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Mackie's Arguments Against Objective Values

J. L. Mackie makes his position explicit by opening his article "The Subjectivity of Values" with this terse statement: "There are no objective values." Mackie had found recent dialogue in moral philosophy to be fraught with misunderstandings and conflation of various moral positions, so he felt it necessary to rigorously define his position as well as the boundaries of his concerns. Thus his article has two major parts: First, Mackie defines the nature of his moral skepticism, and, second, he defends his position by showing the implausibility of moral realism with a series of arguments.

Mackie's first step in defining his position is to describe its essential features. He believes that there are no objective and independent values in the world, but he believes that statements about moral (and aesthetic) judgments are quite literal in claiming objective facts. Basically, Mackie is an error theorist, so he believes that judgments have a truth value even though there are no possible objective values that could ever make them true. The crux of his position is an ontological view about the absence of objective values.

Mackie's second step in defining his position is to set its boundaries. When he speaks of values, he means not only moral values but any sort of values that may be believed objective, such as aesthetic ones, though his focus is on the moral ones. He also wants to make it clear that he is not setting forth a theory prescribing how to act or how to look for values, which he says is the business of first order ethics. His position concerns second order ethics, which is about the status of values. Importantly, he feels that major philosophical questions have been overlooked or "politely shelved" by focusing on linguistic and conceptual analysis. The field of linguistic

analysis has been occupied by emotivists and descriptivists concerned with the literal meaning of statements, already presupposing Mackie's style of subjectivity but not developing a defense of this assumption. Conceptual analysis would also limit ethical inquiry to the meanings, just as discussing how color fits the notion of a secondary quality locates the property of color without actually probing its status or scientific workings. Finally, Mackie clarifies that his position concerns objective values that exist independent of conventions or comparisons; clearly, he says, a value judgment can be true or false if it appeals to standards that aim at some end or if its subject is compared to another subject.

The second major part of Mackie's article convincingly undermines the plausibility of the realist belief in independent and objective values. Mackie attacks the belief from two major angles, the origin of objectivity-laden morals and the supposed nature of objective values, each of which is really a two-pronged approach.

Mackie examines one aspect of the origin of objectivity with the argument from relativity. This well-known issue surrounds the fact that different societies enforce vastly different and incompatible moral codes. Within each code, its rules are believed to have objective authority, so it is indirectly argued that there seems to be no objective truths underlying these supposedly objective rules. Mackie adds that even general principles that could encompass these codes, such as a principle that says one ought to follow his own society's code, are not plausible because the objectivity is believed to lie in the rules themselves, not in another principle of acting. He concludes that moral codes follow established ways of life, not the other way around. Moral codes develop to justify preexisting ways of life and preserve their practice by promoting a belief that they are based objective truths.

Mackie supports this view later in his essay with a complementary argument in which he contends that the language of moral judgments and the way of thinking about them reflect the

objectification of formerly non-objective kinds of statements. He explains that this is based on the human tendency to project feelings and attitudes on their associated objects. Furthermore, social pressures develop in such a complex way that the sources of pressures become indistinct and faceless. The result is that feelings about the actions turn into values such as good or bad associated with the actions, and the indistinct source comes to feel objective. Language reflects this transition by using unconditional imperative statements. Mackie says that the conditional has been suppressed by this process; thus a statement like “If you want x , you ought to do y ” simply becomes “You ought to do y .”

Mackie criticizes the nature of supposed objective values with the argument from queerness, which involves metaphysics and epistemology. The metaphysical problem with objective values is how they could carry a motivational force and how they could supervene upon natural features. Philosophers have failed to describe how it can be possible that an item of knowledge about what one should or should not do can automatically motivate an agent to act accordingly upon being understood. Furthermore, there is no explanation of how they automatically exist as a result of certain actions or features. What is the link between an action or its consequence and the moral value that prescribes or prohibits it?

Even if the assumption that these objective values exist is granted, the immediate epistemological problem is how one could ever come to know these values. Mackie points to the failure of the intuitionists and the absurdity of divining truths through mere contemplation to reject the notion of a moral faculty or intuition. If there is no such faculty, then the remaining possibility seems to be reason, but reason cannot even find the link between actions and their associated values, so it does not seem to provide a reliable means to find these values.

This brings us to the end of Mackie’s line of arguments. It should be noted that he also thoroughly argues for the moral relevance of the issue his position is concerned with, and he

explains the shortcomings of other meta-ethical perspectives that necessitated a rekindling of the ontological discourse about second order ethics. Upon reflection, though, it seems his energy is misdirected because the strength of his position relies on the acceptance of the whole line of argumentation he presents for it.

First of all, he brushes aside the complexity of the issues surrounding moral relativity. He seems content that the fact that societies have different moral codes somehow proves there are no objective moral principles, and he thinks that the only general principles that might unify them fall cleanly outside the scope of the moral rules themselves, such as moral relativism's view that what is right is for one to follow his or her society's rules, and so these suggestions could not possibly threaten his position. However, there remains the strong belief that different social codes really do have moral principles in common and that differences can be explained by traditions and particular constraints that hinder objective reflection. Further, this belief holds that reflection and social progress can bring a society closer to an ideal, objective set of truths. Instead of dealing with this alternative head-on, Mackie rushes in his explanation for the variances among moral codes that these codes are posterior to preexisting ways of life.

Second, if it could be shown that there are objective values to be obtained from reflection or social progress, then the argument from queerness would become a non-issue. Of course Mackie's reply would be that values like these would be intersubjective, not objective: just because there is one group of people that agree on a set of values and there are no other people in existence that dissent, it does not follow that these values would be objective. So the proponent of objective values should endeavor to show that these values are available either through reason or moral intuition. If they are available through moral intuition, then the epistemological side of the queerness problem would be solved; if they are available through reason, then both the epistemological and the metaphysical sides of the queerness problem would be solved.

The objectivity of values would turn out to be something like the analogy of color as a secondary quality that Mackie feels would be inadequate for this subject. The specifics of the analogy may be different from what he considers in his article, though. If objective values are indeed available through some sort of mental process, then any thinker that can discern them in an ideal and objective manner can do so in the same way that anyone with adequate vision in the proper lighting condition can perceive a color, and the moral thinker will find the same value as another thinker (also under the ideal reflective conditions) just as the viewer will perceive the same color as another viewer (also with ideal viewing conditions). Moral judgments deal with things like life experiences, joy, and pain; and humans share a lot common ground with these; but Mackie assumes in his relativity argument that people will have “radically and irresolvably different responses” to things that are morally important.

Mackie foresees criticism of his arguments from relativity and queerness, so he closes with remarks about one more possible source of objective values, a general goal of human life. He shows that such a source is susceptible to both of his previous main arguments and feels that his only threat here is a viable theistic doctrine, so he brings no new sort of arguments to the table. However, his defense on this last point is also susceptible to the same weaknesses of his main arguments. It is even possible that he could be right that different people will have different moral responses to the same things yet still all subscribe to the same general goal of life; it is consistent that different means may reach the same end. If objective values were defeated above, it should now be considered whether a general goal of human life can be discerned in an objective manner. Regardless of whether we focus on a convergence of general values or an agreement on the goal of life, in this article Mackie runs roughshod over several open questions.