

Problems of Philosophy

Handout #11 (Last one! ☹)

Metaethics

I. Cultural Relativism

- "It is wrong to kill babies" means "People in my culture shouldn't kill babies". Motivated by the variety of inconsistent moral practices across cultures (Inuit, Japanese Samurai, etc.). Analogy: "it is wrong to put your elbows on the table while eating."

Problems:

- That there are a variety of opinions about something doesn't show that one is no better than the other.
- Inconsistent with the idea of moral progress, criticism of slavery, etc. No moral reasons to change our practices.
- There is less disagreement than there might appear.

II. Normative Subjectivism (sometimes just called "subjectivism")

- "It is wrong to kill babies" means "I disapprove of killing babies" or "killing babies is wrong for me." Analogy: chocolate is tasty.

Argument #1: The Argument from Democracy (from Shafer-Landau)

1. If everyone has an equal right to have and voice moral opinions, then everyone's moral opinions are equally plausible.
2. Everyone has an equal right to have and voice moral opinions.
3. Therefore everyone's moral opinions are equally plausible.

Response: first premise is false (math example).

Argument #2: The Argument from Disagreement (From Shafer Landau)

1. If there is persistent disagreement among informed, good-willed, open-minded people about some subject matter, then that subject matter does not admit of objective truth.
2. There is persistent disagreement about ethical issues among informed, good-willed, open-minded people.
3. Therefore there are no objective ethical truths.

Responses: Premise 2: there is much moral agreement, much of disagreement is due to empirical claims.

Premise 1: false (math, physics example)

Argument #3: The Argument from Tolerance (from Shafer Landau)

1. If normative subjectivism is true then no one's deepest opinions are more plausible than anyone else's.
2. If no one's deepest opinions are more plausible than anyone else's then we have to respect and tolerate the opinions of all others.
3. Thus if normative subjectivism is true then we have to respect and tolerate the opinions of all others.

Responses: first note that this isn't an argument directly for normative subjectivism – but it can be seen as an argument for normative subjectivism by thinking that the fact that normative subjectivism explains why we should be tolerant is a point in its favor. Nonetheless, there's no conflict between being an objectivist and being tolerant. But more importantly, premise 2 is inconsistent with subjectivism if it is meant to state an objective fact.

Argument #4: The Argument from Atheism (from Shafer Landau)

1. If ethics is objective, then God must exist.
2. God does not exist.
3. Therefore ethics is not objective.

Responses: premise 1 is suspect. First, it's supported by the intuition that laws require lawgivers – but this isn't true of the rules of logics. Second, and more importantly, the Euthyphro dilemma. If God's commands are backed by reasons, then we can be objectivists without appealing to God – for God is just the middleman. If God's commands are not backed by reasons – they're arbitrary – why should we care about them?

General Problems with Subjectivism

- How can we criticize villains?
- It says that each person is morally infallible
- Can't explain moral disagreement
- Renders moral views arbitrary

III. Meta-ethical Subjectivism (sometimes called “expressivism”)

- “It is wrong to kill babies” means “Boo baby killing!” Analogy: Boo (insert your least favorite sports team)! According to expressivism – moral sentences do not express things that can be true or false.

Three Arguments:

- The argument from moral motivation: (factual judgments cannot motivate, and moral judgments motivate all by themselves).
- The argument from economy

Problems:

- It's still complicated to criticize people morally
- Our moral views are still somewhat arbitrary
- Although it can account for moral disagreement to some extent, it's hard to account for moral argumentation, logical relations between sentences etc.

IV. Moral Realism

(a) Naturalism

- “It is wrong to kill babies” is a fact about the natural world. Analogy: “tigers are cats”

Problems: hard to come up with a naturalistic theory

(b) Non-Naturalism

- “It is wrong to kill babies” is a non-natural fact. Analogy: “Angles are nice” (?) “2+2 = 4”

Problems: oddness, moral knowledge

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24.00 Problems in Philosophy
Fall 2010

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