

Lecture Notes 3 : Cognitivism and Error Theory

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Error theory: weak form of cognitivism, stark form of moral scepticism: *all moral statements are systematically and uniformly false.*

What is error theory?

Error theory about religious statements: Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*

Most influential defence of *moral* error theory: J. L. Mackie's *Inventing Right and Wrong*

The argument from *ontological queerness*

(1) Moral statements express beliefs that are true only if there are objectively prescriptive facts.

(2) There are no objectively prescriptive facts.

∴ (3) All beliefs that moral statements express are false.

Mackie claims that these entities would, if anything, have to be 'queer':

If there were objective values then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. (Mackie 1977, 38)

The positive argument

In a fashion similar to Freud, Mackie claims that moral claims are all false, but at the same time indispensable.

The argument from *epistemological queerness*

Add two further premises to (1):

(4) Accessing moral values would require a special faculty of moral perception. But

(5) There is no such faculty.

∴ (6) Even if there were moral values, we couldn't know about them.

Objection 1: The argument is question-begging

Minor premise (2) seems to presuppose a naturalistic world-view.

Response: Mackie's argument does not presuppose naturalism (and Russell's teapot)

Counter-response: Why think of moral entities more like Santa Claus, rather than pretty landscapes, or logical, or grammatical entities?

Objection 2: The argument is a red herring

Objection enlists the 'companions in guilt' (or 'in innocence'!) strategy.

What are objectively prescriptive properties?

Properties inherently capable of 'directing' and 'motivating' the agent in question.

Prescriptivity as Normativity

Suppose I affirm: $\{p, p \rightarrow q\}$. I must also affirm q . The conclusion has 'ought-to-be-affirmedness' built into it. Does that make the process of logical inference, or logical properties, queer?

Prescriptivity as Motivation

Rejecting (1): motivational externalism

Granting (1), rejecting (2): moral statements are analogous to colour statements.

Categorical vs. dispositional properties

- (7) A property is dispositional if and only if its ascription is true in virtue of a counterfactual conditional.

A definition of redness:

- (8) x is red if and only if x is disposed to appearing red to suitable subjects in suitable circumstances.

But surely redness is not a queer property, although it is *constituted* by an agent's inclination under suitable circumstances? And if it is, goodness and rightness are exonerated along with it.

Study questions

What is the argument from queerness?

What is the dispositionalist response to the error-theorist? Is it successful?

Further Reading

Fisher, A. *Metaethics*, ch. 3.

Mackie, J.L. (1977), *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, ch. 1-3.