Is an “Error Theory” of Moral Discourse Defensible?

The question asks us to present and evaluate the grounds on which an Error Theory of moral talk might be defended, and decide whether these grounds are sufficient.

In this essay I consider Mackie’s [1977] Error Theory, giving his supporting arguments and interleaving some of his explanation for why we fall into error. In the process I consider various responses, in particular those of Blackburn, and make my own evaluations. My conclusion is that an Error Theory of moral discourse fails, though Mackie’s attack on moral objectivity succeeds.

**What is Mackie’s “Error Theory”?**

People have supposed that certain entities exist, namely objective values, and that relations of a certain kind exist, namely objective moral requirements. Mackie argues that these things do not exist. Though morality appears to be talking about real things – such as objective values, right and wrong, good and bad – this is an illusion. According to Mackie, all moral claims are literally false because they are committed to things that don’t exist.

It’s important to note that Mackie’s error theory is an ontological rather than a conceptual thesis. It isn’t a doctrine about the meaning of moral statements because, if second-order ethics were confined to conceptual analysis, we would conclude that moral values are objective. Objectivity would be part of the meaning of moral concepts. Consequently, conceptual analysis isn’t enough to evaluate the objectivity of moral concepts. While ingrained in our language, moral concepts are not self-validating. Mackie, unlike Ayer and the positivists, insists that our moral discourse should retain its traditional meaning. For Mackie, moral statements are meaningful but false.

Mackie makes two claims. Firstly, our moral metaphysics is completely mistaken. Secondly, our moral talk is also mistaken, because we’re talking about things that don’t exist. When we come to discuss Blackburn’s response to Mackie, we will consider whether we can accept Mackie’s first claim while rejecting his second.

**Arguments for Mackie’s Error Theory**

Mackie focuses his attack on objectivism and moral realism, assuming that our talk is erroneous if our metaphysics is. He has two arguments – that from relativity and that from queerness.

The Argument from Relativity

This argument rests on the well-known anthropological fact that moral codes vary between societies, across time within a society and between subsections of a society at a particular time. Widespread disagreement provides indirect support for second-order
moral scepticism, since radically different first-order judgements make it difficult to believe that they are apprehensions of objective truths.

Lillehammer [2003] points out that what troubles realists is the failure of convergence in moral disputes. If moral qualities are real, we might expect that the reasonable and reflective moral judgement of people would converge on a unique answer. If there is failure to converge, we ought to be able to find the mistake of fact or reasoning, correct it and then converge on the right answer, but this doesn’t always appear to be possible. Even when there is convergence, this is often for partisan reasons, with nothing to do with reasoned convergence.

We don’t worry about non-convergence with individuals who won’t play by the ground rules (such as logical coherence and accuracy of relevant facts); they can be expelled from the argument. Failure of rationality happens all the time; it’s failure of convergence by rational individuals that we care about. Additionally, it may be that ethics is a hard subject, and that personal concerns make it even harder to be objective. Even so, this doesn’t get us very far.

Mackie admits that even reasoned disagreement doesn’t necessarily count against objectivism, because there are reasoned disagreements over physical or historical theories, which we still consider objective. However, scientific disagreements are over speculative theories based on inadequate evidence, and can usually be resolved simply by discovering more facts. This won’t do for moral disagreements, which reflect people’s adherence to particular forms of life. The variety of moral codes is better explained by this hypothesis than by diverse moralities having variously distorted perceptions of objective values. People approve of X because they participate in X, rather than vice versa.

The Argument from Queerness

This argument makes two claims. The first is Metaphysical, that objective values, if they exist, are entities of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. The second is Epistemological, that given the metaphysical problem, how could we know anything about these strange entities? It would have to be by some form of moral perception or intuition – again, utterly different from the way we know anything else.

Moore’s view was that there are non-natural qualities, known by a faculty of moral intuition. Mackie argues that the objectivist has to be committed to some form of intuitionism to explain how our moral thinking is to be prescriptively authoritative, since no adequate account is given by any of our ordinary sensory perceptions, logical inferences, conceptual analyses or explanatory hypotheses.

To have prescriptive authority, Mackie thinks that objective values would have to be like Plato’s forms, where knowledge of the Form of the Good not only instructs but enables the perceiver to pursue it. All objective goods would have “to-be-pursuedness” built into
them. Situations would arise complete with inbuilt demands for action. Wrong courses of action would have a “not-to-be-doneness” about them.

How do objective moral qualities relate to natural features? For instance, how does the fact that an action is one of deliberate cruelty relate to the moral fact that it is wrong? Mackie doesn’t deny moral distinctions (eg. between the coward and the brave man). Behaviour that is the subject of our moral talk is part of the fabric of the world, and describable differences occur. What Mackie denies is that these are necessarily differences of value.

The issue is with the objectivity of value, not the objectivity of the facts on the basis of which values are assigned. As Williams points out in his [1985b], there’s a fact of the matter whether a “thick” moral concept like “cruel” has been correctly applied, but there’s no fact about whether cruel acts are wrong. It is a fact that cruel actions can be distinguished from kind ones, but Mackie denies that it is a fact that cruel actions should be condemned. We don’t necessarily need the concept of cruelty in our moral vocabulary any more than we need the concept of “chastity”. Mackie also considers justice. We can objectively see that it’s just if the person who comes top in a competition wins the prize, if that’s the rule, and unjust otherwise. But, this leaves open whether there is any objective prescriptive requirement to act justly.

Mackie suggests the wrongness would somehow have to supervene on the facts about the act; the act is wrong because it is one of deliberate cruelty. But what does this “because” mean beyond such actions being socially condemned? Mackie argues that moral attitudes are partly social in origin, pressurising individuals into internalising them, requiring them of themselves and others. We need moral judgements to have authority over ourselves – and particularly others – to regulate interpersonal behaviour in opposition to our inclinations. So, the attitudes objectified into moral values do have an external source, namely our particular society, which fuels the spurious sense of objectivity that Mackie attacks.

Supposedly objective values may alternatively arise from attitudes held by the agent. This is analogous to the pathetic fallacy, our tendency to read our feelings into their objects. Most westerners find witchetty grubs revolting, but aborigines hunt them out with relish, so there can be no quality of revoltingness in the grub itself. Mackie thinks it’s simplest to replace the supposed moral quality with a subjective response that is causally connected to the natural features that give birth to it.

Is our Moral Metaphysics Erroneous?

There are several points at which Mackie’s attack on moral objectivity can itself be attacked. The first is to attack the argument from relativity by pointing to moral progress. Then we can see whether there are facts that will enable convergence. Finally, we can try to allay epistemological concerns and try to provide a model of moral objectivity.
Mackie does consider arguments from moral progress, and agrees that it shows that moral judgments are not merely conventional. However, he thinks we can understand this as extending for consistency’s sake rules arising from an established way of life. This may seem inadequate. It seems a discovery, in the face of much contrary intuition, that women, people from the next tribe, people of other races and slaves deserve equal treatment alongside free men. So, a failure to converge may merely be a temporary phenomenon. An alternative view would be to point to the globalisation of society. Convergence has not so much been a victory of one form of morality over others, but of one form of society over others. Where this victory has been announced prematurely, we see a reversal of moral consensus, as in the various contemporary moral evaluations of suicide bombers.

Maybe there are facts out there that, once acknowledged, will aid convergence. An ethical naturalist will say that human flourishing is what matters in ethics, and that there are constraints on the forms of life within which human beings can flourish. Consequently, there are lots of relevant facts to be pointed to. Mackie doesn’t quarrel with naturalism, except to warn that there may be much variation in the ultimately satisfying goals of human life. However, facts about human flourishing aren't facts about value. If someone takes a contrary view – say that it’s the ecology of the planet rather than human welfare that fundamentally matters – it’s not clear where we go.

Mackie thinks the objectivist’s best counter-argument to his epistemological objection is to look for companions in guilt. The 18th century moralist Richard Price argued that many of our concepts are hard to account for, certainly on empiricist principles. He cites identity and diversity, necessity and possibility, power and causation. Price thinks that since the understanding can acquire these ideas, why can’t it immediately perceive right and wrong as real characteristics of actions? In response, Mackie presumes the empiricist can show how we acquire the concepts Price lists, but claims that no reductio ad absurdum would arise should any such demonstration fail. Mackie would just brazen out the situation and claim that the objects of such failed empiricist searches should also fall before the argument from queerness. This is rather an uncomfortable attitude, as it’s unlikely we would be happy with ubiquitous error.

Finally, we can deny that the realist needs the sort of moral objectivity Mackie suggests. McDowell [1985] sketches an analogy with a realist understanding of secondary qualities. Moral qualities are not subjective in the sense of being mere mental figments, but in the sense of irreducibly involving the subject, such as in colour vision. Redness is constituted by what it is like for a subject to see something as red, yet it is not a mental figment. We can be mistaken about redness, so must also be capable of being right about it. The argument is that we need two things for the veridical perception of either secondary or moral qualities. Firstly, we need, respectively, an appropriate perceptual apparatus and a suitable moral sensibility, namely that of a sighted or virtuous person. Secondly, just as we need favourable circumstances (such as good lighting) correctly to perceive colours, we need favourable circumstances (such as having been well brought up, or being clear-headed) to correctly perceive moral qualities.
This secondary-quality defence of moral realism can itself be attacked. Blackburn raises many cogent points against it. For instance, there are well known mechanics of perception of secondary qualities, but not of moral properties; there are no causal mechanisms for moral blindness. If red things suddenly appeared blue to everyone, they would be blue; but consensual agreement that bad things are good wouldn’t, as far as the moral realist is concerned, make them good. The way perceptions of secondary qualities vary from society to society in no way parallels moral variation. Evaluative predicates are attributive; a thing is good relative to what it’s good for, but a thing is red whatever thing it is.

Hence, while the secondary-quality model shows how a property can simultaneously be both subjective and objective, it isn’t robust enough to be model moral properties.

**Is our Moral Practice Erroneous?**

Even if we accept Mackie’s arguments against moral realism, we might still question whether an error theory of moral discourse is the best solution. Blackburn [1985] raises this problem. Normally with an error theory we ought to do something to correct the error, but Mackie just carries on regardless, using the same error-infected speech.

Blackburn asks whether Mackie in fact “shmoralises”, using the same vocabulary as moralising but without realist metaphysical commitments. However, he rejects this possibility, arguing that if there are no observational differences between moralising and “shmoralising”, then “shmoralising” is moralising.

Blackburn argues that our practice can be in perfectly good order, whatever may be the state of our theory. For example, we need have no concerns over our practice of addition, whatever our theory of the metaphysical status of numbers might be. Anti-realist “arithmetic” is arithmetic, and as free from error.

Blackburn replaces Mackie’s error theory with quasi-realism, whereby we acknowledge that we are projecting our values onto the world, but act as though they are real qualities. Rather than expressing realist second-order metaphysics, they represent a first-order attitude. Quasi-realism claims that our moral responses are proper attitudes to our own attitudes, to be appropriately cultivated to avoid the moral defect of indifference.

The counterfactual claim that “even were I to enjoy bear-baiting, it would still be wrong” sounds like a second-order realist commitment, but in fact expresses a first-order commitment to it being the effect on the bear, rather than our feelings of pleasure, that’s relevant to discovering the wrongness of bear-baiting.

While Mackie claims that our moral statements are literally false, because they presuppose objective qualities that don’t exist, Blackburn thinks this is an odd state of affairs. It may be the case that the moral objectivist’s talk is infected with error in this way but, protected by quasi-realism, projectivism supports, explains and rehabilitates our
ordinary moral talk. There is no “error” for projectivists because this is the way moralising is supposed to work.

Conclusion

So, is an “Error Theory” of moral discourse defensible? I think not. The key incongruity is not in Mackie’s claim that we are in error in supposing that there are objective moral values when there are no such things – in this he is correct. Where he is in error is in his claim that all our ethical statements are false. This seems worse than supposing them to be meaningless, and sits awkwardly with moral prescriptivity. Emotivism can at least be action-guiding, whereas statements that are plain false wouldn't seem to be much use for guidance in any sensible direction.

Blackburn’s recommendations build on Mackie’s suggestions, but provide us with a moral discourse that fulfils its proper function¹.

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¹ Word count 2,612, including Bibliography (93), question (8) & this footnote (14) = 115.