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Getting It Wrong? An Overview of the Central Arguments for Mackie's Error Theory

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I. Introduction

John Mackie's book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*¹ is putting forward such an unusual position that it even caught the translators off guard. The first German translation bore the title *Ethik: auf der Suche nach dem Richtigen und Falschen*² and no doubt, this would have astonished its author quite a bit. To his mind, such a search would be completely futile, because it is clear to him that right and wrong cannot be found in the first place. Right and wrong do not exist in their own right, but need to be constructed by bringing about the respective form of life. Thus, the stress in the subtitle is clearly on "inventing" and he takes great pains to show that our everyday conception of morality is deeply mistaken, as it suggests a much happier outcome of this endeavour. Thus, in charts of metaethical core positions³ Mackie's reconstruction of the ordinary conception of morality occupies a delicate ground falling between the two stools of the respective main contenders. On the one hand, he considers it to be cognitivist, insofar as moral judgments – according to the ordinary conception – express beliefs. On the

¹. (Mackie 1977). Numbers in brackets refer to this edition in what follows.

². (Mackie 1981). This was later corrected, see (Mackie 1986).

³. See, for example, (Miller 2003: 8).

other hand, it is an antirealist position, according to which there are no mind independent moral entities. To be sure, there are other metaethical positions situated between these poles of cognitivism/non-cognitivism and realism/antirealism, such as best opinion accounts of morality. What makes Mackie's diagnosis truly dramatic is that he takes a particular theory of truth to be a further component of the ordinary conception of morality. It is this compound which lies at the heart of his famous error charge: As it stands, in his opinion the ordinary conception of morality is as wrong as pre-modern theories of heat involving the ominous phlogiston.

In what follows, I should like to examine the basic line of thought for this conclusion in his book and to point out where its weak spots lie. First, a general account of strategy will be given, then I shall turn to his core arguments against realism, in section III.1 the argument from relativity, and in III.2 the argument from queerness will be examined.

II. Mackie's Strategy in General

Mackie is putting forward a second order view when he claims that there are no objective values (15). What he means is that values are not part of the fabric or furniture of the universe, that is to say, they are not some mysterious kind of things. It is important to realize that Mackie concedes that there may be objectivity in other senses with regard to ethics, such as impartiality, not being biased etc.

This concession has to do with Mackie's conviction that his second order view has no implications for a first order view. In fact, he holds that ethics can be upheld and even improved without the (in his opinion) erroneous view that there are objective values in the sense indicated. Mackie even pursues such a project in the latter half of his book, namely to develop norms of agency which should be accepted.

Therefore he emphasizes that although his view may with some legitimacy be called "moral scepticism" or "subjectivism" (17), he does not hold sceptical or subjectivist views with regard to first level questions, nor subjectivist views with regard to moral semantics. According to first order scepticism, moral considerations may for example be taken to be irrelevant; according to subjectivist moral semantics, moral judgments are just *reports*

of the feelings of the speaker, not their *expressions*, as Ayer (1946: 107) maintained.

His effort to distance himself from subjectivism as a position in moral semantics also makes clear that he is not primarily interested in questions of moral language, but – at least as far as the negative part of his work is concerned – in questions of moral ontology. In doing so, he in a sense corrects Ayer's reading of Moore. Ayer (1946: 107) believed, even if he does not mention him explicitly, that Moore was doing conceptual analysis, and Ayer even endorses Moore's alleged claim, that the concept of good cannot be analyzed. Now, although there are many theories of concepts, some of which take them not to be mental or linguistic entities at all, it is still safe to say that Ayer got Moore wrong on this point. In short, Mackie is right in reading Moore's (1993: §§13-14) so-called "open question argument" as a metaphysical argument. That said, conceptual analysis has a place in Mackie's argument, but the concept to be analyzed is not that of goodness, as it was in Moore, but the ordinary concept of moral judgment.

According to Mackie, then, it is part of the ordinary concept of moral judgment, that – at least implicitly – a claim to the metaphysical objectivity of moral values is made (35). Moreover, this assumption, embedded in the common conception of moral judgment or of morality in general in Mackie's opinion, is shared by most notable classics on the history of philosophy, such as Plato, Kant and Sidgwick (30).

What Mackie tries to do is to show that this widely shared assumption is unfounded. Rather, he claims, there are no – or even cannot be – metaphysically objective values. Assuming the correspondence theory of truth, this amounts to saying that all moral judgments are wrong. Within this framework, moral judgments presuppose the existence of something, which in fact does not, or even cannot, exist.

Presumably then, for Mackie the correspondence theory of truth is part of the ordinary conception of morality or moral judgments, but not of the, as it were, enlightened or improved conception of moral judgments which he himself suggests. This is important, because he must be able to show that on his reading moral judgements are not only not always false, but can be true without making the claim that there are metaphysically objective values. Alternatively, he may of course wish to give up the notion of truth with regard to moral judgments altogether (with regard to both the destructive and

constructive part of his enterprise).

In any case, there are mainly two arguments by means of which Mackie tries to establish his claim that there are no metaphysically objective values, namely the argument from relativity (36–38) and the argument from queerness (38–42). Put briefly, the argument from relativity draws on the diversity and manifest difference of moral codes in different cultures and at different times in history. The so-called queerness argument claims that for values to be part of the fabric of the universe, both they and our faculties to grasp them would have to be extremely strange and unusual, totally different from anything else which is part of the fabric of the universe. But Mackie thinks that the strangeness would have to be so profound that it conflicts with the best theories about the fabric of the world.

III. The Arguments in Detail

1. Metaethical Moral Relativism

To repeat, the starting point is the diversity of moral codes in different cultures and at different times in history. Assuming that moral codes specify what morally correct agency is, we may therefore say that there is disagreement with regard to correct moral agency. But clearly, disagreement alone cannot establish that there is no truth of the matter or something metaphysically objective which backs up this truth. There is disagreement about many issues, such as the shape of the earth, the development of life etc. and nobody would conclude that therefore the earth has no determinate shape or that there is not one true story of how life came to into being. Mackie clearly recognized this and therefore concluded that the case of morality is somehow special. In the case of morality, in other words, we are justified in inferring non-existence of metaphysically objective values from disagreement.

The feature, which makes the case of moral disagreement special is that the convictions about morally correct behaviour, which members of a culture hold, can be explained best by their membership in a way of life (36). In other words, the way of life has priority. As Mackie says, we think monogamy is the right form of marriage, because we live in a monogamous culture. According to Mackie, it is not the correctness of monogamy that explains best our conviction that monogamy is right. Mackie notes, however, that

there is an important objection to this picture. According to this objection, moral disagreements are not very deep and only concerned with superficial differences (37). Moreover, in many cases, moral disagreements do not concern moral, but factual questions.⁴ An example in the debate about abortion rights may make this clear: one group says, abortion is wrong, because it amounts to killing a human person. The other group says that it is not wrong because a foetus is not a human person. In this vein, both groups actually agree that it is not allowed to kill a human person, but they disagree about the factual question as to whether a foetus is a human person. Moreover, according to the objection, there are very general principles, which are true in every culture (albeit independent of it) and throughout history, and it is only these very general principles, which require metaphysically objective values.

How does Mackie respond to this objection? He is rather quick here, and says that most, if not all, of the fundamental convictions have to do with arbitrary decisions and are not owed to some universally held principle. Thus, Mackie's argument does not rule out weak relativism⁵ (according to which some (types of) moral norms are culture dependent) as opposed to strong relativism⁶ (according to which all (types of) moral norms are culture-dependent).

In any case, the second argument (from queerness) takes charge of both options. For Mackie then, strong relativism would make metaphysically objective values dispensable, but even if a few norms were universal, the

⁴ Cf. Ayer's (1946: 110–112) analysis of moral disagreement, according to which it is mainly concerned with factual issues within a shared system of values; see especially his remark in the preface to the second edition of his *Language, Truth and Logic*, i.e. (Ayer 1946).

⁵ Held, for example, by David Wong (2006). For Wong there is a rather narrow bandwidth of possible moral codes for each culture depending on common human nature and local specifics.

⁶ Discussed, for example, by Mark Timmons (2002: 37–63). Strong Relativism was an attractive position in the wake of works by Lévi-Strauss and others and derived a great deal of its appeal from the political climate in the age when European colonialism came to an end. In this vein, universalism seemed to be connected to colonialism and to the abominable behaviour of the colonial powers. Now, the pendulum is swinging back, since the atrocities of some local dictators seem to remind us of the universality of at least some values.

second argument – drawing on their alleged queerness – is meant to establish that this still would not justify the assumption that there are metaphysically objective values. This suggests that the two arguments are not independent.

2. Values and the Fabric of the Universe

This argument has a metaphysical and an epistemological part, although Mackie does not separate these two aspects neatly.

2.1 Objective values as a metaphysical problem

The gist of Mackie's idea here is that the realist is committed to internalism and that internalism does not seem to go together well with metaphysical objectivity, because the notion of intrinsically prescriptive objects seem to be incoherent. But why can't the realist be an externalist, especially since Mackie himself seems to assume that externalism is correct and that it is the appropriate companion to anti-realism? According to internalism, making a moral judgment is necessarily connected to having a reason for action, while for externalism there is no such necessary connection. The connection of inherently prescriptive objects and internalism may be categoricity. The notion of a categorical demand seems to require metaphysically objective values for him, and moreover require internalism, because these demands cannot be conditional on any attitude the person has. All these assumptions are problematic, however.

Mackie uses the example of Plato's form of the good (40) to illustrate what he has in mind: knowledge of it provides the knower both with a direction and an overriding motive or reason to act. He seems to think that since knowledge of the form is necessarily linked to having a reason for action, and this reason for action cannot be dependent on emotions of the agent, this reason must be found in the form of good or in general the value itself and somehow read off it.

Mackie then connects this thought with Hume's claim, which he endorses, namely that reason is inert and cannot provide a motive for action by itself (40–41). However, how the connection is supposed to work, is not at all clear. Probably he thinks Hume's argument is incomplete; Hume himself needs an argument from queerness (both metaphysical and epistemological)

to establish his claim about the inertness of reason.

A second approach to show that metaphysically objective values would have to be metaphysically queer draws on the notion of supervenience or, more specifically, moral supervenience (41): Supervenience can roughly be explained thus: The basic idea is that something B (a property or a feature) depends on something more fundamental A, and that there could be no difference with regard to B unless there was a difference with regard to A. Moral supervenience is a good example: according to a widely held view, moral properties do, in fact, supervene on natural properties. That is to say, if two actions are exactly similar in terms of their natural properties, they must also be similar with regard to their moral properties. Conversely, if an action A1 is morally good and an action A2 is morally bad, they must also differ with regard to their natural properties.

Mackie thinks that moral supervenience is a problem for the realist. On the one hand, the moral properties must be real, but still dependent on the natural properties, as we have seen. According to Mackie, this dependency relationship is itself mysterious and he seems to think that the realist must assume that we have a cognitive capacity to understand the connection between the natural features of, for example, an action, such as cruelty, and its moral property, i.e. its wrongness. In other words, he thinks we need to be able to understand the mechanism of moral supervenience. Why this should indeed be the case and why this should really be a problem, Mackie does not explain, and it is fair to say that this claim is rather contentious. Nonetheless, Mackie then claims that the antirealist can explain this link much better: if the moral quality of an action is principally nothing other than our reaction to it, the connection between this reaction and the natural features of the action may just be a causal one.

2.2 Objective values as an epistemological problem

According to Mackie, the realist is committed to something like intuitionism (38), namely the idea that humans have a cognitive capacity by means of which they can grasp the prescriptivity or “to be pursuedness” (40) which must be built into the metaphysically objective values. But then, Mackie continues, we would have to explain how such a faculty works and he claims that such an explanation cannot be provided.

He discusses a possible strategy the realist might try to adopt to get out

of this difficulty (39). Mackie clearly subscribes to a broadly empiricist theory of knowledge, i.e. that (synthetic) knowledge derives primarily from sense-perception. Against this background, the realist might say, there are many other truths which we cannot know in the way the empiricist theory suggests, such as those about numbers, causality, identity or other fundamental notions. If we really have knowledge about these truths, the empiricist theory cannot be correct. But if the empiricist theory cannot be correct, maybe our knowledge of moral truths deriving from metaphysically objective values is not so problematic after all. Mackie's answer to this objection is disappointingly brief. He just claims that unlike in the case of metaphysically objective values, empiricists are able to explain our knowledge about numbers, causality, etc. in a satisfactory manner.

He also discusses the relationship of his doctrine to the verifiability principle (39), which was at the center of Ayer's attempts. Mackie thinks that the verifiability principle is false, and that Ayer's expressivism is also false. For the expressivist, there is no need to postulate or concede realism, because moral judgments only express feelings. For Mackie, in contrast, moral judgments do have descriptive meaning. According to their ordinary conception at least, moral judgments implicitly claim the existence of metaphysically objective values, and this claim, according to Mackie, is false, not senseless. Nonetheless, he of course agrees with the broadly empiricist character of Ayer's philosophy and maintains that even if the verifiability principle needs to be rejected, the existence of metaphysically objective values still has to be denied.

Finally, Mackie offers an explanation as to how the mistaken belief in the existence of metaphysically objective values may have come about (42–46). One reason may be that metaphysical objectivity appears to provide moral norms with authority. A second one is the confusion of a thing's objective desirability (given the needs we have) and its having metaphysically objective value. He rejects the idea, though, that the confusion is due to the fact that our moral language of duty derives from a religious context in which it tended to be identified with divine commands. Such a position had been suggested by Elizabeth Anscombe (1981) in her influential paper "Modern Moral Philosophy" in which she demanded a return to the paradigm of classical Greek ethics and, along with it, a focus on philosophical psychology. Mackie rightly emphasizes that Anscombe's diagnosis overlooks the intel-

lectualist tradition of those accounts of ethics, which are indeed closely connected to theological doctrines, such as certain theories of natural law. For this intellectualist tradition, moral obligation is independent of the divine will and originates in moral truths whose stance is similar to the laws of logic. This, however, leads us to questions of moral theory, which need to be discussed on a different occasion.

IV. Concluding Remarks

As far as Mackie's own position is concerned, it is important to disentangle the destructive and constructive part properly. In his opinion, the common conception of morality involves an unwarranted claim to metaphysical objectivity, because in his opinion, antirealism is the correct position. Of course, this antirealism is not part of the ordinary conception, but the reason for its erroneous character. As we have seen, though, what he presents as arguments for antirealism is more like an exposition of this doctrine against a broadly materialist metaphysics for somebody already convinced of it rather than a device to establish its truth in the first place.

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