

It is worth noting that while Ayer is what is known as a non-cognitivist, Mackie is a cognitivist. Non-cognitivists think that moral claims are not truth-apt, whereas cognitivists think that moral claims are truth-apt. As you may have assumed given how Mackie starts the chapter, he does not think that any first-order moral claims (when made *objectively*) are true. In other words, all first-order objective moral claims are false. The distinction between first and second-order is essentially the difference between beliefs one has and the reasons one has for those beliefs. Sometimes it is helpful to think of the first-order as the things that are right and wrong, and the second-order is the moral theory that entails those right and wrong claims.

In contrast to Ayer, Mackie does not take his project to be about the meaning of moral terms. Nor does he take his project to be Moorean in that he is trying to decide if concepts like 'good' can be analyzed or not. (pg 18-19) Such projects complicate things. Mackie intends to focus solely on objectivity.

It is worth taking a moment to consider what Mackie means by 'objective'. At various points in Ch. 1, Mackie identifies the following features of an *objective moral value*:

1. They are part of the 'fabric of the world'. (pg 15)
2. They can be something we know. (pg 21)
3. Their truth is independent of what we want or choose. (pg 21)
4. They are mind-independent. (pg 21)
5. They are inherently action guiding. (pg 23; 29)

In sections 4, 5, and 6, Mackie attempts to show that a rejection of objective values does not entail any great change in either our moral practice, or our lives more generally. We can still retain the intensity of our first-order moral beliefs even if we hold a second-order theory that, as Mackie contends, there are no objective moral values. If you accept the Forms of Plato, or the categorical nature of Kant's moral system, you may continue to act as you do even if you accept Mackie's second-order claim that there are no such objective values.

After this Mackie goes on in section 7 to discuss how objectivized our language is / has become. Such objectification leads Mackie to 'conclude...that ordinary moral judgements include a claim to objectivity, an assumption that there are objective values in just the sense...I...deny'. (pg 35) When we make moral claims in an objective sense, we are committing a kind of *error*. Hence, his theory is known as a kind of *error theory*.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Argument from Relativity**

It is uncontroversial that different societies, both existing now and in the past, have had different moral values in regards to a variety of topics (e.g. slavery, women's rights, etc.). Such disagreement is hard to explain, he thinks, if there are objective moral values. Even if you think that there are some general principles that all humans can agree on, such principles will be both

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<sup>1</sup> But not an Ayerror theory. Ba-dum tsh!

quite general and unable to explain how such principles could evoke the kind of passion with which first-order moral claims do. The argument can be summed up as follows:

- (1) If there were objective moral values, then moral disagreement would be quite rare / impossible.
- (2) Moral disagreement is neither rare, nor impossible.
- (C) Therefore, there are no objective moral values.<sup>2</sup>

### **The argument from ontological queerness**

- (1) If moral values are objective, then they are action guiding when believed.
- (2) There are no action guiding beliefs.
- (C) Moral values are not objective.

If these objective moral values existed, then they would be the kinds of things which would motivate us to act in accordance with those values. If you come to believe that lying is wrong, then you become motivated to not lie. This is quite odd for Mackie as he thinks no other beliefs are like this (hence why he finds them queer). For Mackie, beliefs connect to desires that we have and that is why we become motivated to act. When you are hungry for Thai food, and you come to believe that there is Thai food at a particular location, you are thereby motivated to go to that location. If you do not care for Thai food, however, this belief does not motivate you at all. Objective morality is not supposed to be like that.

### **The argument from epistemological queerness**

- (1) Accessing moral values would require a special faculty of moral perception.
- (2) There is no such faculty of moral perception.
- (C) We cannot know about moral values (even if they exist).

Now, it is extremely clear that Mackie is assuming a naturalist worldview for the epistemic argument. Should you, like Moore or Ross, reject naturalism, then this second argument loses its force. There is, however, more to say. From the Routledge handout for this reading:

But Mackie presses the argument from epistemological queerness by asking what the connection between natural properties and moral properties is. For instance, we commonly say things like 'that's wrong because it is cruel'. If we take cruel to mean 'causing pain for fun', then cruelty is a natural property. It is a psychological fact that something causes pain, and another psychological fact that someone's motive is taking pleasure in doing this. But what is the relation

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<sup>2</sup> Some, like Colin Mcclellan, use the parallel of disagreement about physical facts vs. moral disagreement to help motivate the relativity argument. Scientific dispute is undeniably objective. When two or more parties disagree, they can settle such disagreement (e.g. through experiment). Such methods are not available to those engaged in a moral disagreement. Hence, moral disagreement is not objective. A natural limitation of such an argument, however, is that there are disagreements about physical facts that do not seem to be able to be settled (e.g. flat earthers).

between these facts and the 'fact' that acting in this way is wrong? How can we establish whether it is wrong or not? It isn't an analytic truth, and we can't deduce it. Intuitionism fails to tell us how morality is related to anything else, how natural facts contribute to moral thinking. This makes it even more puzzling how we could come to know about moral properties.

**Possible Problem 1:**

Suppose Mackie is correct and all claims involving moral terms are false. Let 'P' stand for the sentence 'murder is wrong'. P, then is false. However, *false* is a logical concept to which Mackie is helping himself, and logic has many rules and operations. One of the easiest operations is that of *negation*. In standard logic, when you negate (symbolized by a tilde,  $\sim$ ) a sentence, the truth-value of that sentence changes. So, let A stand for any false sentence. Then,  $(\sim A)$  would be true. Likewise, if A is true, then  $(\sim A)$  is false.

However, on Mackie's account, this does not hold. P is false, *and*  $\sim P$  is false. Nothing he has said, however, has justified the conclusion that objective moral claims have a substantially different logic than non-moral claims. Worse, Mackie's view violates other, more important logical rules. As such, the Error Theorist owes us an account of what the logic of moral claims is.

**Possible Problem 2:**

It is not clear that Mackie is right when he claims that there is no practical problem in holding first-order moral beliefs while being a second-order skeptic. It certainly seems like there would be widespread changes in people's behaviors if we all came to accept error theory. There is a paper by Bernard Williams entitled "Subjectivism: Further Thoughts" which seeks to address this very worry. We could read that at some point if you wish.