

Mackie and moral motivation

1. Introduction

J. L. Mackie has argued that morality is not objective because the idea of objective moral properties is too bizarre to be taken seriously. In this essay, I focus on one particular argument of Mackie's, focusing on the idea that objective moral properties would be somehow intrinsically motivating. I argue that there is insufficient reason to attribute this mysterious feature to objective moral properties, and that the distinctive character of these properties can and should be understood differently. This means that Mackie's argument fails to cast doubt on the reality of objective moral properties.

2. An overview of the debate

The debate over the objectivity of morality has brought about a few prominent positions. *Moral realists* hold that there are objective moral properties that moral judgments refer to: e.g., if torture is wrong, it is because torture has the objective moral property *wrongness*. Some realists think these properties are ordinary natural properties belonging to the world studied by science, and other realists think they are special non-natural properties lying beyond the natural world, but both agree that objective moral properties really do exist. *Constructivists* hold that moral properties are not fully objective in the way that realists contend, but instead depend in some way on persons and their attitudes or perspectives: e.g., relativists hold that wrongness is a matter of being *disapproved by the norms of one's culture*, divine command theorists hold that wrongness is a matter of being *prohibited by the commands of God*. Finally, *expressivists* reject the whole idea of moral judgments referring to moral properties. On their view, moral evaluation

is a matter of expressing and encouraging positive or negative attitudes towards certain actions, instead of being a matter of literally describing moral properties had by those actions.

Mackie's position agrees with the realists about the nature of moral judgments: these judgments purport to refer to fully objective moral properties. But he says that realists are wrong about the existence of moral properties: in reality there are no such properties, which means all moral judgments are based on a false presupposition. This *error-theory* can be compared to textbook atheism: when people talk about God, they are trying to make reference to a supernatural being, but in reality there is no such being, which means all of this religious discourse rests on a false presupposition. Moral evaluation is therefore systematically shot through with error.

So for Mackie to support his position against realists, he has to give reasons for thinking that there are no objective moral properties. And here he has two main kinds of reasons. The first begins by noting the well-known moral disagreements from culture to culture, and then argues that this is better explained in terms of differing ways of life than in terms of differing abilities to recognize objective moral properties. The second focuses on the properties themselves, arguing that these properties would have to be extremely unusual—too unusual to be taken seriously. But what would make objective moral properties so incredibly unusual? One main answer is that they would have to be *intrinsically motivating*. If Mackie is right about this, then there would be a good reason for rejecting the existence of objective moral properties and then embracing his error-theory.

3. Mackie's argument

But what exactly is involved in something being intrinsically motivating? And why should we think objective moral properties would have to be intrinsically motivating? The first question is best answered by contrast. Most things in the world have no special connection to motivation. Whether I am motivated by something depends on whether I happen to care about it one way or the other: if I hear about free Cheerios, I won't be particularly motivated, but if I hear about free Crispix, I will be strongly motivated, and that's simply because I really like Crispix and am mostly indifferent about Cheerios. Consequently, there is no ordinary object that everyone *must* be motivated by: it all depends on what they happen to care about, and if there are certain things that everyone on earth cares about (e.g., food, water), that's simply a product of human nature, rather than anything special about the things in question. In general, then, whether something motivates us depends on whether we happen to care about it.

But if something were *intrinsically motivating*, then it would somehow motivate us *on its own*, regardless of whether we happened to care about it. Thus Mackie is convinced that an objective property of wrongness would somehow motivate us against an action all by itself, so that it would be impossible to recognize the wrongness of an action without being motivated against it. This leads us to the second question: why should we think that objective moral properties would be intrinsically motivating? Mackie's answer is that this is the best way of understanding the traditional conception of morality as objectively prescriptive:

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. And 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. Or we should have something like Clarke's necessary relations of fitness between situation and actions, so that a situation would have a demand for such-and-such an action somehow built into it. (Mackie 1977: 40)

Notice that objective moral properties are supposed to motivate us “not because of any contingent fact” about people and their concerns, but because of something about the properties: “the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it”. This unusual motivational feature is supposed to explain how moral properties are different from ordinary descriptive properties: morality is supposed to tell us what to do, thereby motivating us in a certain direction.

And now it is easy to see why Mackie is skeptical about the real existence of any such properties. They would be in a class by themselves, operating in a way that is completely different from everything else. And their effect on us would be inexplicable in terms of ordinary psychological processes: they would motivate us even if we didn't care about them at all. Such mysterious properties are difficult to take seriously, and they seem to cry out for Ockham's Razor. So if there is a way to understand morality that makes no reference to these properties, then we are much better off not positing them in the first place.

4. Reply to Mackie's argument

In this section, I will argue that Mackie is wrong to say that objective moral properties would have to be intrinsically motivating. In my view, morality does not have to have some special way of motivating us. It can motivate us in much the same way everything else does, by appealing to what we happen to care about. What makes moral properties distinctive, and different from ordinary non-moral properties, does not lie in *how* and *whether* they motivate us. Instead, it lies in the fact that we all *ought* to be motivated by them.

First, note that just because someone sees that something is wrong, that does not necessarily mean that they are motivated against it. Indeed, it seems possible for someone to remain completely unmotivated even after judging that something is wrong. We have all been guilty of doing something that we are at the same time convinced is the wrong thing to do. Of course, most of the time we have *some* motivation, however small, against doing something we think is wrong. But it even seems possible for someone to recognize that something is wrong and have *no* motivation against doing it: e.g., someone who does not care at all about right and wrong. Perhaps such a case is uncommon, but that can be easily explained in terms of human societies raising children so that they end up with moral concerns.

Second, even if we focus on the more common case—in which people *are* motivated against things they think are wrong—it is not clear that the moral properties are the source of motivation. It seems more plausible that moral motivation operates in much the same way as any sort of motivation: i.e., it has its source in people and their concerns. After all, some people are more motivated by morality than others, and this seems to be easily explained in terms of differences in upbringing and peer influence. Of course, Mackie would agree that this is all that is going on, since objective moral properties do not actually exist. But realists can say that there are objective moral properties which motivate different people differently, depending on their personal sensibilities.

But if objective moral properties are not intrinsically motivating, then what makes them distinctive and different from ordinary non-moral properties? And if their motivational influence depends on people's personal sensibilities, then how exactly are they *objectively prescriptive*? The answer is that objective moral properties, if they existed, would have to be *normatively authoritative* over all of us. In other words, even if someone is completely unmotivated given the

wrongness of an action, it is still true that they *ought* to be motivated against that action, and indeed that they *ought not* to perform that action. This normative *ought* is by itself no guarantee of motivation, much less motivation that has its source in the moral properties themselves. It is a claim about what should happen, not about what will happen and how. And even if Mackie is right to say that intrinsically motivating properties are so unusual that they cannot be taken seriously, it is far from clear that normatively authoritative properties would be unusual. In any case, it would require a different argument from Mackie.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Mackie's argument against moral realism does not succeed. He cannot safely assume that objective moral properties would have to be intrinsically motivating. It is, of course, plausible enough that objective moral properties would have to be special in some way, and this can perhaps be put in terms of being objectively prescriptive. But this requirement is not to be understood in terms of some mysterious means of motivating us. Instead, it can be understood in terms of moral properties carrying a normative *ought*, a far less controversial and less obviously unusual feature.

REFERENCES

Mackie, J. L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. New York: Penguin Books.