



Error theory

Cognitivism without realism

Moral realism and antirealism

If we define moral realism as the view that our moral judgments express beliefs that correctly describe some aspect of morality, we can define moral antirealism as the denial of this view and distinguish between two antirealist views.

The first sort of antirealist is driven (in part) by psychological concerns. To account for the 'internal' connection between moral judgment and motivation, the non-cognitivists say that moral judgments express non-cognitive attitudes. As such, the question as to whether our moral judgments correctly represent some aspect of reality never arises.

The second sort of antirealist agrees with the moral realist in taking moral judgments to express beliefs. They resist moral realism for metaphysical reasons. The error theorists say that our moral judgments express beliefs that try to represent reality, but they fail to do so. These beliefs tell us the world is some way, but it turns out that the world is not that way at all.

Why cognitivism?

We discussed the Frege-Geach problem last time. Let me add one more point in favor of cognitivism. According to the non-cognitivist, when someone judges that slavery is wrong, the speaker expresses how they feel about slavery. Some have argued that non-cognitivism cannot make sense of the seeming rational authority of morality. As Joyce puts it, "It [non-cognitivism] has trouble accounting for the authority of morality: If S's utterance of "Stealing is morally forbidden" amounts to no more than an expression of S's feelings ("Boo stealing!") then why should anyone who is not antecedently inclined to care about S's feelings pay any attention?"

Aren't we all just a little bit error-theorist?

While most of us are probably not now error theorists of the sort that Mackie was, most of us endorse error theories in other areas. Consider an example:

When European explorers first interacted with cultures of the South Pacific, they found the islanders employing an unfamiliar concept: a type of forbiddenness called "tapu." Europeans developed this into the familiar English term "taboo," but what we mean by "taboo" is quite unlike what the Polynesians meant ... It is not the case ... that "tapu" may be translated into "morally forbidden," with accompanying understanding that the Polynesians have different beliefs about Europeans concerning which actions are forbidden. "Tapu" centrally implicates a kind of uncleanness or pollution that may reside in objects, may pass to humans through contact, may then be transmitted to others like a contagion, and which may be canceled through certain ritual activities, usually involving washing. This is not a concept we employ, though one may find something similar in ancient Roman and Greek texts (Joyce pp. 1).

Aren't we all just a little bit error-theorist?

Joyce continues:

"If one of the European explorers had a penchant for metaethics, what would he say about the Polynesians' discourse? He would naturally take them to have a defective concept, not judgment of the form "X is tapu" is ever true (so long as "X" names an actual action) because there simply isn't anything that's tapu" (Joyce, pp. 2).

Joyce thinks that the Polynesians believe there's a difference between actions that are tapu and actions that are not (a cognitivist thought) and says (quite plausibly!) that these beliefs are mistaken. Mackie's attitude towards our moral language and thought is similar to Joyce's attitude towards the Polynesians' language and thought.

More error theories

Atheists are a kind of error theorist. They have a view about the use of religious language, which is that some people use religious language to try to describe aspects of reality (e.g., what happens when we die, what is responsible for the creation of the universe, who is whispering in my ear telling me to do unspeakable things, etc.). They have a view about the world, which is that there's nothing in this world of atoms and void for religious language to pick out. (Even if you're not an atheist through and through, you are probably an error theorist in the sense that you do not think that all religions have terms that pick out actual deities.)

Mackie's arguments for error theory

Mackie offers two lines of argument in support of error-theory:

1. The argument from relativity.
2. The argument from queerness.



The argument from relativity

Mackie says:

The argument from relativity has as its premiss the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another ... Such a variation is in itself merely a truth of descriptive morality, a fact of anthropology ... Yet it may indirectly support second-order subjectivism: radical differences between first-order moral judgments make it difficult to treat those judgments as apprehensions of objective truths.

But isn't this a bad objection? There is well-known variation in beliefs about our origins from one society to another and from one period to another. Does this indirectly support the idea that these beliefs about our origins are all of them systematically false?

Relativity (cont.).

Mackie thinks there is an important difference between cases of moral and scientific disagreement:

Disagreement on questions in history or biology or cosmology does not show that there are no objective issues in these fields for investigators to disagree about. 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.

He goes on to say that:

... the argument from relativity has some force simply because 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.

Stating the argument

We might construe Mackie's argument as follows:

P1: There is widespread moral disagreement about many moral matters.

P2: Differences in the ways of life do a better job explaining these moral differences than does the hypothesis that there are objective moral facts that some cultures have inferior access to.

C: Thus, evidence concerning disagreement suggests that moral judgments are not the apprehension of objective moral truths.

It is not clear whether Mackie is arguing for a purely epistemological skepticism (i.e., by suggesting that we are not in a good position to ascertain what the truth is) or metaphysical skepticism (i.e., by suggesting that there are no truths to ascertain). The error-theory is a version of metaphysical skepticism.

The argument from queerness

Plato's Forms give a dramatic picture of what objective values would have to be. The Form of the Good is such that knowledge of it provides the knower with both a direction and an overriding motive; something's being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it. 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 this end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it. Similarly, if there were objective principles of right and wrong, any wrong (possible) course of action would have not-to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it.

Explicating the argument

Mackie's conceptual claim: If there were any moral properties, they would require the existence of "objective prescriptions". [The conceptual claim tells us what something would have to be like to be a moral property (e.g., if something were a unicorn, it would have to be like a horse, have a single horn, and would be magical).]

Mackie's substantive claim: There are no objective prescriptions. [The substantive claim tells us whether anything in the world fits the profile specified by the conceptual claim (e.g., there is nothing magical that is like a horse and has a horn).]

Why accept the conceptual claim? One answer would be this. It is part of our conception of moral reasons that they have rational authority. That is, they are reasons for us to act whatever our desires or ends happen to be. If this is right, then any rational subject that believes there are moral reasons to X would be motivated to some extent to X.

Why accept the substantive claim? Skepticism about such reasons. Perhaps it seems that someone can take it that there is a moral case to X and be wholly unmoved to X even if she is nothing less than perfectly rational.

Two kinds of reason

- Mackie is not skeptical of reasons across the board, only categorical reasons. Remember that Smith drew a distinction between two types of reason, motivating and normative. The former figure in psychological explanations of an agent's actions (i.e., they tell us why someone did something). The latter figure in normative explanations (e.g., explanations that tell us why something was good or bad in some respect).
- We can distinguish between two kinds of normative reason. Sometimes there is reason to do something because you have some end or goal and an action would contribute positively towards achieving that goal (e.g., reason to do exercises to build manual dexterity if you aspire to be a professional musician or pick pocket). If someone said, say, you had a reason to practice slipping your hands into coat pockets because they thought that you were in training to be a thief and you reminded them that you had no interest in picking pockets, they should concede that you did not have reason to practice slipping your hands into pockets.
- Moral reasons, however, are supposed to be unlike this. If someone said that you had reason to give your money to Oxfam rather than, say, the Lord's Resistance Army and you said that you didn't want your money to go to humanitarian causes, the moralist will say that this is neither here nor there. You have the reason to contribute to humanitarian causes whatever you happen to want. Such reasons, the moralist says, are categorical.
- The categorical/hypothetical distinction can be understood as follows. You have the hypothetical reasons you do if your having that reason is contingent upon what you desire or what your aims are. You have categorical reasons if you have a reason that bears on what to do where that reason is not contingent upon what you happen to desire or what your aims are.
- Mackie's suggestion is that you do not have categorical reasons of the sort the moralist thinks. (Mackie agrees with the moralist in thinking that if there were any moral reasons they would be categorical reasons. These reasons would be "utterly" different from the hypothetical reasons which he takes to be wholly unproblematic.)

Mackie vs. McDowell on motivation magnets

- It is difficult to say precisely what motivates Mackie's error theory, but I have suggested that Mackie's skepticism derives (in part) from the idea that moral reasons would have to be categorical and that such categorical reasons have something strange built into them. Whereas you can be aware of the facts that constitute hypothetical reasons and be wholly unmoved to act on them (without being anything less than fully rational), Mackie thinks the moralist is committed to the idea that there are also reasons such that if you were to take one to be present you would automatically be motivated (to some extent) to act on them (unless you are somehow less than fully rational). (We might call such things "motivation magnets" and wonder how they work.) In becoming aware of any reason, you form a belief about what reasons there are. If you think (as Humeans do) that the rational subject can form a belief about anything and not be motivated to act accordingly, you might agree with Mackie in thinking that there is something wrong with morality.
- McDowell thinks that there is nothing inherently wrong with the idea that there is a necessary connection between certain kinds of beliefs/judgments and further responses on the part of the subject. Moral values could be real even if the reality of such values required this: any rational subject who believed one to be present would be disposed to respond in certain ways. McDowell tries to find "companions in innocence" and thinks he finds them in secondary qualities.

Might moral values be mind-dependent and real?

In rejecting the idea that there could be any qualities that are objective and prescriptive, Mackie is insisting that any real qualities must be mind-independent qualities (i.e., our concept of them is not understood in terms of some sort of response to them). Moral qualities violate this idea because moral qualities are supposed to be a kind of motivational magnet (i.e., in judging that they are present, we therein would be motivated).

McDowell thinks that there can be real qualities that are mind-dependent. His example of such qualities are secondary qualities. If there are real qualities of things that are nevertheless mind-dependent, perhaps Mackie has no principled reason to reject the possibility of real qualities that must elicit a kind of response from those that become aware of them.



On primary and secondary qualities

- Mackie and McDowell agree that things like colors, tastes, and smells are secondary qualities and that things like shape and texture are primary qualities.
- According to Mackie, our experience of secondary qualities is erroneous. We experience colors, tastes, and smells as if they were primary qualities, but we discover that there is no feature in the world that is intelligible apart from certain kinds of experiences (e.g., our looking at objects, tasting things, catching a whiff of something, etc.). Thus, there's an error in that we naively take secondary qualities to be primary qualities.
- According to McDowell, our experience of color, taste, and smell is not erroneous. Secondary qualities are, he says, qualities that we ascribe to objects where we cannot understand the ascription unless we have had a certain experience. We conceive of this quality as just the disposition or power to elicit in us certain kinds of responses. We cannot conceive of what it is for something to be red apart from our experience of red things, but these properties are real properties of objects in that the red things remain red even when the lights go out or we all turn away.

The primary/secondary quality distinction

- When we stand in the appropriate causal relations to them, physical objects produce in us ideas or experiences of them. Think about the lemon's shape, color, smell, and taste. There's nothing like the lemon that is transmitted from the lemon to our sense organs that explains why our experience is the way that it is. Instead, Locke thought that particles or waves standing in causal relations between the lemon and our sense organs would explain why our experiences are the way they are. He thought that the explanations would be mechanistic and that the relevant features of the causes would be things like the surface texture of the lemon and the mechanical and geometrical properties of the causal intermediaries.
- It is important to distinguish the qualities/properties that the objects have and our ideas of these qualities/properties. Locke thought that the primary qualities were things like size, shape, motion, and solidity. The secondary qualities were things like color, taste, and smell.
- Locke thought that the primary qualities were intrinsic qualities of bodies and that our ideas of these qualities do resemble the qualities themselves. With the secondary qualities, however, he thought that they were nothing but the power to produce in us various experiences. Our idea of, say, yellow in no way resembles the qualities of the objects that we see.

Primary and Secondary (cont.)

Why think there is a real metaphysical distinction here between two kinds of qualities?

A1: Because primary qualities are objective in a way that secondary qualities are not. Whereas we can understand what it is for something to have a primary quality without making reference to our experience, we cannot understand what it is for something to have a secondary quality without making reference to our experience.

A2: We explain the secondary qualities in terms of the primary (e.g., we explain why lemons look yellow to us and have the power to produce in us experiences very different from those that we have when we look at strawberries because of differences in the surfaces of these objects that have to do with differences in, say, shape).

The significance for us?

On one reading of Mackie's argument:

(P1) If there were any moral qualities, they would be both objective and have ought-to-be-doneness built into them.

(P2) Nothing, however, is like this. Being aware of something or judging that something has a quality does not elicit any further response all on its own.

(C) Thus, there are no moral qualities.

McDowell thinks that the second premise in Mackie's argument is mistaken.