Preface

• Ethical judgements divide into first and second orders. Mackie will deal with second-order judgements first (the status of ethics) followed by first-order judgements (the contents of ethics). This is the reverse of experience, where we first encounter first-order statements, which lead on to first order principles and finally to second-order issues. Finally, Mackie deals with the frontiers of ethics – its interface with psychology, metaphysics, law, theology and political theory.

• **First-order judgements:** particular or certain kinds of actions are right or wrong; distinctions between good and bad characters or dispositions; enunciation of broad principles such as that we ought always to aim for the greatest general happiness, or to minimise total suffering, or to serve God, or to look after ourselves.

• **Second-order judgements:** what’s going on when we make first-order statements – whether they are discoveries or decisions; how we think and reason about moral matters; the meanings of ethical terms.

• Mackie acknowledges his debt to Parfit for comments on Parts 1 & 2, and to Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Hume, Kant & Sidgwick\(^1\) (as well as contemporary philosophers). However, following Locke, he claims that the truest teachers of moral philosophy are the outlaws and thieves who keep faith and rules of justice with one another in order to hold together, without supposing that these rules of convenience are innate laws of nature.

PART ONE: THE STATUS OF ETHICS

Chapter 1. The Subjectivity of Values

1.1 Moral Scepticism

• Mackie will argue that there are no objective values, but first clarifies the thesis to meet objections and avoid misunderstanding.

• There are three likely immediate responses to this thesis:
  1. It is not merely false but pernicious, a threat to morality and all that’s worthwhile. It’s paradoxical or outrageous to find coverage of such a thesis in a book on ethics.
  2. It is trivial, obvious and hardly worth arguing.
  3. It is meaningless or empty, and that no real issue is raised by questioning whether or not values are part of the fabric of the world.

• The claim that values are not objective - are not part of the fabric of the world – doesn’t just include moral goodness and moral values, but non-moral values such as aesthetic values as well. It’s important that the various categories of value are given the same kind of treatment (though Mackie will not cover aesthetics here).

• Mackie is proposing moral scepticism.

• This might mean one or more of two first order\(^2\) views – a moral sceptic may reject and ignore all morality as “tripe”. Such a person may (a) really reject all moral judgements, (b) be expressing condemnation of conventional morality

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\(^1\) But no explicit mention of Mill, though he does consider Utilitarianism at length.

\(^2\) See the Preface for the distinction between first and second order questions.
Mackie is discussing a second order view of the status of moral values, the nature of moral thinking and how all this fits into the world.

Such first and second order views are completely independent as well as distinct. One could hold strong and conventional moral views while being a second order sceptic who thinks such views are simply attitudes and policies for conduct. Conversely, one could accept the objectivity of morality while rejecting all conventional morality as corrupt, seeing this judgement as an objective truth.

Moral scepticism can also appear absurd if misunderstood. The sceptic doesn’t deny moral distinctions (eg. between the coward and the brave man). Behaviour that is the subject of moral discourse is part of the fabric of the world, and describable differences occur. What Mackie denies is that these are necessarily differences of value. It is a hard fact that cruel actions can be distinguished from kind ones, but Mackie asks whether it is a fact that cruel actions should be condemned. The question is about the objectivity of value, not about the objectivity of the facts on the basis of which values are assigned.

1.2 Subjectivism

Moral subjectivism is often used as a synonym for moral scepticism.

Mackie gives three possible meanings for moral subjectivism.
1. A dubious first-order, normative claim that everyone should act as he thinks.
2. Several second-order views, many of which are about the meaning of moral terms and statements. For instance, that moral judgements are equivalent to reports of the speaker’s own attitudes.
3. Mackie’s view differs from these in two respects:
   (a) His doctrine is negative; people have supposed that there exist entities or relations of a certain kind, namely objective values or requirements. They do not. The subjectivist needs to account for how people have fallen into this error, explaining how the mistake has arisen and including a positive account of how values fail to be objective.
   (b) It is an ontological rather than a linguistic or conceptual thesis. It isn’t a doctrine about the meaning of moral statements. While it has to give some account of meaning, this is a development of the doctrine rather than its core.

Mackie admits that those espousing (2) have tended to hold to Mackie’s view. On the assumption that there are no moral values, they have looked elsewhere for an explanation of the meaning of moral statements, settling on subjectivism. If all our moral statements were subjective reports, then we could not be aware of any objective moral values. For, were we aware of them, we could say something about them. So, this subjectivism entails moral scepticism. However, the converse is false, for the denial of objective values has no implications for the meaning of moral statements. In particular, it doesn’t imply that moral statements are subjective reports. Certainly, non-objective moral values are broadly subjective, so Mackie allows moral subjectivism as an alternative name to moral scepticism, while distinguishing this broad sense from the specific doctrine of meaning.
1.3 The Multiplicity of Second Order Questions

- There are several kinds of second order questions. (a) the meaning and use of ethical terms; (b) the analysis of ethical concepts; (c) the logic of moral argument (e.g. special patterns licensed, say, by the claim that it’s part of the meaning of moral terms that they be universalisable); (d) ontological questions about the nature and status of the subject matter of first-order moral statements. The latter are questions of factual rather than conceptual analysis, and cannot be settled by considerations of the meaning and use of moral terms like “good”.

- Mackie supports the distinction between factual and conceptual analysis in ethics by analogy with similar analyses in other areas. His examples are of perception and colour vision, which require factual investigation of the phenomena as well as analysis of what we mean by the words we use.

- Error can arise from thinking that an account of meaning of statements gives a sufficient account of what there is. Mackie also thinks questions of meaning fall into complications and that no simple account of the meanings of first order moral statements will cover correctly even the standard, conventional meanings of the main moral terms. He thinks the clear-cut issue about the objectivity of moral values risk being submerged in the complexity of meaning.

1.4 Is Objectivity a Real Issue?

- Moral objectivity is an “old fashioned” and maybe pseudo-question.

- By “old fashioned”, Mackie means not just that it has an ancient pedigree going back to the Sophists via Hume and Hobbes. It was discussed in the 1930-40’s, but has since been shelved without solution or agreement.

- Mackie gives an argument of R M Hare that the question of the objectivity of values does not represent a genuine problem.
  1. Hare has never met anyone who understands what the question means.
  2. Hare thinks that “an attitude of disapproval” and “a moral intuition” are names for the same thing, namely, the activity of thinking that some act is wrong.
  3. Hare agrees that the objectivist will say that two people are contradicting one another if one says that an act is wrong while another says it isn’t.
  4. However, Hare sees do difference between contradicting and negating, so when the subjectivist admits that the one person is negating what the other says, Hare thinks this comes down to the same thing.
  5. The objectivist will say that one of these two people must be wrong. Hare, however, says that judging one of the two judgements to be wrong is merely to negate it, and the subjectivist can do this too.
  6. Hare asks us to consider two worlds, one in which objective values exist and another in which they have been annihilated. People carry on in both worlds with the same subjective concerns. Hare thinks there’s no difference whatever between them.

- Mackie disagrees with Hare.
  1. Mackie agrees that subjective concerns about the wrongness of things will carry on whether or not there are objective values, but diagnoses this as due to a logical distinction between first and second order judgements – with the former being unaffected by the truth or falsity of the latter.
2. It neither follows, nor is true, that there is no difference between Hare’s two worlds. Only in the objectivist world is there anything that backs up subjective concerns.

3. The situation is analogous to Positivists saying there’s no difference between an idealist and a common-sense realist world, because it’s logically possible for people to have the same experiences in both. So, if we reject the positivist claim that makes the dispute between realists and positivists a pseudo-question, we can reject Hare’s claims likewise.

4. Additionally, Hare has ignored how subjective concerns are acquired or changed. In the objectivist world, one can find things out by letting one’s thinking be controlled by how things are. In the world where objective values have been annihilated, new subjective concerns can arise only from sentiment or passion.

- Mackie makes a couple of further distinctions:
  1. We mustn’t confuse the objectivity of values with the contingent possibility that some values are universally held. *Intersubjectivity* (shared subjective values) isn’t objectivity.
  2. Neither is *universalisability*, for someone could universalise his prescriptive judgements to relevantly similar situations not involving him, yet acknowledge that such prescribing and approving activities were nothing more than his activities. Objective values would be universalisable, because they would apply to *kinds* of things, actions or states, but the converse is false.

- Mackie now makes an important and subtle distinction between objectivism and descriptivism:
  1. *Descriptivism* is a doctrine about ethical terms and statements that seems to take one of two related forms:
     (a) Ethical terms and statements are merely descriptive and not even partially prescriptive, emotive or evaluative.
     (b) It isn’t an essential feature of the conventional meaning of moral statements that they have special illocutionary force, such as commending rather than asserting.
  2. Descriptivism contrasts with the views that:
     (a) Commendation is (in principle, at least) distinguishable from description.
     (b) It is at least part of the meaning of moral statements that they be commendatory and in some uses intrinsically action-guiding.
  3. Descriptivism neither entails nor is entailed by objectivism, just as idealism is perfectly consistent with material object statements having a purely descriptive meaning.
  4. In contrast, the dominant European philosophical tradition from Plato has held that moral values are both objective and prescriptive, with moral judgements being partly prescriptive, directive and action guiding.
  5. Mackie gives three examples from this tradition:
     (a) *Plato*. The Forms (in particular, the Form of the Good) are an eternal extra-mental reality, a central structural element of the fabric of the world. Knowing them will not just tell men what to do but ensure they do it, overriding contrary inclinations.³ The philosopher-kings have led to “see” the Forms of the Good, Justice and Beauty and such-like during their

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³ Presumably this is the argument in the *Protagoras* against weakness of will (akrasia).
education, and will consequently be impelled to pursue and promote these ideals. Consequently, they can be trusted with unchecked power.

(b) **Kant.** Believed that pure reason can itself be practical, without pretending to explain how.

(c) **Sidgwick.** Ethics is the science of conduct. What ought to be must have existence and be the same for all minds. The affirmations of this science are also precepts, happiness being an end absolutely prescribed by reason.

6. Consequently, since many philosophers have held values to be objectively prescriptive, the ontological doctrine of objectivism must be distinguished from descriptivism, which is a theory of meaning.

- Mackie thinks that objectivism is *important* as well as a real issue. It would make a difference to *metaphysics* (where do objective values fit?), to *epistemology* (how do we come to know objective values?) and to *psychology* (how does such knowledge, or Kant’s pure practical reason, direct our choices and actions?).

- How the issue of objectivism is settled will affect certain sorts of moral argument. He gives an example from Sidgwick concerning an argument between an *egoist* and a *utilitarian*. On the assumption of the existence of objective *goodness* (though not merely the objectivity of what ought to be or what it is rational to do), egoism can be *refuted* as a first-order ethical system, whereas if goodness is only subjective, it cannot be. The arguments are as follows:
  (a) If the egoist claims that *his* happiness is objectively good, the utilitarian can reply that the egoist’s happiness cannot be more objectively good than that of any other person; that he is he can have nothing to do with its objective goodness.
  (b) If the egoist claimed merely that it was objectively rational or even obligatory for him to seek *his* own happiness, the utilitarian counter-argument would only lead to the *universalisability* of egoism, not to its refutation. Insisting on the universalisability of moral judgements, rather than on their objectivity, would produce the same result.

### 1.5 Standards of Evaluation

- Another way of denying objective values is to say that they are neither true nor false, but Mackie notes another possibility of confusion – for there are many methods of evaluation that are undoubtedly true or false despite there being no objective values in Mackie’s sense. He cites examples where agreed and assumed standards are used to grade, classify, judge, award prizes and so on. Given any sufficiently determinate standards, it’s an objective issue how well they are met, with comparative judgements in particular being capable of truth or falsehood.

- The subjectivist doesn’t deny any of this, in the aesthetic or moral spheres any more than in sheepdog trials. In particular, there’s a particularly moral objective distinction – that between justice and injustice – which applies in many of these fields. It’s a paradigm case of injustice if the innocent is declared guilty, especially if the court knows him to be innocent. A finding is unjust if it is at variance with the relevant law and the facts. Given the standards, it’s objectively just if the person who comes top is awarded the prize, and unjust otherwise. So, justice or injustice of decisions relative to standards can be perfectly objective, despite occasional subjective elements in their interpretation. **But,** the important issue from the subjectivist perspective is that this leaves open whether there is any objective prescriptive requirement to *act* justly.
So, recognising the objectivity of justice relative to standards just pushes the question back to the standards themselves\(^4\). While the subjectivist can say that there is no objectivity about the choice of standards, he would be wrong to insist that the choice is completely arbitrary. Standards have to be appropriate to function (good apples have to be edible). Even so, standards aren’t strictly validated in this way, and the appropriateness of standards is neither fully determinate nor totally indeterminate relative to independently specifiable aims.

Mackie makes a final point. However determinate the objective appropriateness of standards relative to aims and desires might be, this is still no threat to the denial of objective values, and is logically no different from the objectivity of goodness relative to desires. Something can be called “good” simply because it is such as to satisfy a certain desire, but the objectivity of this relation isn’t what Mackie means by objective values\(^5\).

1.6 **Hypothetical and Categorical Imperatives**

Mackie clarifies matters by introducing Kant’s distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives (“ought”-statements).

1. “You ought to do Y” will be a hypothetical imperative if it follows “If you want X …”, where Y is the best or only means of obtaining the desired X. The reason for doing Y rests on its causal relation with the desired end, X, with the oughtness contingent upon the desire.

2. “You ought to do Y” will be a categorical imperative if the oughtness is not contingent upon any desire for any end to which Y might contribute.

However, we need to be careful not to be deceived by the form of conditionals into thinking they are all hypothetical imperatives. “If you promised to do Y, you ought to do Y” is a categorical imperative unless the reason you ought to keep the promise is because of some unstated end – say because otherwise you wouldn’t be trusted in the future.

Even desires can feature in the antecedent of the conditional without thereby making them hypothetical imperatives. Mackie’s example is of the categorical imperative “If you’re strongly sexually attracted to young children, you ought not to go in for school-teaching”. It is categorical because the consequent isn’t a means to the satisfaction of the desire\(^6\). It would be a hypothetical imperative if the implied reason for the ought was prudential, but it could also be categorical if the avoidance isn’t a means to the satisfaction of any supposed desire on the part of the agent\(^7\).

Not every non-conditional is a categorical imperative, because an if-clause may have been elided. Parade-ground orders are scarcely ever categorical since the reason for compliance will some desire on the part of the person addressed, if only that of keeping out of trouble. Since-clauses are likewise hypothetical imperatives, the reason for doing Y being contingent on the desire for X, to be achieved by doing Y.

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\(^4\) True, but I thought the lesson was that even given the objectivity of standards, it’s still not obvious that it’s an objective fact that we should obey them and act justly.

\(^5\) Because the desire is arbitrary, so is the good that satisfies it.

\(^6\) Thought it would be without the “not”!

\(^7\) Is Mackie saying a particular imperative can be both hypothetical and categorical? Also, in the prudential case, would the imperative be categorical if the prudence was not desire-related – eg. the desire to avoid public humiliation (or not to hurt a child?).
• According to Kant, imperatives of skill\(^8\) relate to contingent desires whereas those of prudence relate to the desire for happiness, which everyone has. Both are hypothetical. However, a council of prudence can be a categorical imperative if it relates to the agent’s future welfare but not to any desires he currently has – not even the present desire that his future desires be satisfied. In this case it is analogous to a moral categorical imperative.

• Kant held that all moral judgements are categorical imperatives – maybe applications of one categorical imperative. Mackie accepts that it can plausibly be maintained that many moral judgements do contain such a categorical element. However, Mackie’s denial of objective values is just that no such categorically imperative element is objectively valid. The objective values Mackie denies would be action-directing absolutely rather than contingently on the agent’s desires.

• Mackie clarifies his claim by reference to moral argument, supposed to be made explicit in support of some evaluative conclusion with action-guiding force which isn’t contingent on the agent’s desires, purposes or chosen ends. Then, in the input to this argument, Mackie claims that there must be a failure of objective validation in one or more of the following:
  1. Premises that aren’t capable of being simply true
  2. Form of the argument that isn’t valid as a matter of general logic
  3. Authority or cogency of argument that is not objective, but constituted by choosing or deciding to think in a certain way.

1.7 The Claim to Objectivity

• Mackie asks whether his thesis is trivially true. Valuing, preferring, choosing, recommending, rejecting, condemning and so on are human activities. There’s no need to look for values prior to or logically independent of them. There’s widespread agreement in valuing and value-judgements cohere with others or can be criticised or defended if not. If the subjectivist is maintaining only that desires, ends, purposes and such-like are part of the system of reasons, with no ends or purposes being objective rather than merely inter-subjective, then why not concede the claim without fuss?

• Mackie this would be to give in too easily. He’s already pointed out that the main European tradition of moral philosophy maintains that there are objective values of the sort Mackie denies. He now gives another list and brief exposition of historical exponents of this claim:
  1. **Kant**: held that the categorical imperative was objective. The law a rational being gives to himself is determinate and necessary.
  2. **Aristotle**: the good is that at which all things aim. While ethics is part of politics, whose goal is practice rather than knowledge, there can be knowledge of what is good for man – *eudaimonia* – which is intrinsically desirable, and not good simply because it is desired.
  3. **Samuel Clarke**: a rationalist who claimed that it was fit and reasonable for creatures to act (in a moral way) irrespective of God’s explicit command, or expectation of personal advantage, reward or punishment.
  4. **Hutcheson**: a sentimentalist, but one who defined moral goodness as a quality found in actions that attracts approval, the moral sense whereby we perceive virtue and vice having been given us by God.

\(^8\) Mackie doesn’t explain what these are. We’re presumably supposed to be familiar with Kant.
5. **Hume**: was not an objectivist, but showed the prevalence of objectivism in his day by remarking that his view that virtue and vice are not perceived by reason would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality.

6. **Richard Price**: right and wrong are real characteristics of action which are perceived by the understanding and are not qualities of our minds. He rejects moral sense as making virtue an affair of taste and making right and wrong not reside in the objects themselves.

- **Objectivism** is also firmly based in ordinary thought and the meaning of moral terms. Moore (extravagantly) claimed that “good” was the name of a non-natural quality, but Mackie thinks this isn’t far wrong in moral contexts – with “non-natural” leaving room for the evaluative, prescriptive and intrinsically action-guiding aspects of the supposed quality.

- Mackie illustrates this point by describing disagreements between non-cognitivists and naturalists\(^9\) about the basic meanings of ethical terms. If we reject the view that the function of ethical terms is to introduce objective values into our discussions about conduct and choice of action, we’re left with two alternatives:
  1. **Non-cognitivism**: ethical terms conventionally express either (a) attitudes held by the speaker towards what he categorises morally or (b) prescriptions or recommendations, maybe subject to the constraint of universalisability.
  2. **Descriptivism**: ethical terms are, in contrast to the non-cognitivist view, in meaning descriptive of natural features (a) universally seen as distinguishing such actions as kind from cruel and (b) relations between such actions and human desires.

- Mackie is supportive of both these alternatives, which each capture part of the truth. Each can account for the fact that moral judgements are action-guiding, but they each gain credibility from the felt inadequacy of the other.
  1. **Objections to non-cognitivism**: there’s more to ethics than this, even allowing for full-blooded prescriptivity and universalisability; something external to the maker of moral judgements, with authority over him and his hearers. We’re inclined to believe that ethics has more to do with knowledge and less to do with decision than is allowed for by non-cognitivism.
  2. **Objections to descriptivism (naturalism)**: while, according to the naturalist, it’s not a matter of choice whether an action is cruel or not, the practicality of naturalistic ethics is totally relative to desires of the persons guided and leaves out the categorical quality of moral judgements.

- According to Mackie, the authority of ethics is omitted both by naturalism, in excluding the categorical aspect, and by non-cognitivism, in its rejection of the claim to objective validity or truth. The ordinary user of moral language doesn’t intend it to present his own or anyone else’s private outlook. Someone in a moral predicament isn’t asking whether the act in question is something he really wants to do or has a pro-attitude towards, or even whether it’s something he could recommend in all similar situations. He wants to know whether the act is wrong in itself, and this is just the everyday objectivist’s version of the philosopher’s non-natural qualities.

- Mackie refers us to those influenced by existentialism to show how ingrained objectification of values is. When objective values are denied, the reaction can be that nothing matters at all. This doesn’t follow, because subjective concern can...
survive the abandonment of objectivism. However, this shows that people have tended to objectify their own concerns, giving them a fictitious external authority, so that their subjective concerns collapse along with the objective.

- Russell feels he has to defend himself against the charge of inconsistency in both holding that ethical values are fundamentally subjective and yet still himself expressing emphatic opinions on ethical questions. He thinks he can do so, but still feels unsatisfied (yet feels even less satisfied by the alternatives).

- Mackie concludes that ordinary moral judgements include just the claim to objectivity that he’s at pains to deny. This has been incorporated into the meanings of moral terms, and any analysis of them – such as of either or a combination of non-cognitivism and naturalism – that omits this claim is incomplete.

- So, if second-order ethics were confined to linguistic and conceptual analysis, it would conclude that at least moral values are objective, since this is part of what the moral concepts – both of the ordinary man and of the European philosophical tradition – mean. Consequently, conceptual analysis isn’t enough, for the objectivity of moral concepts, while ingrained in our language, is not self-validating. Objectivity should be questioned, but this can’t be done by analysis, but only by an “error theory” – that when most people claim that their moral judgements point to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false. This is what makes Mackie’s use of the term moral scepticism appropriate for his position.

- This error theory need very solid support, because it goes against common sense and assumptions built into our thought and language. We must argue explicitly for it, rather than lightly assuming the sceptical thesis and then passing on. The two main standard arguments – that from relativity and that from queerness – are given in the next two sections, supplemented by Mackie.

1.8 The Argument from Relativity

- The major premise of this argument for moral subjectivity is the well-known anthropological fact of the variation of moral codes (a) from one society to another, (b) from one time to another within a society and (c) from one subsection to another within a society at a particular time. Of itself this entails neither first or second-order ethical views, but 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.

- Mackie points out that disagreement per se doesn’t count against objectivism, because there are disagreements over physical or historical theories which are still deemed objective. Mackie denies the parallel on the grounds that disagreement in the sciences is over speculative theories based on inadequate evidence whereas moral disagreements reflects people’s adherence to particular forms of life. This is the causal direction: people approve of X because they participate in X, ideally at least, rather than vice versa.

- Moral heretics and reformers show that moral judgements are not merely conventional – but Mackie thinks that we can understand their stance as new and unconventional extensions of rules adhered to as arising from an established way of life, maybe for consistency’s sake.
• The variety of moral codes is better explained by the hypothesis that there are different forms of life than that diverse moralities have variously distorted perceptions of objective values.

• The argument from relativity is famously countered by the claim that objectivists don’t consider individual rules to have universal individual rules, but only very general basic principles that are recognised to some extent by all societies. Sidgwick gives three such principles that provide the foundations for different methods of ethics:
  1. The principle of universalisability.
  2. One should conform to the rules of any society from which one benefits.
  3. A utilitarian principle of doing what seems likely to promote the general happiness.

• Mackie admits that such principles, alloyed to particular circumstances, accounts for the sort of variation we actually see.

• However, this only goes part way to answering the moral sceptic. The objectivist has to say that objectivity attaches properly only to these basic principles, and to other moral judgements moral truth and falsity attaches only derivatively and contingently. Despite the popularity of utilitarian and universalising principles in recent ethics, these principles are far from being all that’s actually affirmed in ordinary moral thought – what R M Hare calls ideals or, unkindly, fanaticism. When people judge something as good and right, they do so immediately, not as a deduction from some general and widely accepted principle. It arouses some immediate response in them – but also arouses some radically contradictory response in others. Mackie suggests that moral sense or intuition – rather than reason – better describes what’s going on in moral judgements, and that this leaves the argument from relativity at full force.

1.9 The Argument from Queerness

• This is a stronger and more general argument for moral scepticism and has two parts:
  1. Metaphysical: objective values, if they were to exist, would be entities of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe.
  2. Epistemological: given the metaphysical problem, how would 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; the intuitionists’ that there is a faculty of moral intuition. Intuitionism has long been out of favour and is easily shown to be implausible, but is something to which any objectivist has to be committed. To say that moral judgements are just intuited is a travesty of actual moral thinking, but, however complex the real process, it will require some input of this sort – either premises or forms of argument – if the result is to be prescriptively authoritative. “A special form of intuition” is a lame answer, but the only one possible, to the questions of how we are aware of:
  1. This authoritative prescriptivity.
  2. The truth of these distinctively ethical premises.
  3. The cogency of distinctively ethical forms of reasoning.

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10 These sound like alternative basic principles, so we’re still be left with relativism.
• The reason for the above is that an adequate account is given by none of our ordinary sensory perceptions, logical inferences, conceptual analyses or explanatory hypotheses.

• The best counter-argument of the objectivist is to look for companions in guilt. The 18th century moralist Richard Price claims that empiricists such as Locke or Hume have equal difficulty accounting for our knowledge and ideas of such things as essence, number, identity, diversity, solidity, inertia, substance, space and time (allegedly, their necessary existence and infinite extension), necessity and possibility, power and causation. Price thinks that if the understanding – the truth-discriminating faculty – can generate so many new simple ideas, why can’t it immediately perceive right and wrong, which are real characters of actions?

• Mackie agrees that this is an important argument that the empiricist need to answer by showing how we know about such companions in guilt. Mackie thinks he can do this, but not here, but if any such argument should fail, then its subjects should also be deemed prey to the argument from queerness.

• Not only logical positivists but more liberal empiricists find it hard to accommodate objective values. Mackie both rejects the verification principle but denies its conclusion that moral statements lack meaning, thinking instead that they are meaningful but false.

• Objective values would have to be like Plato’s forms, where knowledge of the Form of the Good not only instructs but enables the person who perceives it to pursue it. As ends, all objective goods would have “to-be-pursuedness” and wrong courses of action would have “not-to-be-doneness” built into them. Situations would have demands for actions built into them, much as Clarke’s necessary relations of fitness between situation and action.

• Hume’s argument that reason (including knowing) can never influence the will needs supplementing with the argument from queerness. Someone might object that, while the ordinary objects of knowledge and reason (abstracted from desires) cannot influence the will, values differ from natural objects just in having this power to automatically influence the will once known. Hume would respond by saying that this involves postulating value-entities and value-features, and faculties of perceiving them, of entirely different kinds to those related to anything else with which we’re acquainted.

• The queerness is brought to light by asking how objective moral qualities relate to natural features; for instance, how the fact that an action is (say) one of deliberate cruelty relates to moral fact that it is wrong. The relation cannot, says Mackie, be one of entailment or of logical or semantic necessity. But, the wrongness must somehow supervene on, or be consequential of, the facts about the act; the act is wrong because it is one of deliberate cruelty. Mackie now asks what this “because” means, and what the relation signifies beyond such actions being socially condemned because of attitudes absorbed from our social environment. We need to postulate something that can not only see the natural features that constitute the cruelty, and the wrongness itself, but also the mysterious link between the two. Alternatively, wrongness might be a higher-order property of natural properties, but what, and how discerned? Mackie thinks it’s much simpler to replace the moral quality with a subjective response that is causally connected to the natural features that allegedly give birth to the supposed moral quality.

• Mackie considers whether the argument from queerness has benefited from its response to the wilder products of philosophical fantasy (Platonic Forms, non-natural qualities and faculties of intuition). He thinks the reason the argument
from queerness doesn’t appear as forceful when directed at terms used for everyday moral judgements that claim objectivity (such as “you must (or can’t) do that”, “unjust”, “obligation”, “disgraceful”, “mean”, or talk about good and bad reasons for and against possible actions) is that the objective prescriptivity is hidden, embedded in the forms of speech about such things. There’s nothing queer (say) about talk of injustice arising from violating the accepted standards of merit, and the claim to moral authority may pass unnoticed under cover. We need to examine and expose such hidden assumptions, just as they are manifest in less cautious philosophical reconstructions.

1.10 Patterns of Objectification

- Mackie now provides a set of rationalisations\(^{11}\) for the origin of our tendency to objectify moral values. If we can do this, and Mackie doesn’t think this will be difficult, we’ll be in a less paradoxical situation than retaining such commonsense beliefs.
- From the subjectivist perspective, supposedly objective values arise from attitudes the person who thinks he’s responding to objective values has. What Hume refers to the mind’s “propensity to spread itself on external objects” explains the projection or objectification of moral attitudes. This is analogous to the pathetic fallacy, our tendency to read our feelings into their objects. Because we’re disgusted by a fungus (say) we ascribe to the fungus itself a non-natural quality of foulness\(^{12}\).
- There’s more than this going on in moral contexts, since moral attitudes are partly social in origin. These socially originating and necessary behaviour patterns pressurise individuals who internalise these pressures, requiring these patterns of behaviour of themselves and others. So, the attitudes objectified into moral values do have an external source, though not that those who believe in their absolute authority imagine.
- Additionally, there’s the motive of the need for morality to regulate interpersonal behaviour in opposition to our inclinations. This makes us want moral judgements to have authority over ourselves and others, and objectification supplies this.
- From a logical perspective, aesthetic judgements are in a similar epistemological and metaphysical situation, but are less strongly objectified. This makes it easier to accept an error theory and subjectivism easier to accept.
- Mackie thinks it incorrect to consider moral values as primarily the projection of feelings, because wants are more important to us. Hobbes pointed out that we call things good if they form the objects of our appetites, and both “good” and “goods” are used in non-moral contexts of things which satisfy desires. We reverse the direction of dependence, Mackie supposes, by making desire depend on goodness rather than vice versa. Indeed, the desired thing will be desirable so that it both arouses and satisfies desire. It’s easy to confuse a thing’s objective desirability with it having objective value. This pattern of objectification is shown up by our use of the word “good” as one of our primary moral terms.
- Mackie thinks there’s no real distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives, because in supposed hypothetical imperatives, the conditional clause

\(^{11}\) I’ve written this up as rather a splurge – it needs splitting into numbered points.

\(^{12}\) While we’re disgusted, the fungus isn’t intrinsically disgusting. Witness aborigines and witchetty grubs.
is omitted and the “want”, whether of the speaker or someone else, is elided. This is explained by the social nature of judgements, which have developed in response to a joint way of life and where the demands may be those of an indefinite multitude and are equally binding on all in the community. The agent is expected to internalise the demands and act as if the ends of the required action were his own. Mackie sees advantages in suppressing any explicit references to demands and making the imperatives categorical, and sees traces of objectification in the use of words such as “must”, “ought” or “should”, which are used for hypothetical imperatives.

- Mackie considers the objection that all this links normative ethics too closely to descriptive morality; to socially enforced patterns of behaviour as studied by anthropologists. But, he thinks it can’t be denied that this is how moral thinking starts, and even when divorced from actual communities, an ideal community of moral agents (such as Kant’s kingdom – better commonwealth – of ends).

- Another explanation of the objectification of moral values is of ethics as a system of laws without reference to the legislator, whether state or divine. Stress on quasi-imperative notions – of what ought to be done – or of what is wrong in the sense of forbidden, are relics of the theological ethics of Christianity. Mackie points out that Greek ethics focuses on the objectification of the desired and satisfying rather than of the commanded, but are still prescriptive and action-guiding. Mackie refers to Anscombe’s view that all moral obligations, duties, rights, wrongs and oughts – in the modern, non-Aristotelian sense – have survived outside the divine law that makes them intelligible. “Ought” now has only a delusive appearance of content, and she recommends returning to Aristotelian terminology.

- Mackie finds some merit in the above argument, but thinks it mistaken to think of objective prescriptivity as a local, unnecessary post-operative complication of a society from which the dominant theistic belief has recently been excised. As the Euthyphro dilemma shows, even those accepting divine commands still may think of moral values as having an independently objective action-guiding authority; that God commands what is good in itself, and not that what is good is so merely because God commands it – for otherwise, God himself couldn’t be called good.

- So, the apparent objectivity of moral value has more than one source, and several distinct patterns of objectification have left traces in our moral concepts and language.

1.11 The General Goal of Human Life

- Mackie has addressed the preceding sections to Kantians or post-Kantians in the English philosophical tradition, and it may not satisfy those who follow Aristotle and Aquinas, for whom the key moral concepts are the good(s) for man and the goal(s) of human life. For them, moral reasoning consists in better understanding these goals and determining better ways of achieving them. However, Mackie finds this subject to two interpretations:
  1. Descriptive: the good or end of human life just is (or can be posited as) what men in fact pursue and find ultimately satisfying.
  2. Prescriptive: the good or end of human life is what man ought to be striving for, whether he is or not.
Mackie thinks that the Aristotle/Aquinas approach jumbles these together, supporting claims of the second sort from the more plausible ones of the first.

- Mackie goes along with the above to some degree.
  1. He doesn’t quarrel with the descriptivism, except to warn that there may be more variation in the ultimately satisfying goals of human life than is suggested by terminology such as “the good for man”.
  2. Nor does he quarrel with prescriptivism, provided it is recognised as subjectively so – with the speaker putting forward his own demands or those of the movement he represents, linked to what he sees as fundamental human goals. Mackie will adopt this approach later in the book. However, if someone claims that something is objectively the right and proper goal of human life, then he is effectively claiming its pursuit to be objectively and categorically imperative, and Mackie’s previous arguments have already addressed such claims, which he reviews below.

- Mackie thinks that this is just another pattern of objectification, arising by constructing a claim to objective prescriptivity by combining normative elements of the prescriptive interpretation (of the Aristotelian / Aquinas tradition) with the objectivity allowed by the descriptive interpretation. This is overthrown by the argument from relativity already given – it is implausible to think that the radical diversity of the goals men actually pursue result from an imperfect grasp of a unitary true good. We can also apply the argument from queerness and ask what the objectively true rightness of the true goal can be, and how it’s linked both to descriptive features of the goal and the fact that it is to some extent\(^\text{13}\) an actual goal of human striving.

- Mackie acknowledges that a theist could defend this objectivism by saying that the true purpose of man is that for which he was intended by God, and the actual strivings of man bear some relation – albeit imperfect because of the imperfection of created things – because he made them for this end and such as to pursue it.

- However, since he doesn’t think theism can be defended, Mackie doesn’t think this potential counter-argument any threat to his position, though he discusses the relation between morality and religion in Chapter 10.

### 1.12 Conclusion

- Mackie now gives a very helpful summary of this chapter, which is hard to compress. The status of values is a real issue. Moral scepticism isn’t to be confused with first-order normative views nor with conceptual analysis. Both non-cognitive and naturalistic analyses fail to capture the claims to objectivity of ordinary moral judgements. Moral scepticism is an error theory, holding that the ingrained belief in objective values that is built into ordinary moral thought is false. Solid arguments can be given against common-sense responses to moral scepticism; namely, those from relativity and metaphysical and epistemological queerness, together with explanations of how people might come to believe in objective values when there are no such things. Of equal importance for the case for moral scepticism is clearing up confusions about what it is not – in particular that it does not dispute the objective status of many qualities and relations.

\(^{13}\) Mackie’s italics – I don’t understand this last sentence.