Hypothetical Imperatives, Moral Imperatives, and the Objectivity of Values

If we accept Mackie's account of the nature of ethical statements, that the cognitivists are right to assert that when we say X is wrong, we mean that X is morally wrong in an objective sense, and, further, that it doesn't make sense for anything to be morally wrong in an objective sense, then it seems that Mackie is right to say that one would have to conclude that we are mistaken to think some acts wrong.[1] Now, I'm inclined to agree with Mackie that if we accept that for something to be objectively wrong implies that there is some quality of "wrongness" out in the world which applies to the act in question, then it doesn't make a great deal of sense to claim that some things are wrong, primarily on the grounds that, like Mackie, I don't believe that such qualities exist. And I will tentatively accept for the sake of argument Mackie's assumption that it is actually meaningful to say that such qualities adhere in actions in the world. But I don't think Mackie's conception of objective values is the only one possible – in fact, I think Mackie is himself committed to the existence of objective values of another sort, which he never explicitly rules out. Mackie is rash, in my opinion, when he says that there are no objective values.

I am unconvinced by Harrison's argument that, because it makes sense for a hypothetical imperative to be right or wrong despite the absence of "rightness" or "wrongness" in the world, that it need not be any different for categorical imperatives.[2] When I ought to make a certain move in a chess game, the "ought" is situated in a very

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[1] Mackie, J.L. *The Subjectivity of Morals.* (1977) Louis P. Pojman, Ed., *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings, 4th Ed.* Canada: Wadsworth Group, 2002, p. 135. Hereafter cited, parenthetically, by page number.

[2] Jonathan Harrison. *A Critique of Mackie's Error Theory* (1995) Louis P. Pojman, Ed., *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings, 4th Ed.* Canada: Wadsworth Group, 2002, p. 135. Hereafter cited, parenthetically, by page number.

specific context – if my goal is to win the game, I ought, logically, to make the moves that will allow me to win the game. The imperative is clearly objective and action-guiding. This sort of ought doesn't exist for categorical imperatives – it isn't clear what, exactly, if they are taken to be strictly categorical, is action-guiding about them. If wrong actions are taken to be wrong in themselves – and it seems they would have to be, if they're taken to be categorically wrong – then the language seems to imply that the actions participate in some quality of "wrongness," which somehow adheres in them, and which we, simply because we must, seek to avoid. It doesn't make sense to ask of something declared categorically wrong, "Wrong relative to what?"

Mackie's objection, then, only effectively applies to categorical imperatives, for only wrongness in the categorical sense seems to commit us to what I agree with Mackie is the rather untenable position that there are real qualities of rightness or wrongness or goodness or badness adhering in things and actions in the world. Harrison is right that calling something right in a hypothetical sense doesn't imply the existence of a separate quality of "rightness," but I think he's wrong to claim that it isn't any different for categorical imperatives. It isn't only that "the fact that inspection does not reveal anything like an objective characteristic, wrongness, answering to the rather peculiar description Mackie gives of it when we do something which we *categorically* ought not to do," shows categorical wrongness to not be objective (Harrison, 457). Harrison's point, I think, is not something like, "Just because you can't 'see' the wrongness doesn't mean it's not there," but rather, "The description Mackie gives of categorical wrongness is the wrong one." But in the absence of such a peculiar description, it doesn't seem that

categorical wrongness means much of anything at all. Categorical wrongness, then, is "queer" in a way that hypothetical wrongness is not.

So insofar as when we make a moral judgment we are saying something along the lines of, "Murder is bad or wrong because the act of murder has the objective quality of being bad or wrong," then I accept Mackie's position that at least some of our moral judgments are false. Harrison takes it that Mackie suggests that all of our moral judgments are made in this way, and are therefore false. And yet, as Harrison notes, Mackie seems to commit himself in other parts of his book to what look suspiciously like moral judgments, and it isn't clear how he can reasonably be justified in doing so if he really believes, as he says, that all moral judgments are necessarily false.

It seems it would be most charitable to Mackie, here, to assume that he was hasty in pronouncing all moral judgments necessarily false, or that Harrison has portrayed him accurately, as he seems, on occasion, to assert moral judgments which he feels we ought to regard as somehow true, as when he says "As the world is, wars and revolutions cannot be ruled to be morally completely out of the question. The death penalty, I believe, can." (Harrison, quoting Mackie, 459). It seems unlikely that his position really is that when we make moral judgments we must necessarily commit ourselves to the existence of queer, nonexistent moral entities if, despite this, he still feels compelled to make moral judgments of his own. But, in fact, Mackie says only that " although *most* people in making moral judgments implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false" (451) (emphasis my own). So he does leave a little wiggle-room. Presumably, then, he means something different in

making his moral judgments than he claims the rest of us do in making ours. For instance, Harrison notes that:

> Another possibility, which I think might be the one Mackie actually thinks obtains, is that, though all moral beliefs are false, it is better that men believe some of these falsehoods than others. It is neither true, for example, that patriotism is a duty, nor true that it is not one, but, when the dreadful consequences of war with modern weapons are considered, it is much better that men should think that it is not a duty than that they should think it is. (Harrison, 462).

Now, obviously – and Harrison notes this as well – if Mackie is of the opinion that it would be *better* for us to hold certain moral beliefs than it would be for us to hold others, then he can't strictly hold that all moral judgments are false. When presented with this, I'm not inclined to think Mackie simply doesn't realize that in making his moral pronouncements he's unknowingly (or worse, knowingly) making what he earlier describes as a false claim. It seems more likely that he is overly rash in baldly declaring, "There are no objective values," when, really, he only attempts to (successfully, in my opinion) refute the existence of the sort of objective values implied by our common ideas of categorical rightness and wrongness (Mackie, 446). But there are, or could potentially be, I think, objective values of the more hypothetical sort, which I think Mackie is committed to in asserting that it would be better for us to believe in one set of moral claims rather than another. And these, I would assert, surely exist in the trivial way that one really 'ought' to move in certain ways if one wishes to win a game of chess.

If we accept, for instance, Warnock's position that there is an object of morality, which can broadly be described as "the amelioration of the human condition," then it seems it wouldn't be terribly difficult to claim, at the very least, that there are objectively good and bad and right and wrong actions when considered in the broadly defined

context of human welfare.[3] Actions which tend to promote the amelioration of the human condition would be objectively good or right in the sense that certain moves in a chess game might be said to be objectively good or right. And the same could be same of actions which tended promote the opposite. So it would make sense to declare that certain actions were objectively good or bad, without positing any odd properties of the universe. It seems that Mackie thinks (rightly, in my opinion) that the human race would be worse off if patriotism were widely believed to be a moral duty, and that, given that fact, it would be better if we didn't believe it. I suppose one could also say that it would be *good* if people were to not believe in patriotism as a duty. But were one to say this, I don't think one would be committed to positing that some mysterious quality of "goodness" therefore adheres to my not believing in patriotism as a duty. My disbelief in patriotism is not good in and of itself, but only in the context of ameliorating the human condition.

Nothing about this seems inconsistent with Mackie's position. As I hope I've shown, he only refutes a particular conception of objective value. If he regards that conception as the only one possible, then I think he must be mistaken. If he doesn't regard the conception of objective value I've outlined above as valid, then I don't see why he thinks he ought to go around making what are certainly moral judgments. If he intends his moral judgments to be understood the way he claims most of us understand them, then, by his own account, he is saying something false. If he intends them in some other way – perhaps in a non-cognitivist emotivist or prescriptivist sense – then he is only expressing his subjective moral attitudes, and yet has enough confidence in the

[3] Geoffrey Warnock. *The Object of Morality*. (1971) Louis P. Pojman, Ed., *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings, 4th Ed.* Canada: Wadsworth Group, 2002, p. 135. Hereafter cited, parenthetically, by page number.

correctness of these attitudes to say something like, "As the world is, wars and revolutions cannot be ruled to be morally completely out of the question. The death penalty, I believe, can." I don't understand how something is to be understood as "morally completely out of the question" in anything other than an objective sense.

It might be objected here that, whether the preceding discussion is correct or not, it is simply not an accurate reflection of how moral reasoning works, or what we really mean when we make ethical judgments. Mackie takes it as a given, for instance, that when *most* of us (and this is important, because it seems Mackie must consider himself an exception) make moral judgments, we necessarily posit that there are strange moral properties in the fabric of the universe, and that, since these don't exist, all of our moral judgments must be false. But this is really a weaker claim than Mackie makes it out to be. For, as Harrison notes:

> It is *because* we believe, falsely, that certain things are inherently and inescapably morally disgusting that we (irrationally) believe that they are wrong. Our conclusion that such things are wrong, however, *could* be true, although the reason we have for it is false. When we come to the same conclusion in other cases, there is no reason why what we believe, in those cases, should not be true. (465).

So even if we grant Mackie that most of us have succumbed to his patterns of objectification and now believe in our moral claims on false bases, it does not follow that our moral claims are necessarily false in their purely semantic content. If morality has as its object the amelioration of the human condition, and hence if our moral concepts arose, originally at least, in response to these demands, then it would follow that our actions could be said, in theory, to be right or wrong in relation to the amelioration of the human condition. That many of us now tend to think of morality in ontologically untenable categorical terms does not refute this. Perhaps, then, if Mackie wishes, as Harrison says

he does (I regret that I have not had a chance to read the rest of Mackie's book for myself), that we "describe as right (or wrong) anything we like" in order to "modify our existing moral code to meet new needs, abandon those parts of it which are out of date, and invent moral rules to solve quite new problems," he ought to exhort us to break our habit of thinking of morality in categorical terms and to instead think of them in hypothetical terms (Harrison, 461-2). Presumably, when selecting which moral rules would be *best* to have (and Mackie must allow that we have this ability, lest his position degenerate into incoherence), we would evaluate those rules in light of some end along the lines of the amelioration of the human condition. And, in theory at least, such rules could be considered objectively right or objectively wrong, in light of the object of morality.