs & judgments (e.g. “it is raining outside”)
 - prescriptive/action-promoting?
 - similar to commands (e.g. “shut the door!”)

Example Metaethical Topics

- Metaphysics: what is the nature of moral facts or properties
 - do such facts or properties exist?
 - what are they like?
 - are moral facts or properties compatible with physicalism?
 - are moral properties or facts objective?

Example Metaethical Topics

- Epistemology: what are the conditions for knowledge in ethics?
 - can we have moral knowledge?
 - how are moral claims justified?

Example Metaethical Topics

- Moral Psychology: what kinds of psychological states are characteristic of moral thought and behaviour?
 - what is the connection between motivation and moral judgment?
 - how, if at all, are emotions related to moral judgment?

Value and Objectivity

Subjectivity and Objectivity in Ethics

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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

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- 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

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- 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

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:

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*