

Phil. 1100

Notes #1: Introduction

Note Read everything on the syllabus that was passed out on the first day of class.

I. Basic Concepts

- Two kinds of judgements/propositions:
 - *Evaluative*: Makes a positive or negative evaluation of something; says something is good, bad, right, or wrong.
 - *Descriptive*: Non-evaluative.
- *Ethics*: The branch of philosophy that studies good & bad, right & wrong. 3 sub-branches of ethics:
 1. *Ethical Theory*: Deals with general theories about what is right/wrong and good/bad. Ethical theories try to state the *general conditions* for an action to be right, for a state of affairs to be good, etc.
 2. *Applied Ethics*: Deals with concrete, usually controversial issues. Ex.: Abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia.
 3. *Meta-ethics*: Deals with the nature of evaluative judgements/statements. Addresses *non-evaluative* questions *about values*

II. Some Questions of Meta-ethics

- What does “good” mean? Can it be defined?
- Is value objective? Are there ‘moral facts’?
- How do we know what is right and wrong?
- Why do people hold the values they hold?
- What motivates people to act morally (or not)?

III. The Question of ‘Objectivity’

- *Objectivity*:
 - *Objective property*: A property which a thing has independent of observers; a property that is “in the object”, or solely dependent on the nature of the object.
 - *Subjective property*: A property which a thing has or doesn’t have, depending on the attitudes or reactions of observers to the thing; a property that is “in the subject” (“in the eye of the beholder”).
 - *Objective truth*: A proposition that is true, and whose truth does not depend upon (beliefs, desires, or other attitudes of) observers.
 - *Subjective truth*: A proposition that is true, but whose truth depends upon (beliefs, desires, or other attitudes of) observers.
- *Moral realism* (a.k.a. “objectivism”): The view that some moral propositions are objectively true. Or: Some things have objective moral properties. Opposed to: *Anti-realism*

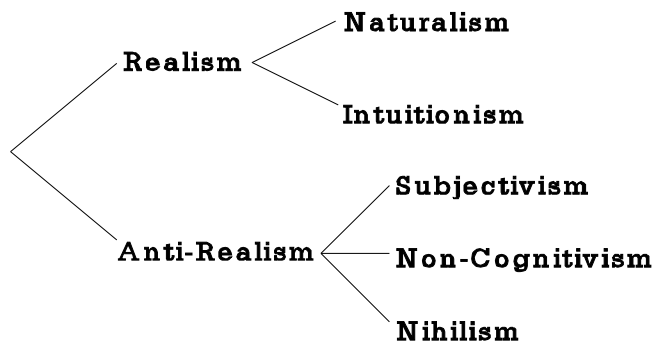
IV. The Five Theories in Meta-ethics

Two forms of realism:

1. *Ethical naturalism*: Holds that (i) moral properties are 'reducible' to objective, natural properties. "Good" and other moral terms can be defined/explained in non-moral terms. (ii) Moral knowledge derives from observation.
2. *Ethical intuitionism*: Holds (i) that moral properties (at least one of them) are irreducible, (ii) that moral knowledge derives from 'moral intuition.'

Three forms of anti-realism:

3. *Moral relativism / subjectivism*: Moral statements are true or false depending upon attitudes of observers. They report people's attitudes or practices. Hence, their truth is relative to a person or group. Two common versions:
 - 3a) Individual subjectivism: Moral truths are relative to an individual.
 - 3b) Cultural relativism: Moral truths are relative to a culture.
4. *Moral skepticism / nihilism*: Moral propositions are false (or contain false presuppositions). Nothing is really right or wrong.
5. *Non-cognitive ethics*: Moral statements are neither true nor false; they do not assert genuine propositions. Instead they express feelings, or issue imperatives, or something else like that.



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Notes #2: Moral Relativism/Subjectivism

I. Basic Concepts

- Moral relativists & subjectivists hold that moral statements are statements about the attitudes of observers towards the objects of evaluation. Two common forms:
 - *Cultural Relativism*: Usually, the view that “morally good” (or “right”, or related terms) means “approved by society,” or something similar. Implies: Moral goodness is *relative to* a society.
 - *Individual Subjectivism*: The view that “morally good” (or “right”, etc.) means “approved by me (the speaker),” or something similar. Implies: Moral goodness is *relative to* an individual.
- Hence, moral facts are ‘subjective’.

II. Ruth Benedict, “Anthropology and the Abnormal”

1. *‘Normality’ is ‘culturally defined.’* What is considered normal is different in different societies. Examples:
 - The culture of paranoids in Melanesia (the Dobuans)
 - The megalomaniac culture of the Kwakiutl
2. “Morally good” just means “normal”:
“The concept of the normal is properly a variant of the concept of the good. It is that which society has approved.” (87)
3. Therefore, morality is culturally defined. However, at the end, she leaves open that there might be some minimal set of rules common to all cultures.

III. Philosophical issues raised by Benedict’s article

- a. Are there any moral beliefs that are common to all societies? Possible examples:
 - The incest taboo.
 - People (esp. parents) should care for children.
 - People should not randomly attack each other.
 - People should generally tell the truth.
 - People should generally keep promises.
 - There are virtues such as honesty and courage.
- b. What is the argument for premise (2) above?
- c. Is there a reason why we should respect other cultures? Does this argument support that conclusion?

IV. Standard Objections to Subjectivism

A. *The Problem of Horrible Attitudes*

1. In Nazi Germany, the Nazis acted wrongly, and people like Oskar Schindler acted morally.
2. But according to cultural relativists, whatever society approves of is moral, and whatever society disapproves of is immoral.
3. In Nazi Germany, society approved of sending Jews to concentration camps, and disapproved of resisting the Nazis.
4. Therefore, according to relativists, the Nazis were being moral, and Oscar Schindler was being immoral. (From 2, 3.)
5. Relativism is false. (From 1, 4.)

B. The Problem of Fallibility

1. It is possible for me to be wrong about a moral question.
2. If individual subjectivism is true, then that's conceptually impossible.
3. Therefore, individual subjectivism is false.

Or:

1. It is possible for society to be wrong about a moral question.
2. If cultural relativism is true, then that's conceptually impossible.
3. Therefore, cultural relativism is false.

C. The Problem of Disagreement

1. If subjectivism is true, then two individuals cannot disagree about a moral question.
2. Two individuals *can* disagree about a moral question.
3. So subjectivism is false.

Or:

1. If cultural relativism is true, then people from different societies cannot disagree about a moral question.
2. People from different societies *can* disagree about a moral question.
3. So relativism is false.

D. The Problem of Arbitrariness

1. Subjectivism implies that (e.g.) wrong actions are wrong because someone disapproves of them.
2. Either this person/group has *no reason* for disapproving of those actions, or they disapprove of those actions *because they are wrong* or they disapprove of those actions for some other reason.
3. If they have *no reason* for disapproving of an action, then their disapproval is *arbitrary*.
4. If they disapprove of an action *because it is wrong* then it must be wrong independently of their disapproval.
5. If they disapprove of an action for some reason other than its wrongness, then their disapproval is unjustified. (They don't have a sufficient reason for disapproving.)
6. If either (a) one's disapproval of *x* is arbitrary, or (b) it is unjustified, or (c) *x* is wrong independently of one's disapproval, then it is false that *x* is wrong because one disapproves of it.
7. So subjectivism is false. (From 1-6.)

V. The Subjectivist Fallacy:

Confusing beliefs, perceptions, or other representations with reality. Example:

1. Beliefs vary from one person (culture) to another.
2. Therefore, truth is relative to a person (culture).

Suppressed premise:

- 1a. Belief = truth.

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Notes #3: Non-Cognitive Ethics

I. Non-cognitivism

- Holds that moral statements (a) lack *cognitive meaning* and therefore (b) are neither true nor false.
- Moral statements serve some other function, such as (a) expressing emotions, or (b) giving commands.
- *Cognitive meaning*: The kind of 'meaning' a sentence has when the sentence says that the world is a certain way; i.e., the sentence asserts a proposition. Distinguished from:
- *Emotive meaning* the kind of meaning a sentence has when it expresses emotions.

II. Ayer's Argument

- A. J. Ayer is a *logical positivist*. Logical positivists are people who believe premise (1) below:
 1. The meaning of a sentence is determined by the observations that would verify or refute it.
Corollary: A sentence that cannot be verified or refuted is meaningless.
 2. Ethical statements cannot be verified or refuted by any observations.
 3. Therefore, ethical statements are cognitively meaningless.
- What does moral discourse do, then? Answer: It has *emotive meaning* Expresses feelings/influences audience's feelings. Examples/analogies:
Boo! Hurray! Yecch! Ow!
- Ayer takes a similar view about religion.

III. Consequences of Non-cognitivism

1. It does not make sense to call a moral statement 'true' or 'false.'
2. It is not possible to have a moral disagreement.
3. There are no moral *beliefs* or *judgements* (only moral *feelings*).
4. No one ever disapproves of (has a negative feeling about) something *because* it is wrong.

IV. Objection: The Frege-Geach Problem

- This objection derives from an article by Peter Geach (1965).
- Two uses of evaluative (or other) predicates:
 - *Asserted*: “Abortion is wrong.” “George is a bad person.” *Note*: In each of these, something is given either a positive or a negative evaluation. (The evaluation is asserted.)
 - *Unasserted*: “Is abortion wrong?” “If George is a bad person, then so is Sally.” “John believes that abortion is wrong.” “Some choices are better than others.” *Note*: In these, there is no thing that is given a positive or negative evaluation by the speaker. (The speaker does not assert any evaluation.)
- Non-cognitivism tries to explain the meaning of value terms.
 - In *asserted* contexts, the non-cognitivist account is clear, as discussed already.
 - What about unasserted contexts? Claim: the non-cognitivist has no acceptable answer to this. Think about why this is.
- What would the evaluative term mean in the unasserted context?
 - The meaning should be *uniform* between asserted & unasserted contexts.
 - But the unasserted contexts make no sense with an emotive or other non-cognitive meaning inserted.

- Examples:

<u>Normal English sentence</u>	<u>Non-cognitivist interpretation</u>
1 Abortion is wrong.	Boo on abortion! / Don't have an abortion!
2 It is false that abortion is wrong.	?? (It is false that boo on abortion?)
3 It is possible that abortion is wrong.	?? (It is possible that don't have an abortion?)
4 Sally believes that abortion is wrong.	?? (Sally believes boo on abortion?)
5 I wonder whether abortion is wrong.	?? (I wonder whether boo on abortion?)
6 If doing something is wrong, then getting your little brother to do it is also wrong.	??
7 Some actions are more wrong than others.	??
8 I hope I did the right thing.	??

- *Hence* an objection to non-cognitivism:

1. If non-cognitivism were true, unasserted uses of evaluative terms would make no sense (would be meaningless). (Premise.)
2. But they do make sense. (Premise.)
3. So non-cognitivism is false. (From 1, 2.)

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Notes #4: Nihilism

Nihilism: A metaethical theory that holds that (positive, first-order) moral statements are generally false. Nothing is good, bad, right, or wrong.

I. Mackie's main argument:

1. Ordinary moral statements imply moral realism.
2. Moral realism is false.
3. Therefore, ordinary moral statements are false.

Arguments for (1):

Essentially, the arguments against subjectivism and non-cognitivism.

Arguments for (2):

A. The argument from 'queerness': Moral properties would be utterly unlike anything else we know of in the world. E.g.:

- They are non-physical, & we can't explain them scientifically.
- They do not interact with the physical world.
- They cannot be observed or otherwise detected.

B. The argument from relativity:

- People disagree, esp. between cultures, on the moral 'facts.'
- Therefore, if there is a faculty of moral perception, it must be extremely unreliable.
- Therefore, we have no knowledge of moral facts.
- Therefore, there is no reason to believe in moral facts.

II. Why do we have moral discourse?

- *The projection theory:* we 'objectify' our own feelings & project them onto external objects.
- Moral qualities are thought of as the inevitable *causes* of and justifications for our feelings of approval/disapproval. Compare: 'disgustingness'.
- The social function of this: This enables people to (be convinced to) place moral concerns before their selfish interests. Also encourages/justifies uniformity in a society, w/ respect to the laws people follow.
- To think about (not in Mackie): How might moral thinking/discourse have evolved, biologically?
A hypothesis:
 - a) Humans have a natural tendency to believe & imitate other humans.
 - b) Moral discourse can be used for manipulating the behavior of other people.
 - c) This explains why people commonly fail to practice their own moral principles (hypocrisy).

III. An Objection to Nihilism

1. A life of joy and satisfaction is better than one of constant, excruciating agony.
2. A nuclear war would be bad.
3. You shouldn't light babies on fire just for the fun of it.
4. Therefore, at least one moral statement is true. (From 1, 2, 3.)

Assessment: The case for nihilism vs. the case against nihilism

Expanding Mackie's arguments from above:

Mackie's 1st Argument:

- 1 Moral statements imply the existence of moral properties. (Premise)
- 2 Moral properties are weird. (Premise)
- 3 If something is weird, it doesn't exist. (Premise)
- 4 Therefore, moral properties don't exist. (From 2, 3)
- 5 Therefore, moral statements are false. (From 1, 4)

Mackie's 2nd Argument:

- 1 Moral statements imply the existence of moral facts. (Premise)
- 2 People disagree a lot about the moral facts. (Premise)
- 3 If people disagree a lot about some type of thing, it doesn't exist. (Premise)
- 4 Therefore, moral facts don't exist. (From 2, 3)
- 5 Therefore, moral statements are false. (From 1, 4)

- Which premises are more plausible:

Realist Premise

You shouldn't light babies on fire just for the fun of it.

A life of joy and satisfaction is better than one of excruciating agony.

etc.

Mackie Premise

If something is weird, it doesn't exist.

If people disagree a lot about some type of thing, it doesn't exist.

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Notes #5: Ethical Naturalism & 'Objectivism'

- Tara Smith is a follower of Ayn Rand.
- Rand is a controversial 20th-century novelist/philosopher, known for novels *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*.
- Rand & Smith put forward one form of ethical naturalism.
- *Ethical naturalism*: Any theory that claims that evaluative properties ('good', 'right', etc.) can be defined/explained in terms of objective, non-evaluative (or 'natural') properties.

I. Rand & Smith's Form of Ethical Naturalism

Central thesis: x is good (for me) = x furthers my life. (The rest explains and/or defends this idea.)

Basic concepts:

- *Morality*: A code of values to guide one's choices.
- *Value*: Something one acts to gain or keep. (Distinguish: "benefit" vs. "value".)

Source of 'value':

- Value can only exist *for* a living thing.
- Living things strive to continue living. Life "is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated actions."
- Life depends upon the actions of the living things themselves. Failure to act leads to death.
- Life is the central value for any living thing; things are good or bad for the organism depending on whether they promote the organism's life.
- Therefore, an immortal being could have no values.
 - It wouldn't matter what you did, because no opportunity costs. In real life, we have to choose carefully because we have limited time & opportunities.
 - Immortal beings could not be sick or healthy.
 - Immortal beings could not experience pleasure or pain. Pleasure/pain are just mechanisms for detecting things that further or inhibit our lives.

The need for morality:

- Some of our needs require *conscious* action to satisfy.
- Needs are objective.
- Hence, we need to identify the correct values. This is the function of morality.

Randian virtues:

- Explain why courage, honesty, and justice are virtues. (Important supporting idea: the harmony of interests.)
- The most important virtue: rationality. Reason is our basic tool of survival.

II. Questions about this theory

1. Does "value" mean "something one acts to gain and/or keep," or "something one *ought to* act to gain and/or keep"?
2. What shows that life itself is valuable? And what shows that nothing else is valuable?
3. Notice that this theory is *egotistic*: Everyone should do what promotes his own life. (Does this mean "maximize life expectancy"?) Does this mean it would be morally correct to murder 4 million people, if doing so increased your life expectancy by 5 minutes?

III. Objection: The Open Question Argument

- *Open Question*: A question that could consistently be given either answer; a question that is not settled merely by understanding the words in the question.
 1. The following is an open question: “Is life good?”
 2. The following is *not* an open question: “Does life promote life?”
 3. Therefore, “Is life good?” does not mean “Does life promote life?”
 4. Therefore, “good” does not mean “promotes life”.
- According to G.E. Moore, a similar argument can be given against any ethical naturalist theory.
- The naturalist’s mistake: confuses two things:
 - A *standard* of value—tells us what things are good.
 - A *definition* of value—tells us what “good” means.

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Notes #6: Ethical intuitionism

I. Central Theses

- There are objective evaluative facts.
- They are not reducible to natural (non-evaluative) facts.
- Knowledge of value derives from 'ethical intuition.'
- Knowledge of value gives us reasons for action independent of our desires.

II. The Concept of Intuition

Initial intellectual appearances

- *Appearance*: the mental state you are in when you say, "it seems to me that P" (where P is some proposition).
- *Intellectual* appearances: appearances that depend on thinking & understanding, as opposed to sense perception, memory, or introspection.
- *Initial* appearances: the way things appear prior to reasoning.

Examples

- The shortest path between two points is a straight line.
- No object can be red and blue at the same time.

Examples from ethics

- Suffering is bad.
- Other things being equal, one should bring about good things, rather than bad things.
- "Better than" is transitive.

III. Phenomenal Conservatism

- If it seems to S that P, then S thereby has at least prima facie justification for believing that P.
- The self-defeat argument for PC:
 1. (Almost) all beliefs are based on appearances. (Exceptions: faith, self-deception.) (Premise.)
 2. A belief is justified only if it is based on something that is a source of justification. (Premise.)
 3. Therefore, a belief is justified only if appearances are a source of justification. (From 1, 2.)
 4. If PC is false, then appearances are not a source of justification. (Premise.)
 5. So if PC is false, then no belief is justified. (From 3, 4.)
 6. So one cannot be justified in believing an alternative to PC. (From 5.)

IV. Important Points about Intuition

- Intuitions are not merely beliefs. Examples:

Organ Harvesting A doctor in a hospital has five patients who need organ transplants; otherwise, they will die. They all need different organs. He also has one healthy patient, in for a routine checkup, who happens to be compatible with the five. Should the doctor kill the healthy patient in order to distribute his organs to the five others?

Trolley Car Problem A runaway trolley is heading for a fork in the track. If it takes the left fork, it will collide with and kill five people; if it takes the right fork, it will collide with and kill one person. None of the people can be moved out of the way in time. There is a switch that determines which fork the trolley takes. It is presently set to send the trolley to the left. You can flip the switch, sending the trolley to the right instead. Should you flip the switch?

- Some intuitions are universal. Example:

Easy Trolley Car Problem: As in Trolley Car Problem, except that there is no one on the right fork; if the trolley goes down the right fork, it will run into a pile of sand which will safely stop it. Should you flip the switch?

- Not all intuitions are true. But intuitions are *presumed* true until proven false.
- Not all moral beliefs are “intuitions.”

V. Common Objections

A. *We need arguments for believing intuition to be reliable*

Response:

- This is a *global skeptical argument*. It leads to the conclusion that no one can know *anything* whatsoever.
- Global skepticism not relevant here. Besides its being absurd, we’re interested in what might make ethics different from other fields, like science.

B. *Intuitionists cannot explain disagreement:*

1. Moral disagreements are common.
2. Intuitionism can’t explain why moral disagreements occur.
3. Anti-realism can.
4. So anti-realism is better than intuitionism.

Responses:

- a. The prevalence of non-moral disagreements. Examples:

- Who shot JFK?
- The Mead/Freeman controversy
- Sports controversies
- Einstein/Bohr debate

No one thinks that any of these things are “subjective.”

- b. The fallibility of human beings. Humans have numerous sources of error:

Confusion, ignorance, oversight, misunderstanding/incomplete understanding, bias, miscalculation, etc.

- c. Disagreements are especially common in 4 kinds of cases:

- ⌘ When people have strong personal biases, esp. self-interest.
- ⌘ When people defer to their culture.
- ⌘ When people defer to religion.
- ⌘ All philosophical issues.

C. *Intuitionists cannot resolve disagreement:*

1. If two people have differing intuitions, the intuitionist can give no way to resolve the disagreement.
2. If a meta-ethical theory provides no way of resolving (some?) disagreements, then the theory is false.
3. So intuitionism is false.

Responses:

- a. Some ethical disagreements can be resolved by appeal to ethical arguments.
- b. What’s the justification for (2)?
- c. No other theory provides a way of resolving all ethical disagreements.

D. Intuitionism is weird:

1. Intuition is weird.
2. Objective moral values are weird.
3. If something is weird, it doesn't exist. (?)
4. So, intuition and objective moral values don't exist.

Responses:

Is there objective weirdness?

- a. If there is no objective weirdness, then "weirdness" isn't evidence of non-existence.
- b. If there is objective weirdness, what is it?
 - ⌘ "Weird" = "very different from most other things"?
 - Why think that weird things in this sense don't exist?
 - ⌘ "Weird" = "counter-intuitive"?
 - Intuition is not counter-intuitive. Nor are moral properties.
 - ⌘ "Weird" = "poorly understood"?
 - Why think weird things in this sense don't exist?

VI. Moral Reasons

Two views of reasons for action:

- *Humean View:* Reasons for action must come from desires.
- *Rationalist View:* Two sources of reasons for action:
 - ⌘ Desires
 - ⌘ Evaluative beliefs

Problems with Humean View:

- Can't explain rationality of prudence: The examples of Odysseus and the partying student.
- Can't explain weakness of will, or free will. Actions should always be determined by stronger desire.
- Can't explain why morality is important.
- Can't explain why we should want coherent moral beliefs.
- Rationalist view explains all these things.

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Overview of Unit 1

By the end of unit 1, students should know what all of the following things are:

Concepts & distinctions:

Evaluative vs. descriptive claims

Branches of ethics:

Meta-ethics, ethical theory, applied ethics

Objective vs. subjective

Moral realism vs. anti-realism

Global skepticism

Philosophical theories:

Ethical naturalism

Ethical intuitionism

Subjectivism

Non-cognitivism

Nihilism

Philosophers & their ideas:

Ruth Benedict

The meaning of 'normal'

Implications of relativism: Why we can't evaluate other cultures, &c., why one can't criticize a culture.

Objections, esp.: Nazis, arbitrariness

A.J. Ayer

Why ethical statements are 'non-cognitive'

Logical positivism

How his view differs from relativism & nihilism

Objections, esp.: Frege-Geach problem

J.L. Mackie

Argument from relativity

Argument from queerness

Why we have moral discourse: the theory of 'objectification'

Central objection to nihilism.

Tara Smith

Definition of "value"

The nature of 'life'

What is 'good' (& how it relates to life)

What is a morality, & why we need one

Ethical egoism

Objection: Open question argument.

Huemer

4 basic tenets of intuitionism

Def. of 'intuition'

Phenomenal conservatism & "prima facie justification"

Objections, esp.: explanation of disagreement, reliability objection & response