

How Queer?

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In his book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, J. L. Mackie argues against the existence of objective moral values. He does so in two sections, the first called “the argument from relativity” and the second “the argument from queerness” (Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* 36, 38).¹ In this paper, I will examine each argument in turn and show that Mackie fails in his attempts. Of course, by showing that Mackie’s arguments fail, I have not shown that objective values exist, but that is not the purpose of this paper. I only wish to expose some problems in Mackie’s arguments. That is, in this paper, I plan to show that the arguments from relativity and queerness are not convincing. In doing so, I will take some time to formulate them in the strongest way that I can, for I wish to avoid a straw man. Again, I am not making an appeal to ignorance; I realize that there may be other arguments better than Mackie’s and that I am far from establishing the existence of objective moral values. I am showing, though, that Mackie’s efforts fail.

The first argument that Mackie makes is from relativity. The argument from relativity has two parts, which I will call “A” and “B.” Part A takes as evidence that there are variations in moral codes between different periods of time, different groups, and even disagreement within groups (Mackie 36). The argument claims that if there were objective moral values,

¹ This book will be cited simply by the author’s last name followed by the page number on which the cited material occurs.

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there would be some consensus on morality because moral systems would be based on those values. But there is widespread disagreement about morality, and this is inconsistent with the hypothesis. Therefore, we must admit that there are no objective moral values. More succinctly, the argument is as follows:

- (1) If there were objective moral values, then there would be uniformity in moral codes.
- (2) Moral codes differ in important ways.
- (3) Therefore, there are no objective moral values.

One may object to this argument by showing there is disagreement in scientific questions, and thus one could analogously say:

- (4) If there were objective facts, then scientists would agree about them.
- (5) Scientists disagree about many things.
- (6) Therefore, there are no objective facts.

But unless we want to adhere to extreme subjectivism, which is not a doctrine that Mackie is espousing (see Brink, "Moral Realism and the Skeptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness" 112), we must admit that

- (7) Science is discovering objective facts.

So how is it that we can disagree about scientific questions and not end up with this contradiction? It is because scientific disagreements are the result of hypotheses that are based on inadequate evidence (Mackie 36). Our incomplete knowledge causes these disputes, and because we do not have a complete understanding of the natural world, we cannot assume that we would agree upon all objective facts. It seems then that Mackie rejects (4) and avoids the contradiction by claiming that the existence of objective facts

does not necessitate our knowledge of them. But Mackie says “it is hardly plausible to interpret moral disagreement in the same way” (Mackie 36).

In part B, Mackie makes an argument to best explanation and proposes a theory of how morality actually works. He claims that our morality is a result of our habits and customs (Mackie 36). For example, we prefer monogamy because it is the type of thing we do, not because monogamy is an objective good. We idealize the things that we do and call them objective values. This theory better explains the variety in moral codes (Mackie 37). If people in different cultures have different moral values than we do, it is because they have idealized their behavior, some of which is different than our own. This theory can adequately explain the wide variety in moral codes, a variety that causes problems for theories positing objective moral values.²

The question, though, is whether or not Mackie’s arguments are actually convincing. If he is trying to demonstrate that there are no objective moral values, he has a difficult task. There are very few ways of proving that something does not exist. Either we would have to discover some true conditional by which we can use *modus ponens* to arrive at the non-existence of the thing or we would need to resort to a *reductio ad absurdum*. Mackie seems to propose the conditional “if there are objective moral values, there would be a consensus” and infers there are no objective moral values by *modus tollens*.

It seems Mackie has made a fatal assumption here. He has assumed that the existence of objective moral values would force a consensus. I fail to see why that would be so. What is it about objective moral values that would force their knowledge upon us? There are many objective truths that are yet unknown or are disputed by us. For a long time scientists have debated the makeup of the atom. It cannot be both Thompson’s plum pudding and an electron orbiting a nucleus.³ Yet whatever is really the makeup of the atom, various possibilities have been disputed. Objective facts have yet to force their knowledge upon us in any other circumstances, so why should morality be different?

Mackie does try to refute objections that compare moral disagreement to scientific disagreement, saying that “it is hardly plausible to

² Mackie treats a theory by Sidgwick that proposes to overcome the difficulty while maintaining objective values (Mackie 37), but this is not relevant to my discussion.

³ The current model is an electron probability cloud surrounding a nucleus.

interpret moral disagreement in the same way” (Mackie 36). But he gives no other reason to believe this than his assertion. Scientific pursuits can avoid this problem because the disputes are based on inadequate knowledge. Yet moral disagreements could come about the same way. The key to Mackie’s refutation of the counterexample is knowledge. Because objective facts do not cause us to know them, we must search for knowledge; in that search we often err. But, in order to conclude that moral systems cannot avoid this problem in the same way scientific disputes do, we must assume that all people know these objective moral values equally well. This assumption has little in the way of justification.

If there are objective moral values, we have no reason to suppose that all people know them equally well, and so we can expect some disagreements about morality. These disagreements would be based on one or both disagreeing parties’ faulty understanding of what the true objective moral values are. To give an example with a strongly moral aspect, let us look at the Qur’an. The Qur’an is a book containing codes of conduct that a faithful Muslim must observe, yet those who call themselves devout Muslims range from the peaceful Sufi mystics to the Jihadists. Both of these groups read the same book and get wildly different meanings from it. So, even when the law is written down and easily accessible to all, people will interpret it differently. If we cannot agree upon moral codes that are written for all to see, I do not see how we are justified in assuming that everyone must know and understand an unwritten moral code equally well. Therefore, we can reject (1) and can thereby demonstrate that Mackie has not adequately supported (3).

Even supposing that there was an objective value that was known equally well by two parties and that those parties in some way disagreed about it, this would only show that one of the parties failed to implement it correctly or that this particular supposedly objective value indeed does not exist. Disagreement cannot show that the whole set of objective moral values does not exist, only that one or more value supposedly in the set does not exist. Such is the fate of arguments of this type, for example, the related arguments dealing with the problem of evil. If they are sound, they do not show that God does not exist but that a being with all the properties of the Absolute cannot exist. There is a possibility that Mackie’s argument

could show that some certain moral value or values do not exist, but even this allows too much. Disagreement as it stands may be explained by human error in our efforts to understand exactly what the objective moral values really are.

Richard T. Garner asserts that Mackie makes no attempt to show that objective values do not exist by such an argument as the one refuted above; instead, he claims that Mackie's argument is an argument to best explanation (Garner, "On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts" 140). I will now examine this version, which I have previously called "B," but I should note that even if Mackie's theory best explained our moral systems, it would not show that there are no objective values; it would only show that those are not the sort of thing that all people base their morality on. I say "all" because this disagreement does not exclude the possibility that some groups may base their morality on objective values.

This version of the argument makes the assumption that there is vast disagreement among moral codes, this being the anomaly that Mackie's moral theory explains better. If there were no vast disagreement, then the subjectivist would have to explain how so many societies came to behave in such incredibly similar ways and then idealize those behaviors. Merely mild disagreement does not show that there are no objective moral values because objective moral values would help explain the almost overwhelming consensus of the world's people. The disagreement among peoples must be vast enough that it actually counts against the objectivity of values. But those who make this argument have severely overestimated the level of disagreement in the world.

Even our moral disagreements rest on a foundation of broad moral agreement. For example, in the ongoing debate about abortion no one questions whether it is right or wrong to kill people. Pro-choice advocates do not condone murder. The questions they raise are about whether a fetus is a person with a right to life. In other disagreements, only some aspect of an objective moral value is questioned. For example, death penalty proponents and opponents do not disagree about whether killing people is morally wrong; the issue is whether it is morally justified, or even required, in the case of extreme criminals. Even Jihadists appeal to values with which we can identify. They indiscriminately kill because they truly believe the

West is trying to destroy their people, culture, and religion. We disagree with their assessment and their methods, but we do not disagree that people should protect their people, culture, and religion. We may argue with them to try and convince them that non-violent methods are more appropriate, but we can identify with their love of their own society. Even sadists appeal to values we can understand. They inflict pain on others because it gives them pleasure. We understand why a sadist values pleasure because we value it ourselves. We non-sadists simply disagree with how the person achieves such pleasures and would say that the sadist values pleasure above more important values. We can see that the questions in many of these disagreements are either about facts or about which moral values have preeminence, not about two utterly foreign moral values.

That we can even communicate about moral values with people whose moral codes clash with our own shows some consensus. Those who have differing moral codes will always justify their practices with a value we can understand. Once we realize this, Mackie's claim to have the better explanation falters. Did people from separate communities all across the world independently happen to behave in ways that led them to idealize nearly all of the same values that all other peoples also idealized? Or is this agreement explained better by the theory that there is something about these values that draw all peoples? The disagreements are too few and the consensus is too wide for us to easily accept Mackie's theory.

Mackie also argues against objective moral values by discussing their "queerness," claiming that objective moral values would be unacceptably queer both metaphysically and epistemically (Mackie 38). Whatever kinds of things objective moral values are, they would have to be very strange entities, so strange that we could not bear it. His metaphysical argument seems to be:

(8) If there were objective values, they would be unacceptably queer.

(9) Whatever would be unacceptably queer cannot exist.

From lines 8 and 9 we can deduce:

(10) There are no objective values.

The epistemic argument claims that coming to know what objective moral values are and understanding their authoritative prescriptivity would require some special faculty. Whatever sensory perception is necessary to know these objective values would be unacceptably queer. Thus, we can conclude that we cannot know objective values by an argument similar to the one above.

Now we ask whether Mackie argues that there are no objective values at all or that there simply are no objective moral values. If he is claiming that there are no objective values whatsoever, we must ask by what standard he can judge moral values as strange. If there were no objective values, such as aesthetic values, then any standard by which we judge moral values would have to be completely subjective. And we should ask why we must choose the subjective standards that label moral values unacceptably queer. Just as we can freely choose any moral values to live by if there are no objective values, we can freely choose the standards by which we judge the queerness of objective moral values. And those standards might not label moral values as queer. In fact, we could claim that objective moral values are the only things in the universe that are not unacceptably queer, or that a universe without objective moral values is unacceptably queer. Therefore, if there are no objective values at all, we can claim objective moral values are not unacceptably queer.

If Mackie claims that there are some objective values, namely aesthetic values, and by these values we could objectively say moral values are too queer, then we could propose that objective moral values are of the same kind as the aesthetic values. Moral values would be of a similar type to the other objective values, and we could know moral values through the same faculty by which we know the other objective values. Therefore, if there are some objective values, we can claim that objective moral values are not unacceptably queer. And because the law of excluded middle dictates that either “there are no objective values” or “there are at least some object values” is true, we can claim that objective moral values are not unacceptably queer. That is:

- (11) If there are no objective values, objective moral values are not unacceptably queer.

- (12) If there are at least some objective values, then objective moral values are not unacceptably queer.
- (13) There are either no objective values or there are at least some objective values.
- (14) Therefore, objective moral values are not unacceptably queer.

And so, even if we grant Mackie's assumption that nothing unacceptably queer exists, we need not conclude that objective moral values do not exist.

Finally, that Mackie finds objective values too strange for comfort seems an odd argument against their existence. I find electrons to be very strange. The idea that something can be both a wave and a particle and that it exists as a definite cloud of probability until a measurement collapses its wave function is a very strange notion indeed! If I find some idea strange, does that count in any way against its truth? Certainly not! Moreover, Mackie finds objective values unacceptably strange because he construes them so. He claims that objective values would have to be Platonic Forms—such Platonic Forms would be strange to be sure, but they are not what many objectivists claim these values are.

When we are confronted with arguments of this type, we need to examine the assumptions underlying them. Mackie's assumptions, that objective moral values would force a consensus and that objective moral values would be unacceptably queer, are unfounded. Thus, while I have not shown that there are objective morals, I have shown that Mackie's arguments from relativity and queerness fail to persuade us that objective moral values do not exist.

Works Cited

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