

## The Nature of Moral Value

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- **J. L. Mackie** (a moral anti-realist) believes that there are **no universal moral values** based on **relativistic arguments**.
- Mackie argues for what he calls **moral skepticism**, which is the view that **there are no objective values**.
  - This is distinguished from **moral objectivism** which involves the view that **there are objective values**.
- Before his arguments, he makes a couple of distinctions first:
  1. He distinguishes moral skepticism from the following views:
    - (a) Our current system of values needs to be replaced with a better system of values.
    - (b) No existing system of moral values is adequate.
  2. He distinguishes second-order moral questions from first-order moral questions.
    - (a) First-order moral questions are concerned with moral values.
    - (b) Second-order moral questions are concerned with the possible existence of objective moral values, independently of any system of values.
  3. He distinguishes moral skepticism from simple subjectivism.
  4. He distinguishes the thesis that **there are objective moral values** from the thesis that **there are inter-subjective values**.
    - One could be a moral skeptic while still believing that there are inter-subjective values shared across both individuals and cultures.
    - These inter-subjective values may still not be objective in the sense that they are true for all time.
- Mackie proposed the following two arguments for his **moral skepticism position**:
  1. The argument from the ontological (what exists) and epistemological (what we know) **weirdness of objective moral values**.
    - Ontological weirdness: If there are objective moral values, they are not visible nor are they tangible. What kind of things are they? How do we know they exist?
    - Epistemological weirdness: Even if there were a plausible ontological account of objective moral values, how could we come to know them?
  2. The argument from cultural relativism:
    - Premise — Societies differ markedly in their moral values.
    - Conclusion — There are no objective moral values.

### Thomas Nagel

- **Thomas Nagel** (a moral realist) admits that there is **at least one very general value** that is **objective**.
- Thomas Nagel's goal is to find **at least one objective moral value** thereby contradicting Mackie's moral skepticism.
- To find at least one **objective moral value**, Nagel uses "the view from nowhere".
- **The view from nowhere** involves **bracketing ourselves off** from the **world** and our **relationships** with people in the world. Essentially we stand back and look at our lives and the world we live in as a whole.

- According to Nagel, **the view from nowhere** abandons the **subjective viewpoint** leaving only an **objective viewpoint**.
- Nagel argues that a **maximally objective value** found by **increasing levels of abstraction** will have **three characteristics**:
  1. The value will be **broad in scope**, it will apply to many different kinds of actions.
  2. The value will be **agent-neutral**, meaning it won't involve any reference to anyone.
  3. The value will be **external**, meaning that it won't refer to anyone's reasons for acting.
- Nagel warns about **the danger of taking the view from nowhere** is that if the value is **too abstract** it becomes **vacuous** (For example: Be good).

## The Nature of Moral Explanation

### Gilbert Harman's Ethics and Observation

- **Gilbert Harman** investigates the possibility that **ethics is objective like science**, given that both can be **judged** using **thought experiments**.
- If **ethics is analogous to science**, then just as **scientific theories** can be **supported (corroborated) by observation**, so can **ethical theories**.
- Harman contends that **scientific theories entail scientific law**. He then goes on to provide an example of an **observation** that is **NOT explained** by any **moral theory** (Someone observes kids burning a cat, and says it is morally wrong. The observation does not corroborate the theory that burning cats is morally wrong).
- Due to his counterexample, **observation does not corroborate theory** in ethics.
- In **science**, the **theory explains the observation**. In **ethics**, the **theory does not explain the observation**. Therefore **ethics is not a branch of science**. Hence **ethics is not analogous to science**.
- Harman then suggest that **ethics** is more like **mathematics** than it is like a **science**. **Mathematical statements do not explain observations** nor are they **corroborated by them**. Instead **theorems are derived from axioms, not observation**.
- Harman concludes that **ethics is not like mathematics** as **science uses mathematics**, thus **mathematics are indirectly corroborated by observation**.
- Since **ethics** is not **analogous to science or mathematics**, therefore **it is not objective**. Thus **ethics is subjective**.

### Nicholas Sturgeon's Moral Explanations

- **Nicholas Sturgeon** has an issue with **Harman's burning of the cat example**. He argues that indeed, **mainstream moral theories** do explain why the **kids burned the cat**, thus the **observation does corroborate the moral theory**.
- He claims that the theory that the **mainstream moral theories** entail that **anyone who burns a cat for fun** is suffering from **moral depravity**.
- Therefore **ethical theories** are **no worse** than **scientific theories**.

## The Meaning of Moral Terms

### G.E. Moore

- **G.E. Moore** comments extensively on **the meaning** of the term **"good"** in a famous work called the **Principia Ethica**.
- He argues against the tendency to **equate "good"** with a **set of natural properties** given such considerations as the following:
  1. If we try to identify the term good with a natural property such as pleasure (like Mill did) then we have: Pleasure is good. But if good is nothing but pleasure, the statement "Good is pleasure" becomes "Pleasure is pleasure", which is a vacuous statement.
  2. The term "good" satisfies different criteria in different contexts.
- Moore claims that trying to **define "good"** in terms of **natural properties** commits the **"naturalistic fallacy"**; it is an **error in reasoning** that involves **inferring values from facts**.
- He claims that the same is true for **perceptual terms** (such as color). They **cannot be identified** with **natural properties**.

### A.J. Ayer

- **A.J. Ayer** claims that **statements of ethics, theology, and aesthetics** are all **meaningless** since they are **neither truths of logic** nor **empirically verifiable**. For example:
  1. Theology — God exists.
  2. Ethics — Stealing is wrong.
  3. Aesthetics — This painting is beautiful.