judgments are somehow relativistic. Broccoli is delicious to me but repellant to you, in something like the way that Bill is behind me but in front of you. There is no issue about whether broccoli is *really* delicious or repellant, any more than there is an issue about whether Bill is *really* in front or behind. The reason for that confidence is not merely that people disagree. We can see no way to argue that one judgment is right and the other is wrong: so much varies between distant cultures that we may have no basis for argument. But with judgments of taste—say, judgments of attractiveness—no trouble is created by the diversity of views because disagreement about attractiveness does not challenge our own standards.

With morality things seem different. Because we experience moral judgments as objective, we cannot simply allow that what is morally right in one place is not morally right in another place. For this reason, Mackie thinks that the relativity of moral judgments undercuts their objectivity. Diverse moral standards reflect different "ways of life," he says. They are not insights into what is morally required.

Nagel and Foot resist this step from disagreement to lack of objectivity. Writing in a **Kantian** spirit, Nagel says that facts about moral disagreement do not undermine impersonal moral reasoning; instead, they provide additional materials for such reasoning to wrestle with. Writing in an **Aristotelian** spirit, Foot begins with the thought that genuine moral requirements have some connection to what is good for people. Moreover, when it comes to the core elements of a good life, human beings share a great deal: "All need affection, the cooperation of others, a place in the community, and help in trouble. It isn't true to suppose that human beings can flourish without these things—being isolated, despised or embattled, or without courage or hope. We are not, therefore, simply expressing values that we happen to have if we think of some moral systems as good moral systems and others as bad." Rather, we are asserting that some moral systems are defensible by arguments based on what is good for human beings, and some are not. Lincoln knew well that some people disagreed with him about the morality of slavery. He thought they were wrong. In addition, he thought he could defend his view with forceful arguments.

So we should be cautious about jumping too quickly from observed disagreements to the relativist idea that what is right for them and what is right for us are different. Why, Foot asks, are we so sure that we know where our reflection on moral standards and human good might lead? The problem with "relativists, and subjectivists generally," she says, is that that they "are ready to make pronouncements about the later part of moral arguments, and moral reviews, without being able to trace the intermediate steps."

Though they draw on different philosophical traditions, Nagel and Foot converge here. We experience moral requirements as objective. But are they really objective? Nagel and Foot agree that we will not find the answer in second-order arguments about the nature of moral thought. The only way to answer this question, they think, is to do the hard work of substantive, first-order, moral reflection—to think about what you ought to do and see whether that thinking leads to compelling conclusions. If it does, then you have a strong case for moral objectivity.

J. L. Mackie (1917–1981)

Mackie was born in Sydney, Australia. He taught in New Zealand, Australia, and England, and ended his teaching career as a fellow at University College, Oxford. A skeptically minded empiricist, Mackie made important contributions to metaphysics (*The Cement of the Universe*) and the philosophy of religion (*The Miracle of Theism*), as well as metaethics.

THE SUBJECTIVITY OF VALUES

from *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*

1. Moral Scepticism

There are no objective values. . . .

The claim that values are not objective, are not part of the fabric of the world, is meant to include not only moral goodness, which might be most naturally equated with moral value, but also other things that could be more loosely called moral values or disvalues—rightness and wrongness, duty, obligation, an action's being rotten and contemptible, and so on. It also includes non-moral values, notably aesthetic ones, beauty and various kinds of artistic merit. . . .

Since it is with moral values that I am primarily concerned, the view I am adopting may be called moral scepticism. But this name is likely to be misunderstood: "moral scepticism" might also be used as a name for either of two first order views, or perhaps for an incoherent mixture of the two. A moral sceptic might be the sort of person who says "All this talk of morality is tripe," who rejects morality and will take no notice of it. Such a person may be literally rejecting all moral judgements; he is more likely to be making moral judgements of his own, expressing a positive moral condemnation of all that conventionally passes for morality; or he may be confusing these two logically incompatible views, and saying that he rejects all morality, while he is in fact rejecting only a particular morality that is current in the society in which he has grown up. But I am not at present concerned with the merits or faults of such a position. These are first order moral views, positive or negative: the person who adopts either of them is taking a certain practical, normative, stand. By contrast, what I am discussing is a second order view, a view about the status of moral values and the nature of moral valuing, about where and how they fit into the world. These first and second order views are not merely distinct but completely independent: one could be a second order moral sceptic without being a first order one, or again the other way round. A man could hold strong moral views, and indeed ones whose content was thoroughly conventional, while believing that they were simply attitudes and policies with regard to conduct that he and other people held. Conversely, a man could reject all established morality while believing it to be an objective truth that it was evil or corrupt. . . .

2. Subjectivism

Another name often used, as an alternative to "moral scepticism," for the view I am discussing is "subjectivism." But this too has more than one meaning. Moral subjectivism too could be a first order, normative, view, namely that everyone really ought to do whatever he thinks he should. This plainly is a (systematic) first order view; on examination it soon ceases to be plausible, but that is beside the point, for it is quite independent of the second order thesis at present under consideration. What is more confusing is that different second order views compete for the name "subjectivism." Several of these are doctrines about the meaning of moral terms and moral statements. What is often called moral subjectivism is the doctrine that, for example, "This action is right" *means* "I approve of this action," or more generally that moral judgements are equivalent to reports of the speaker's own feelings or attitudes. But the view I am now discussing is to be distinguished in two vital respects from any such doctrine as this. First, what I have called moral scepticism is a negative doctrine, not a positive one: it says what there isn't, not what there is. It says that there do not exist entities or relations of a certain kind, objective values or requirements, which many people have believed to exist. Of course, the moral sceptic cannot leave it at that. If his position is to be at all plausible, he must give some account of how other people have fallen into what he regards as an error, and this account will have to include some positive suggestions about how values fail to be objective, about what has been mistaken for, or has led to false beliefs about, objective values. But this will be a development of his theory, not its core: its core is the negation. Secondly, what I have called moral scepticism is an ontological thesis, not a linguistic or conceptual one. It is not, like the other doctrine often called moral subjectivism, a view about the meanings of moral statements. . . .

The denial that there are objective values does not commit one to any particular view about what moral statements mean, and certainly not to the view that they are equivalent to subjective reports. . . .

4. Is Objectivity a Real Issue?

The main tradition of European moral philosophy from Plato onwards has combined the view that moral values are objective with the recognition that moral judgements are partly prescriptive or directive or action-guiding. Values themselves have been seen as at once prescriptive and objective. In Plato's theory the Forms, and in particular the Form of the Good, are eternal, extra-mental,

realities.[1] They are a very central structural element in the fabric of the world. But it is held also that just knowing them or "seeing" them will not merely tell men what to do but will ensure that they do it, overruling any contrary inclinations. The philosopher-kings in the *Republic* can, Plato thinks, be trusted with unchecked power because their education will have given them knowledge of the Forms. Being acquainted with the Forms of the Good and Justice and Beauty and the rest they will, by this knowledge alone, without any further motivation, be impelled to pursue and promote these ideals. Similarly, Kant believes that pure reason can by itself be practical, though he does not pretend to be able to explain how it can be so.[2] Again, Sidgwick argues that if there is to be a science of ethics — and he assumes that there can be, indeed he defines ethics as "the science of conduct" — what ought to be "must in another sense have objective existence: it must be an object of knowledge and as such the same for all minds"; but he says that the affirmations of this science "are also precepts," and he speaks of happiness as 'an end *absolutely* prescribed by reason.[3] [M]any philosophers have thus held that values are objectively prescriptive. . . .

7. The Claim to Objectivity

As I have said, the main tradition of European moral philosophy includes the. . . claim, that there are objective values of just the sort I have denied. I have referred already to Plato, Kant, and Sidgwick. Kant in particular holds that the categorical imperative[4] is not only categorical and imperative but objectively so: though a rational being gives the moral law to himself, the law that he thus makes is determinate and necessary. Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* by saying that the good is that at which all things aim, and that ethics is part of a science which he calls "politics," whose goal is not knowledge but practice; yet he does not doubt that there can be

1. One of the central doctrines in Plato's philosophy is his "theory of forms." Consider the many things that are good, or the many things that are beautiful. According to the theory of forms, goodness itself ("the form of the good") is a single thing alongside the many good things; beauty itself ("the form of beauty") is a single thing alongside the many beautiful things.

2. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was a German philosopher, one of the most influential thinkers of the Enlightenment, and the author of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and the *Critique of Judgment*. He explores the idea that "pure reason can by itself be practical" — that our conduct can be guided by reason itself — in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason*.

3. Mackie is here quoting from Henry Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*. Sidgwick (1838–1900) was an English moral philosopher. A classical utilitarian, he held that the standard of right conduct is the principle of utility: that conduct is right if and only if it produces the greatest sum of happiness.

4. According to the categorical imperative, which Kant presents in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, we ought only to act on a rule that we could approve of everyone acting on.

knowledge of what is the good for man, nor, once he has identified this as well-being or happiness, *eudaimonia,* that it can be known, rationally determined, in what happiness consists; and it is plain that he thinks that this happiness is intrinsically desirable, not good simply because it is desired. . . .

Even the sentimentalist Hutcheson defines moral goodness as "some quality apprehended in actions, which procures approbation . . ., " while saying that the moral sense by which we perceive virtue and vice has been given to us (by the Author of nature) to direct our actions.[5] Hume indeed was on the other side, but he is still a witness to the dominance of the objectivist tradition, since he claims that when we "see that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason," this "wou'd subvert all the vulgar systems of morality."[6] . . .

But this objectivism about values is not only a feature of the philosophical tradition. It has also a firm basis in ordinary thought, and even in the meanings of moral terms. . . .

Someone in a state of moral perplexity, wondering whether it would be wrong for him to engage, say, in research related to bacteriological warfare, wants to arrive at some judgement about this concrete case, his doing this work at this time in these actual circumstances. . . . The question is not, for example, whether he really wants to do this work, whether it will satisfy or dissatisfy him, whether he will in the long run have a pro-attitude towards it, or even whether this is an action of a sort that he can happily and sincerely recommend in all relevantly similar cases. Nor is he even wondering just whether to recommend such action in all relevantly similar cases. He wants to know whether this course of action would be wrong in itself. . . .

I conclude, then, that ordinary moral judgements include a claim to objectivity, an assumption that there are objective values in just the sense in which I am concerned to deny this. And I do not think it is going too far to say that this assumption has been incorporated in the basic, conventional, meanings of moral terms. Any analysis of the meanings of moral terms which omits this claim to objective, intrinsic, prescriptivity[7] is to that extent incomplete. . . .

If second order ethics were confined, then, to linguistic and conceptual analysis, it ought to conclude that moral values at least are objective: that they are so is part of what our ordinary moral statements mean: the traditional moral concepts of the ordinary man as well as of the main line of western philosophers are concepts of objective value.

5. Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) was a Scottish philosopher who held that human beings use various "senses" to navigate the world, including (in addition to the five senses commonly known) a sense of beauty, a public sense, a sense of honor, a sense of the ridiculous, and, most important, the moral sense described here. Mackie here quotes from Hutcheson's 1725 essay *An Inquiry concerning Moral Good and Evil.*

6. David Hume (1711–1776) was a Scottish philosopher and a student of Hutcheson's. Mackie is quoting from *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1736). Selections from Hume's writings on morality are in chapters 15 and 16 of this anthology.

7. Moral claims are *prescriptive*: they call for certain kinds of conduct. When we say that telling the truth is the *right* thing to do, we mean not only that it is objectively right. We are prescribing truth-telling.

But it is precisely for this reason that linguistic and conceptual analysis is not enough. The claim to objectivity, however ingrained in our language and thought, is not self-validating. It can and should be questioned. But the denial of objective values will have to be put forward not as the result of an analytic approach, but as an "error theory," a theory that although most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false. It is this that makes the name "moral scepticism" appropriate. . . .

Traditionally [this skeptical theory] has been supported by arguments of two main kinds, which I shall call the argument from relativity and the argument from queerness. . . .

8. The Argument from Relativity

The argument from relativity 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 nor second order ethical views. Yet it may indirectly support second order subjectivism: radical differences between first order moral judgements make it difficult to treat those judgements as apprehensions of objective truths. But it is not the mere occurrence of disagreements that tells against the objectivity of values. Disagreement on questions in history or biology or cosmology does not show that there are no objective issues in these fields for investigators to disagree about. But such scientific disagreement results from speculative inferences or explanatory hypotheses based on inadequate evidence, and it is hardly plausible to interpret moral disagreement in the same way. Disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect people's adherence to and participation in different ways of life. The causal connection seems to be mainly that way round: it is that people approve of monogamy because they participate in a monogamous way of life rather than that they participate in a monogamous way of life because they approve of monogamy. Of course, the standards may be an idealization of the way of life from which they arise: the monogamy in which people participate may be less complete, less rigid, than that of which it leads them to approve. This is not to say that moral judgements are purely conventional. Of course there have been and are moral heretics and moral reformers, people who have turned against the established rules and practices of their own communities for moral reasons, and often for moral reasons that we would endorse. But this can usually be understood as the extension, in ways which, though new and unconventional, seemed to them to be required for consistency, of rules to which they already adhered as arising out of an existing way of life. 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.

But there is a well-known counter to this argument from relativity, namely to say that the items for which objective validity is in the first place to be claimed are not specific moral rules or codes but very general basic principles which are recognized at least implicitly to some extent in all society — such principles as provide the foundations of what Sidgwick has called different methods of ethics: the principle of universalizability, perhaps, or the rule that one ought to conform to the specific rules of any way of life in which one takes part, from which one profits, and on which one relies, or some utilitarian principle of doing what tends, or seems likely, to promote the general happiness. It is easy to show that such general principles, married with differing concrete circumstances, different existing social patterns or different preferences, will beget different specific moral rules; and there is some plausibility in the claim that the specific rules thus generated will vary from community to community or from group to group in close agreement with the actual variations in accepted codes.

The argument from relativity can be only partly countered in this way. To take this line the moral objectivist has to say that it is only in these principles that the objective moral character attaches immediately to its descriptively specified ground or subject: other moral judgements are objectively valid or true, but only derivatively and contingently — if things had been otherwise, quite different sorts of actions would have been right. And despite the prominence in recent philosophical ethics of universalization, utilitarian principles, and the like, these are very far from constituting the whole of what is actually affirmed as basic in ordinary moral thought. Much of this is concerned rather with what Hare calls "ideals" or, less kindly, "fanaticism."[8] That is, people judge that some things are good or right, and others are bad or wrong, not because — or at any rate not only because — they exemplify some general principle for which widespread implicit acceptance could be claimed, but because something about those things arouses certain responses immediately in them, though they would arouse radically and irresolvably different responses in others. "Moral sense" or "intuition" is an initially more plausible description of what supplies many of our basic moral judgements than "reason." With regard to all these starting points of moral thinking the argument from relativity remains in full force.

9. The Argument from Queerness

Even more important, however, and certainly more generally applicable, is the argument from queerness. This has two parts, one metaphysical, the other epistemological. 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

8. R. M. Hare (1919–2002) was an English moral philosopher, author of *The Language of Morals* (1952) and *Freedom and Reason* (1963).

special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else. These points were recognized by Moore[9] when he spoke of non-natural qualities, and by the intuitionists in their talk about a "faculty of moral intuition." Intuitionism has long been out of favour, and it is indeed easy to point out its implausibilities. What is not so often stressed, but is more important, is that the central thesis of intuitionism is one to which any objectivist view of values is in the end committed: intuitionism merely makes unpalatably plain what other forms of objectivism wrap up. Of course the suggestion that moral judgements are made or moral problems solved by just sitting down and having an ethical intuition is a travesty of actual moral thinking. But, however complex the real process, it will require (if it is to yield authoritatively prescriptive conclusions) some input of this distinctive sort, either premisses or forms of argument or both. When we ask the awkward question, how we can be aware of this authoritative prescriptivity, of the truth of these distinctively ethical premisses or of the cogency of this distinctively ethical pattern of reasoning, none of our ordinary accounts of sensory perception or introspection or the framing and confirming of explanatory hypotheses or inference or logical construction or conceptual analysis, or any combination of these, will provide a satisfactory answer; "a special sort of intuition" is a lame answer, but it is the one to which the clear-headed objectivist is compelled to resort. . . .

Plato's Forms give a dramatic picture of what objective values would have to be. The Form of the Good is such that knowledge of it provides the knower with both a direction and an overriding motive; something's being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it. 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. Similarly, if there were objective principles of right and wrong, any wrong (possible) course of action would have not-to-be-doneness somehow built into it. . . .

The need for an argument of this sort can be brought out by reflection on Hume's argument that "reason" — in which at this stage he includes all sorts of knowing as well as reasoning — can never be an "influencing motive of the will." Someone might object that Hume has argued unfairly from the lack of influencing power (not contingent upon desires) in ordinary objects of knowledge and ordinary reasoning, and might maintain that values differ from natural objects precisely in their power, when known, automatically to influence the will. To this Hume could, and would need to, reply that this objection involves the postulating of value-entities or value-features of quite a different order from anything else with which we are acquainted, and of a corresponding faculty with which to detect them. That is, he would have to supplement his explicit argument with what I have called the argument from queerness.

Another way of bringing out this queerness is to ask, about anything that is supposed to have some objective moral quality, how this is linked with its natural features.

9. G. E. Moore (1873–1958) was an English philosopher, author of *Principia Ethica* (1903).

What is the connection between the natural fact that an action is a piece of deliberate cruelty — say, causing pain just for fun — and the moral fact that it is wrong? It cannot be an entailment, a logical or semantic necessity. Yet it is not merely that the two features occur together. 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"? And how do we know the relation that it signifies, if this is something more than such actions being socially condemned, and condemned by us too, perhaps through our having absorbed attitudes from our social environment? It is not even sufficient to postulate a faculty which "sees" the wrongness: something must be postulated which can see at once the natural features that constitute the cruelty, and the wrongness, and the mysterious consequential link between the two. . . .

It may be thought that the argument from queerness is given an unfair start if we thus relate it to what are admittedly among the wilder products of philosophical fancy — Platonic Forms, non-natural qualities, self-evident relations of fitness, faculties of intuition, and the like. Is it equally forceful if applied to the terms in which everyday moral judgements are more likely to be expressed — though still, as has been argued in Section 7, with a claim to objectivity — "you must do this," "you can't do that," "obligation," "unjust," "rotten," "disgraceful," "mean," or talk about good reasons for or against possible actions? Admittedly not; but that is because the objective prescriptivity, the element a claim for whose authoritativeness is embedded in ordinary moral thought and language, is not yet isolated in these forms of speech, but is presented along with relations to desires and feelings, reasoning about the means to desired ends, interpersonal demands, the injustice which consists in the violation of what are in the context the accepted standards of merit, the psychological constituents of meanness, and so on. There is nothing queer about any of these, and under cover of them the claim for moral authority may pass unnoticed. But if I am right in arguing that it is ordinarily there, and is therefore very likely to be incorporated almost automatically in philosophical accounts of ethics which systematize our ordinary thought even in such apparently innocent terms as these, it needs to be examined, and for this purpose it needs to be isolated and exposed as it is by the less cautious philosophical reconstructions. . . .

TEST YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Which of the following alternatives best captures Mackie's account of moral subjectivism?

   (i) Each of us has our own personal moral code.

   (ii) There are no objective values.

   (iii) We should each do whatever we wish.

   (iv) Moral statements are expressions of attitudes.

2. What is the difference between a first-order moral view and a second-order moral view? Give two examples of each. Is Mackie's moral subjectivism a first-order view or a second-order view?

3. State in your own words the two parts of Mackie's "argument from queerness" (do not give the argument: just describe its two components).

NOTES AND QUESTIONS

1. According to Mackie, the idea that values are *objectively prescriptive* is endorsed by many philosophers and by common sense. Explain what "objectively prescriptive" means. Does the claim that values are *objective* mean that values are objects that we interact with? If not that, then what does it mean? Consider two interpretations of *prescriptive*:

   (i) A moral statement is *prescriptive* if and only if a person who fully understands the statement is motivated to comply with it.

   (ii) A moral statement is *prescriptive* if and only if a person who fully understands the statement knows what kinds of conduct it requires of those to whom it applies.

   What is the difference between these interpretations? Which interpretation does Mackie rely on in his discussions of Plato, Kant, and Sidgwick?

2. Mackie's argument from relativity begins from the fact that moral beliefs vary across societies and across groups within a single society. This variation, he says, "may indirectly support second-order subjectivism."

   (i) Why is the support for subjectivism only indirect? Why doesn't moral disagreement lead directly to subjectivism?

   (ii) How exactly does the variation in moral views within and between societies (indirectly) support second-order subjectivism? (*Hint:* Focus on Mackie's contrast between explaining scientific and moral disagreement.) Is Mackie convincing on this point?

   Mackie considers a "well-known counter to the argument from relativity."

   (i) The counter draws on the distinction between specific moral rules and general principles. Give some examples of the distinction. How does this distinction provide the basis for a reply to the argument from relativity?

   (ii) How does Mackie respond to the counterargument?

   (iii) Consider a reply to Mackie's response. To make things more concrete, consider a **utilitarian** who thinks that the principle of utility is objectively valid. The utilitarian might say:

   > You need to distinguish between making moral judgments and defending those judgments. When people make moral judgments, they often