

Philosophy 3100: Ethical Theory

Topic 5 - Intuitionism and Nihilism:

1. An Overview of the Debate So Far
2. Intuitionism and Nihilism Stated and Compared
3. Intuitionist Moral Epistemology
 - a. Non-Inferential Epistemic Justification
 - b. Rational Intuition
4. Mackie's Arguments against Intuitionism
 - a. Mackie's Arguments from Queerness
 - b. The Argument from Relativity / The Argument from Disagreement

What is Intuitionism?

Intuitionism / Non-Naturalism:

(i) Moral statements purport to state objective, irreducible moral facts.

Semantic
← Thesis

(ii) There are such facts in the world.

Metaphysical
← Thesis

(iii) They are not natural facts:
none can be known *purely* empirically.

Negative
Epistemological
← Claim

(iv) But some can be known (or we can be justified in believing in some) *non-inferentially*, using rational intuition.

Positive
Epistemological
← Thesis

What is Nihilism?

Nihilism / Error Theory:

(i) Moral statements purport to state objective, irreducible moral facts.

Semantic
← Thesis

(ii) There are no such facts; so

Metaphysical
← Thesis

(iii) Moral statements are all false.
(Or, more exactly, the “basic” ones are all false.)

(a consequence
of these theses)
←

Note: like Non-Cognitivism, Nihilism requires no moral epistemology, since there are no moral facts to be known.

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Intuitionist Moral Epistemology

Background:

- The concept of *epistemic justification*.
- *Inferential vs. non-inferential* epistemic justification.

A belief had by some person is **non-inferentially justified** just in case it is justified, but not on the basis of other beliefs that the person holds.

There can, however, still be some other basis for the belief, such as, e.g., *a visual experience, an introspection, or a memory*. We can group these together and call each “an appearance.” (That’s in contrast to a belief.)

Intuitionist Moral Epistemology

The Regress Argument for the Idea that Some Moral Beliefs Must Be Non-Inferentially Justified:

Consider some moral belief, B. If B is going to be justified, then either:

- i. B is justified at least partly on the basis of other moral beliefs. → seems like this can't work for all moral beliefs
- ii. B is justified wholly on the basis of some non-moral beliefs. → but Hume's Law: no 'ought' from an 'is' (see Huemer: 4.3)
- iii. B is justified, but not on the basis of any other beliefs.
↳ this is non-inferential justification of a moral belief!

Intuitionist Moral Epistemology

Possible Examples of Non-Inferentially Justified Moral Beliefs:

Suffering is bad.

It's better to be happy than to be miserable.

It's wrong to torture a child for fun.

“[I]n Men's dealing and conversing one with another, 'tis undeniably more Fit . . . that all Men should endeavour to promote universal good and welfare of All, than that Men should be continually contriving the ruin and destruction of All.” (Samuel Clarke, qtd. in Huemer: 134)

Intuitionist Moral Epistemology

Possible Examples of Non-Inferentially Justified Moral Beliefs:

If one can prevent a bad thing from happening without sacrificing anything of any importance, then one ought to do it.

If an act is wrong, then any other act exactly like it, performed in exactly the same circumstances under exactly the same conditions, with exactly the same consequences, is also wrong.

If you make a promise, you have a prima facie obligation to keep it.

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What is Intuitionism?

A striking passage from W.D. Ross, Intuitionist:

“That an act, *qua* fulfilling a promise ... is *prima facie* right, is self-evident; not in the sense that it is evident from the beginning of our lives, or as soon as we attend to the proposition for the first time, but in the sense that when we have reached sufficient mental maturity and have given sufficient attention to the proposition it is evident without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself. It is self-evident just as a mathematical axiom, or the validity of a form of inference, is evident. ...



W.D. Ross
British Philosopher
(1877-1971)

– *The Right and the Good* (1930), pp. 29-30

What is Intuitionism?

A striking passage from W.D. Ross, Intuitionist:

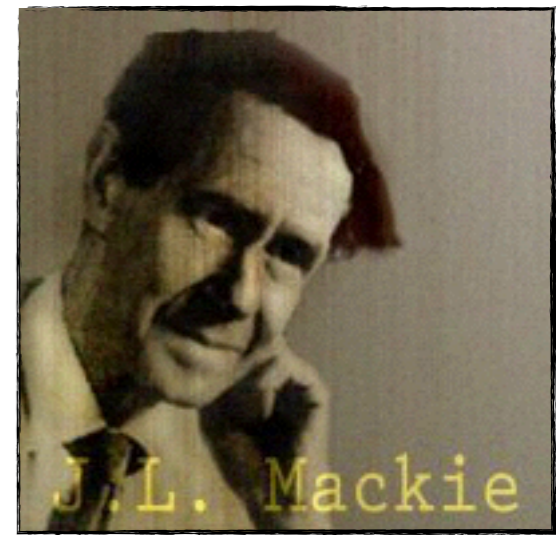
... The moral order expressed in these propositions is just as much part of the fundamental nature of the universe ... as is the spatial or numerical structure expressed in the axioms of geometry or arithmetic. In our confidence that these propositions are true there is involved the same trust in our reason that is involved in our confidence in mathematics; and we should have no justification for trusting it in the latter sphere and distrusting it in the former. In both cases we are dealing with propositions that cannot be proved, but that just as certainly need no proof.”



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Mackie's Arguments



Australian Philosopher
(1917-1981)

Mackie's Objections from Queerness:

- **Queer Supervenience (p. 41)**

“The wrongness must somehow be ‘consequential’ or ‘supervenient’; it is wrong because it is a piece of deliberate cruelty. But just what *in the world* is signified by this ‘because’?”

- **Queer Magnetism (p. 40)**

“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 the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it.”

- **Queer Knowing (p. 38)**

“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. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else.”

Mackie's Arguments

The Argument from Disagreement (Mackie: 36-38):

“The argument from relativity [Mackie's name for the Argument from Disagreement] has as its premiss the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community. Such variation is in itself merely a truth of descriptive morality, a fact of anthropology which entails neither first order [i.e., normative] nor second order ethical [i.e., metaethical] views. Yet it may indirectly support second order subjectivism [read Nihilism]: radical differences between first order moral judgements make it difficult to treat those judgements as apprehensions of objective truths.” (Mackie: 36)

Mackie's Arguments

The Argument from Disagreement (Mackie: 36-38):

“In short, 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.” (Mackie: 37)

The Argument from Disagreement

The Argument from Disagreement against Intuitionism

P1. There is widespread moral disagreement.

P2. If Intuitionism were true, then there probably wouldn't be such widespread moral disagreement.

C. Therefore, Intuitionism probably isn't true.

Preliminary Comments and Questions:

- i. The argument applies equally well to any form of non-skeptical Moral Realism (e.g., analytic reductionism).
- ii. *How does Cultural Relativism do here?*
- iii. *What about Nihilism?*

The Argument from Disagreement

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Possible Intuitionist Responses:

To P1:

- There is less *genuinely moral disagreement* than there seems.
- Not clear how widespread even the genuinely moral disagreement is, since there are so many moral facts that most everyone would agree upon.

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Possible Intuitionist Responses:

To P2:

- We should expect plenty of disagreement over ethics even if Intuitionism is true, since (i) common sources of error apply to ethics as well, and (ii) there are reasons to think that ethics would be especially error prone.