

Error Theory

Problems and Solutions

Mackie begins by outlining the problem of objective values. He argues that there are no objective values, which means that moral claims are neither true nor false. This is a radical claim, and it goes against the way that most people think about morality.

Mackie's solution to the problem is to develop a theory of moral skepticism. He argues that we should be skeptical of any claims that moral values are objective. Instead, we should view moral values as subjective, meaning that they are based on our own personal preferences and beliefs.

Arguments for Moral Skepticism

Mackie is targeting those who accept what are called *objective moral values*. According to Mackie, such a thing has the following properties:

1. They are part of the 'fabric of the world'. (pg 15)
2. They can be something we know. (pg 21)
3. Their truth is independent of what we want or choose. (pg 21)
4. They are mind-independent. (pg 21)
5. They are inherently action guiding. (pg 23; 29)

Mackie offers two main arguments for being a skeptic about objective values like those:

1. **The argument from relativity:** This argument is based on the observation that different cultures have different moral codes. If moral values were objective, then we would expect there to be more agreement on moral matters.
 - (1) If there were objective moral values, then moral disagreement would be quite rare / impossible.
 - (2) Moral disagreement is neither rare, nor impossible.
 - (C) Therefore, there are no objective moral values.
2. **The argument from queerness:** This argument is based on the idea that objective values would be very strange kinds of things. They would be different from anything else in the universe, and we would need a special faculty of moral perception to be aware of them.

It's worth noting that while Mackie presents the queerness argument as one argument, most take his claims to amount to two distinct kinds of queerness arguments. I will call the first *ontological queerness*, and the second *epistemic queerness*.

Ontological Queerness

- (1) If moral values are objective, then they are action guiding when believed.

- (2) There are no action guiding beliefs.
- (C) Moral values are not objective.

Epistemic Queerness

- (1) Accessing moral values would require a special faculty of moral perception.
- (2) There is no such faculty of moral perception.
- (C) We cannot know about moral values (even if they exist).

Implications of Moral Skepticism

If Mackie is correct, then there are no objective moral values. This means that moral claims are neither true nor false. This has a number of implications for our understanding of morality:

- **Moral motivation:** If there are no objective moral values, then what motivates us to act morally? Mackie argues that we are motivated by our desires and beliefs. We act morally when we believe that doing so will lead to the satisfaction of our desires.
- **Moral progress:** If there are no objective moral values, then how can we talk about moral progress? Mackie argues that moral progress is possible, but it is not progress towards some objective goal. Instead, it is progress towards a society in which people's desires and beliefs are more in line with our own.

Objections to Moral Skepticism

There are a number of objections that have been raised against moral skepticism. Here are two of the most common objections:

- **Logical Issue:** If Mackie is right, then all objective moral claims are false. For Mackie, objective moral claims *and their contradictions* are both false. Such a view assumes a particular theory from the philosophy language regarding empty terms and how they affect the sentences that they occur in which is not uncontroversial.
- **First-order Issue:** It is not clear that Mackie is right when he claims that there is no practical problem in holding first-order moral beliefs while being a second-order skeptic. It certainly seems like there would be widespread changes in people's behaviors if we all came to accept error theory. There is a paper by Bernard Williams entitled "Subjectivism: Further Thoughts" which seeks to address this very worry. We could read that at some point if you wish.