

Handout: J.L. Mackie – The Subjectivity of Values

Framing the Problem

At the heart of J.L. Mackie's argument is a bold and provocative claim:

There are no objective values.

This assertion, according to Mackie, is likely to provoke three kinds of reactions:

- Outrage (that it threatens morality),
- Shrugged acceptance (as trivially obvious),
- Confusion (as meaningless or incoherent).

To avoid misunderstanding, Mackie aims to clarify what exactly he is denying and *why*. His thesis belongs not to first-order normative ethics (concerned with what we ought to do), but to **second-order, metaethical reflection** on the *status* of moral claims.

1. What Is Mackie Denying?

- Mackie calls his view **moral skepticism**, but not in the ordinary sense (e.g., rejecting morality altogether). Rather, he means a **second-order ontological skepticism**: the denial that values like *rightness*, *wrongness*, *goodness*, *duty*, or *virtue* exist as objective features of the world.
 - His view is also called **subjectivism**, but again with caution:
 - Not first-order subjectivism ("everyone ought to do what they think best"),
 - Not simple emotivism or speaker-attitude reporting (e.g., "X is wrong" = "I disapprove of X"),
 - Rather, he advances a **negative thesis**: that objective values *do not exist*.
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2. The Structure of Mackie's Argument

Mackie's essay proceeds in three main stages:

1. **Clarification of the debate** over objectivity and subjectivity,
 2. **Diagnosis of the pervasive error** (error theory),
 3. **Positive arguments for subjectivism**, most famously:
 - The **Argument from Relativity**, and
 - The **Argument from Queerness**.
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3. Clarifying the Metaethical Terrain

Second-Order Questions

Mackie distinguishes:

- **First-order ethics**: what actions are right/wrong.
- **Second-order ethics**: what *moral claims* mean, and whether they are *true*.

Among second-order questions, Mackie identifies several types:

- **Linguistic/semantic**: What do moral terms mean?
- **Ontological**: Do moral properties like "goodness" *exist*?
- **Epistemological**: Can we *know* moral truths?

Mackie's thesis is **ontological**: moral properties like *wrongness* or *rightness* do **not exist** independently of our responses.

4. The Error Theory

Moral Judgments Presuppose Objectivity

Mackie insists that **ordinary moral discourse** assumes that moral claims are **objective, prescriptive truths**:

- They are meant to *describe* the world (not just express attitudes),
- They *obligate* us categorically (regardless of desires or interests).

Because these assumptions are built into the language and logic of moral discourse, Mackie concludes:

All ordinary moral judgments are systematically in error.
(Hence: “error theory.”)

5. Standards and Hypotheticals

Mackie acknowledges that we can make **objective evaluative claims**, *relative to standards* (e.g., this is a good knife, good diver, or just ruling):

- These evaluations are **true or false** *given agreed-upon standards*,
- But **the standards themselves** are not objectively valid; they are **human constructs**.

This distinction mirrors **Kant’s contrast between hypothetical and categorical imperatives**:

- Hypothetical: “If you want X, do Y” (contingent on desires),
- Categorical: “Do Y” (regardless of desires).

Mackie’s core claim is the denial that any **categorical imperatives** are objectively true.

6. Argument from Relativity

Premise: Widespread moral disagreement across cultures and time periods.

- Not minor variations, but **deep, foundational** differences.

Conclusion: Best explained not by variation in *perceptions* of objective values, but by variation in:

- Ways of life,
- Social practices,
- Cultural conditioning.

Even when reformers challenge dominant norms, they typically **extend** preexisting moral values rather than appeal to some independent moral reality.

7. Argument from Queerness

One of the most famous arguments in metaethics.

Metaphysical Queerness:

If moral values were real, they would be **utterly unlike** anything else in the universe:

- **Intrinsic prescriptivity** (a built-in “to-be-doneness”),
- **Objective motivating force** (knowing the good makes one pursue it).

Such properties would be **ontologically strange**—more like Plato’s *Forms* than natural objects.

Epistemological Queerness:

If we could know objective values, it would require a **special, non-natural faculty** (e.g., moral intuition):

- But such faculties are mysterious, unaccounted for by empirical psychology.
 - Thus, **we have no plausible access** to the supposed objective realm of values.
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8. Patterns of Objectification

Mackie explains our widespread belief in objective values through **projection**:

- We mistakenly “read into” the world the **feelings, attitudes, and social norms** we’ve internalized.
- This is akin to the **pathetic fallacy**: projecting subjective qualities (like “foulness” or “meanness”) onto external objects.

Examples:

- Saying something is “rotten” or “disgraceful” presupposes it has an **intrinsic** moral property—but actually expresses a deeply entrenched *evaluative attitude*.
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9. Theological and Aristotelian Objections

What about God?

- Some thinkers (e.g., Clarke, Price) claim that moral truths are grounded in God’s will.
- But Mackie replies: this only shifts the mystery—*is something good because God wills it, or does God will it because it is good?*

Mackie's answer: even divine command theory must ultimately confront the problem of **objective prescriptivity**, and thus faces the **same metaphysical and epistemological challenges**.

What about Human Nature and the Good for Man?

- Aristotelian conceptions of ethics appeal to the **teleological flourishing** of human beings.
- But Mackie warns against **smuggling in normativity**:
 - Is the “good for man” a descriptive truth (what humans pursue)?
 - Or a normative claim (what they *should* pursue)?

Trying to do both, Mackie argues, results in a **covert objectification**.

10. Conclusion and Implications

Mackie's conclusion:

All moral claims involving objective prescriptivity are false.

The “**error theory**” must be defended by:

1. **Exposing the mistaken assumption** built into moral language,
2. **Showing the implausibility** of objective values (queerness),
3. **Explaining** the persistence of the belief (objectification),
4. **Highlighting the relativity** of moral codes.

This clears the way for constructing a **subjectivist, naturalist, and ultimately human-centered account** of ethics.

Mackie will explore this possibility in future chapters by developing a constructive ethical theory that *dispenses* with claims to objectivity without collapsing into nihilism.