

Mackie's "Moral Skepticism"

1. What Kind of Claim is Moral Skepticism?

Contrast the following two questions:

- (1) What are we expressing when we make moral claims?
- (2) Are there objective moral values?

Some "subjectivist"-y answers to (1)

- Relativism - Saying "murder is wrong" is the equivalent of saying something like "I believe murder is wrong," or "Murder is incompatible with such and such moral standards."
 - Analogy: Saying "A is to the left of B" is the equivalent of saying something like "relative to my perspective A is to the left of B"
- Expressivism - Saying "murder is wrong" is a way of expressing certain feelings we have about murder. It's the equivalent of saying something like "Boo murdering!"

Mackie denies these views.

Problems with relativism: moral disagreement

Problems with expressivism:

Mackie's worry about expressivism: "It is a very natural reaction to any non-cognitive analysis of ethical terms to protest that there is more to ethics than this, something more external to the maker of moral judgments, more authoritative over both him and those of or to whom he speaks..."

Also: Frege-geach problem/The embedding problem – How do we explain what's mean when moral sentences are embedded in more complex sentences?

Examples: I wonder whether lying is wrong, I think lying is wrong but I might be mistaken, James will lie about such matters, unless doing so would be wrong in which case he won't, lying is not wrong, etc...

This turns out to be quite difficult.

Instead, Mackie answers (1) as following: When we express moral claims we are asserting that there are certain objective facts about rightness and wrongness, goodness and badness, that hold. His answer to (2) is that all such claims are false.

This is a radical view and Mackie acknowledges that a good argument is therefore required. He endeavors to provide some.

2. The Argument from Disagreement

1. There is a great deal of moral disagreement.
2. The best explanation for the existence of moral disagreement is that there are no objective moral facts.
3. We have good reason to believe that there are no objective moral facts. (1,2).

Defense of (2)

Of course there is a great deal of disagreement on a host of matters that we think there are facts about: scientific matters, cosmological matters, historical matters...

“But such scientific disagreement results from speculative inferences or explanatory hypotheses based on inadequate evidence, and it is hardly plausible to interpret moral disagreement in the same way. Disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect people’s adherence to and participation in different ways of life. The causal connection seems to be mainly that way round: it is that people approve of monogamy because they participate in a monogamous way of life rather than that they participate in a monogamous way of life because they approve of monogamy.” (74)

“the actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted of objective values” (75).

Is the argument for (2) relying on something like this? *If disagreement is explained by variation in ways of life, then the best explanation for the disagreement is that there are no facts of the matter?*

Why think this?

3. The Argument from Queerness

1. “If there were objective values then they would entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything in the universe” (76).
2. In general, we should avoid positing entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything in the universe.
3. We should avoid positing objective values. (1,2)

Defense of (1):

- *Metaphysical Weirdness*: If things were objectively good or right they’d somehow have to have “to-be-pursuedness” built into them. That’s odd. (Also - Hume argues that no fact alone can be intrinsically motivating, the person has to have some desire in order for motivation to take hold)
- *Epistemological Weirdness*: How could we possibly come to know about these entities/qualities or relations?
- *Supervenience*: What is the connection between the fact that doing X would cause, say, inordinate pain, and the fact that X is wrong. It doesn’t follow logically, or from the meaning of any words, but it’s also not a coincidence. It’s wrong *because* it causes pain – but what kind of “because” is this? More generally: plausibly, the moral facts supervene on the naturalistic facts, but how and why?
 - Definition: “A” facts supervene on “B” facts if there can be no change in the A facts without a change in the B facts. (Facts about molecules supervene on facts about atoms: no change in molecule facts without a change in atom facts).

Potential objection to (2): “companions in guilt” – essence, number, identity, solidity, inertia, substance, necessity and possibility, causation, power, infinite extension of time and space...

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu/>

24.00 Problems of Philosophy
Fall 2019

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.