

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 claim:

1. It can be something we know.
2. It can be true or false.
3. Its truth is independent of what we want or choose.
4. It is about something mind-independent.
5. It is about something that is part of the 'fabric of the world'.

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.). Mackie thinks these disagreements are quite different than the scientific disagreements which societies have had over time.

With scientific disagreements, the best explanation is that different societies don't have sufficient evidence to discover the truth. It is perfectly plausible to think that there is just one way the world is, empirically speaking, but it is not always easy to discover how that is. Our empirical beliefs are caused by, and change in response to, discoveries of what is true about the world. In contrast, says Mackie, the idea that two societies which disagree are both trying to find 'the truth' about ethics doesn't sit well with an understanding of the history of societies and how ethical practices develop. It is far more plausible to say that different ways of life have given rise to different moral beliefs than to argue that societies' different moral beliefs result from very inadequate or badly distorted perceptions of the one moral reality. There are different ways that human beings live, and they have developed different conventions about how to live, and these conventions are reflected in their moral judgments.

Given this difference between moral disagreement and scientific disagreement, Mackie concludes there is no fact of the matter in regards to ethical issues. Psychological factors and social forces are sufficient to explain why we behave the way that we do, and why we have the moral disagreements that we do. Unlike scientific disagreement, there is no common evidence to appeal to in moral cases; there are no experts to consult.

In response, the moral realist could argue that there is evidence that could be appealed to, and that those who disagree are merely mistaken. Perhaps the realist could claim that if your moral intuition does not detect the wrongness of a murder, then there is something wrong with you - and not morality. Many find this kind of reply to result in a stalemate between Mackie and his critics. Thankfully, Mackie gives us more argument to consider.

The argument from ontological queerness

- (1) Moral statements express beliefs that are true only if there are objectively prescriptive facts.
- (2) There are no objectively prescriptive facts.
- (C) All beliefs that moral statements express are false.

If such entities existed, then they would be 'queer' - i.e. unlike the rest of the entities in the universe. (Mackie 1977, 38) Why would they be queer? Well, they would be a kind of fact that by the mere believing of it introduces / creates motivation in you that wasn't there before. At time t_0 , you do not believe a moral truth, and lack motivation to follow it. At t_1 , you come to believe the moral truth and gain motivation to follow it because of the belief.

Are any other beliefs like that? Mackie doesn't think so, and so these kinds of beliefs if they existed would be so weird. Now, just because something is weird isn't a reason to not believe it, so Mackie needs to get us to see not only are they weird but that they are unneeded to explain moral behavior. For that, we get the second queerness argument.

The argument from epistemological queerness

Add two further premises to (1):

- (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, 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 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.

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 said, however, lead us to believe that moral claims had a substantially different logic than non-moral

claims. Worse, Mackie's view violates other, more important logical rules (which we needn't go into here, but we can talk about if you are interested). As such, the Error Theorist owes us an account of what the logic of moral claims is.

Problem 2:

Let's go back to the argument from relativity. Recall that moral disagreement was, for Mackie, evidence that there was no fact of the matter in regards to whether or not moral truths exist. Let us call disagreement at this level *first-order disagreement*. Let us call disagreement between theories, *second-order disagreement*. First-order disagreement is about what actions are right/wrong, and second-order disagreement is about which theories are right/wrong.

Not surprisingly, we've seen that different moral theories are (generally) inconsistent with one another. You cannot be a Kantian-Hedonist, for example. Error theory, then, is a second-order theory which disagrees with quite a lot of our other second-order theories. The argument from relativity claimed that moral disagreement is different than scientific disagreement, and this entailed that there was no fact of the matter in regards to moral truths. Disagreement exists, we can now see, at the second-order level too. If this disagreement entails that there is no fact of the matter at the second-order level, then Mackie's theory would not be true. Such a problem is known as being *self defeating*. This is usually understood as the notion that if the theory is true, then it is false. This is bad for a philosophical theory!