

## Mackie's error theory<sup>1</sup>

Metaethics is the branch of philosophy that asks about what morality is, philosophically speaking. It asks questions in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and epistemology. For example, can ethical claims be true or false? If so, are these truths objective? Are there moral properties, like being right or wrong, that are part of reality? And if there are ethical truths, how do we discover what these truths are?

Cognitivism is the view that ethical language expresses ethical beliefs about how the world is. Cognitivists argue that moral judgements can be true or false, and so aim to describe the world. Furthermore, we can be mistaken about whether a moral judgement is true or false. Our thinking it is true does not make it true.

But if there are truths about morality, what kind of truths are they? Moral realism claims that good and bad are properties of situations and people, right and wrong are properties of actions. Just as people can be 5 feet tall or run fast, they can be morally good or bad. Just as actions can be done in 10 minutes or done from greed, they can be right or wrong. These moral properties are a genuine part of the world. Whether moral judgements are true or false depends on how the world is, on what properties an action, person or situation actually has.

In this handout, we discuss two objections made by John Mackie to moral realism. What Mackie aims to show is that there cannot be any objective moral truths or objective moral properties. On the basis of these arguments, he defends an 'error theory' of morality, which we discuss at the end.

### **MACKIE'S ARGUMENT FROM RELATIVITY**

Mackie's first argument is from relativity. (In this handout, we discuss the argument from relativity as an objection to moral realism. For a broader discussion of moral relativism, the distinct metaethical theory, see the handout 'Moral relativism'.) In his book *Ethics*, Mackie starts from the common observation that, as a matter of fact, moral codes differ from one society to the next, i.e. there is relativity of morality to societies. According to one society, slavery is permissible under certain conditions; according to another, it is never permissible; or again, female circumcision is right v. it is wrong; or all people should be treated as equals v. people should be treated according to their caste. This claim, which we may call 'descriptive relativism', is a factual one, and one that certainly seems correct.

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<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 371-9, 381-2

We can use this fact, Mackie argues, to show that there are no *objective* moral truths, but the argument is indirect. The mere fact that there is moral disagreement between societies doesn't by itself show that moral realism is wrong. Societies have also disagreed on empirical matters of fact, e.g. some have thought that the Earth is flat, others that it is round; or again, that some people can magically move objects by thought v. there is no magic; and so on. Even scientific theories have disagreed, e.g. Newtonian ideas of space, time and motion v. Einstein's theory of relativity. But in all these cases, we should be happy to say that there are objective truths, and some people just made mistakes. So disagreement over a claim doesn't show that there is no objective truth. So the mere fact that societies have disagreed over morality still leaves open the possibility that there is objective moral truths, but some societies have held mistaken beliefs about what is morally good and right.

The argument against moral realism comes when we consider how we should understand and explain the moral disagreements between societies. The realist must argue that different societies, with their different ethical values and practices are all trying to get at the truth about ethics. The relativist argues that this is implausible, and we should understand the morality of a society as a reflection of its way of life.

With scientific disagreements, the best explanation is that different societies don't have sufficient evidence to discover the truth. It is perfectly plausible to think that there is just one way the world is, empirically speaking, but it is not always easy to discover how that is. Our empirical beliefs are caused by, and change in response to, discoveries of what is true about the world. In contrast, says Mackie, the idea that two societies which disagree are both trying to find 'the truth' about ethics doesn't sit well with an understanding of the history of societies and how ethical practices develop. It is far more plausible to say that different ways of life have given rise to different moral beliefs than to argue that societies' different moral beliefs result from very inadequate or badly distorted perceptions of the one moral reality. There are different ways that human beings live, and they have developed different conventions about how to live, and these conventions are reflected in their moral judgments.

Mackie goes on to note that the realist can respond that there are *general ethical principles* that different societies share. For example, most societies have prohibitions on killing, lying, and theft, and encourage care of the weak. If disagreement supports the view that there is no objective moral truth, then agreement supports the view that there is. Different ethical practices reflect the different particular conditions in which different societies are situated, but not different ethical principles. This explains why societies disagree and recognises how and why different ethical practices develop without giving up on moral realism.

Mackie argues that this response to the argument from relativity is weak. At best, it shows only that the fundamental principles of morality are objective. Other moral judgments are relative to particular circumstances, so a judgment that, say, 'stealing is wrong' is true in some societies but could be false in others. Although this is the kind of thing that utilitarianism might defend, it does not reflect how

most people understand morality. People hold their moral judgments not on the basis of general principles, but because something about the act arouses their disapproval. They have an 'intuition' that it is wrong. *Which* acts arouse people's disapproval differs from one society to another, so we cannot argue that these moral judgments are objective.

### Discussion

There are several responses that the moral realist can make to Mackie's last argument, that the response from realism to the argument from relativity is weak.

One response is to say that moral realism isn't trying to describe how most people think about morality, it is trying to give the correct metaethical theory. For example, if utilitarianism is the correct normative ethical theory, then perhaps it is simply true that the only objective moral fact is given by the principle of utility, because there are just two moral properties: good, which is happiness, and right, which is maximising happiness. Nothing that Mackie has said shows otherwise.

On this point, we should note that the moral non-naturalist G E Moore would say exactly this. Moore argued that we reach moral knowledge by 'intuition'. But when he talks about moral intuitions, he doesn't mean people's gut reactions, as Mackie seems to think. He means rational, 'self-evident' propositions, i.e. judgments that we can understand to be true when we consider them carefully. Moore went on to argue that we can only have intuitions in this sense about fundamental moral principles, and that our intuitions support utilitarianism! If Mackie is trying to attack intuitionism, he completely misunderstands it here.

A second response is to object to Mackie's claim that any moral judgments that are relative to the circumstances of a society are not objective. This misunderstands the nature of moral reality, we could say, as well as the nature of truth. For example, some plants grow in hot countries but not in cold countries. So 'Chilli plants will grow well' is a relative truth - it is true in one country but not another. But this doesn't make it any less *objective*. Whether a chilli plant will grow well in the country you are in is a mind-independent fact. We can even turn the relative truth into a universal truth by stating the conditions that apply, e.g. 'Chilli plants will grow well in hot countries'. Moral realists can say the same about moral judgments. Some ethical practices will be permissible in some circumstances but not in others. Whether a moral judgment is true will depend on whether the practice is actually morally right or wrong in those circumstances. If someone's 'intuition' is that 'stealing is wrong' and they live in conditions in which stealing is wrong, then their intuition is objectively true. One person can think 'Chilli plants grow well' and another, living in different conditions, can think 'Chilli plants don't grow well', and they can both be objectively correct, given the conditions they live in. So two people, living in different conditions, can have conflicting intuitions about stealing and both be objectively correct, given the conditions they live under. They only make a mistake if they think 'stealing is always wrong, in every society' (and this is not true). And 'Stealing is wrong under conditions C' (if we can spell out the conditions) is not a relative truth at all, but a universal one.

## **MACKIE'S ARGUMENTS FROM QUEERNESS**

Mackie presents a second argument against moral realism, which he calls an argument from 'queerness'. The oddity of moral properties and how we would know about them if they did makes it implausible to think that there are any moral properties. The argument has two aspects, metaphysical and epistemological.

### Metaphysical queerness

If there were moral properties, Mackie argues, they would have to be very different from anything else in the universe. His argument for this claim rests on the connection between morality and motivation. Moral judgements motivate us - we avoid actions we believe are wrong and try to do actions that are right. But that means, if there were moral properties, simply *knowing* what is good or bad, right or wrong, would be enough to motivate us to act in certain ways. For this to be true, 'goodness', say, would have to have 'to-be-pursuedness' built into it.

If this is a confusing idea, that's Mackie's point. How could an objective property motivate us in this way? How could there be some direct, immediate relation between some fact of the world and our desires? Just to know something true about the way the world is doesn't entail being motivated to do anything about it. As we might say, the direction of fit is wrong.

We may add that, clearly, moral properties cannot be natural properties discovered by sense experience and science. None of the properties we discover this way are intrinsically motivating. So if there are moral properties, they must be non-natural properties. What Mackie's argument is supposed to show is how peculiar such non-natural properties would have to be.

### Epistemological queerness

Suppose there were moral properties. If some actions, such as an act of courage, have the property of being objectively right; or again, if some states of affairs, such as being in pain or cowardice, have the property of being objectively bad - how could we know? Intuitionism, Mackie claims, says no more than that we have some special faculty - but this is a terrible answer that doesn't explain how we have this knowledge at all. If we think of our usual ways of knowing about the world - sense perception, introspection, hypothetical reasoning, even conceptual analysis - none of these can explain knowledge of morality. To say that we know moral judgements to be true or false 'by intuition' is only to say that we don't know them in any of the usual ways. The theory doesn't give us any real answer as to *how* we know truths by intuition.

The non-naturalist might well reply that it is not only knowledge of morality that faces this objection. We can't explain our knowledge of mathematics, necessary truths, the existence and nature of substance, space or causation in any of these ways either. Here, the non-naturalist is appealing to rationalist arguments about the scope of a priori knowledge. Is our knowledge of moral properties any more puzzling than our knowledge of these other things?

Mackie accepts the point: either empiricism can account for knowledge in these areas, or they all face the objection that they appeal to something 'non-natural'.

To a significant extent, then, Mackie's argument depends on empiricism, rather than rationalism, being the correct account of our knowledge.

But Mackie presses the argument from epistemological queerness by asking what the connection between natural properties and moral properties is. For instance, we commonly say things like 'that's wrong because it is cruel'. If we take cruel to mean 'causing pain for fun', then cruelty is a natural property. It is a psychological fact that something causes pain, and another psychological fact that someone's motive is taking pleasure in doing this. But what is the relation between these facts and the 'fact' that acting in this way is wrong? How can we establish whether it is wrong or not? It isn't an analytic truth, and we can't deduce it. Intuitionism fails to tell us how morality is related to anything else, how natural facts contribute to moral thinking. This makes it even more puzzling how we could come to know about moral properties.

### Discussion

Mackie's argument from queerness depends on his understanding of what moral realism claims. In particular, he takes moral realism to be committed to the idea that moral properties are mind-independent and part of reality. Both these ideas need careful thought.

'Reality' here can't mean simply the world as physics describes it - space, time, matter and perhaps causal relations between them. But obviously, physics won't tell us right from wrong. But why should we think that all reality is like physical reality? Moral properties, if they exist, aren't going to be like physical properties. Even reductive naturalists think the most likely natural properties to be moral properties are psychological properties.

Are psychological states 'part of reality'? They certainly exist - whether one is happy or not is a psychological fact. In one sense, it is not a mind-independent fact, because it is a fact about a mind. In another sense, we can argue that it is a mind-independent fact, because whether you are happy or not is true or false independent of what anyone thinks. Anyone can make a mistake about whether or not you are happy, even you (you might think you are happy when, really, if you were completely honest with yourself, you'd realise you are not)! Perhaps this is controversial. So let's talk about eudaimonia instead. Whether someone is eudaimon is, according to Aristotle, objectively true or false, but it is a fact about someone's life, including their mind. There are lots of facts that are about human beings and their activities, e.g. not just psychological facts, such as whether someone is in love, but also cultural facts, such as facts about whether a piece of music is baroque or classical. But they are still facts, because they are independent of our judgments and made true by the way the world is, in this case, the human world.

Moral realism claims that moral judgments are mind-independent in the sense that whether a moral claim is true does not depend on whether we think that it is true. It doesn't have to claim that moral judgments are not about minds. If moral facts are facts about our minds, perhaps they are not all that 'queer' after all.

Reductive naturalism, which claims that moral properties are, in fact, natural properties, argues that we can make the case even more strongly. Consider utilitarianism as an example. John Stuart Mill argues that our experience *does* give us evidence of what is good. What is good is what is desirable, and the best evidence for what is desirable is what people generally desire. Once we recognise this, there is no particular epistemological difficulty in discovering moral properties. Furthermore, if we say that goodness *is* happiness, then there is no metaphysical queerness about goodness either. It is simply a natural psychological property. And yet it is a motivating one. We desire happiness and are motivated to pursue it. Saying that something is good is to say that it produces happiness, so it is no puzzle how moral properties and moral judgments motivate us.

These responses are driven by (reductive or non-reductive) moral naturalism. We can show how moral properties are not queer by seeing how they fit with our understanding of human life. But Mackie's arguments from queerness originally targeted non-naturalism. It is harder to see how non-naturalist theories such as Moore's intuitionism can respond.

### **MACKIE'S ERROR THEORY**

Mackie agrees with moral realists that we understand moral judgements to be cognitive. The way we use ethical language is to make objective claims about a moral reality. Moral judgments express beliefs about mind-independent moral properties, and these beliefs can be true or false. This is how moral language functions. But, he argues, there is no such moral reality. And so he argues that all moral judgements are false. 'Murder is wrong' is false, because the property of being wrong does not exist. 'Murder is right' is false, because the property of being right does not exist. There are no moral properties. Ethical language rests on a mistake.

Moral realism claims that there are moral properties, and these are objective - 'mind-independent' - because whether some action or state of affairs is good or bad, right or wrong, is independent of whether people believe that it has this property. But, Mackie argues, there are no mind-independent moral properties. This is the mistake that we make. Mackie is an 'error theorist'.

Error theory is a form of moral anti-realism. It accepts cognitivism - moral language asserts claims about the world which are intended to be true. But error theory rejects moral realism: there are no mind-independent moral properties to make moral judgments true.

Here is an analogy. Some people really believe in fairies. They don't think that when we are talking about fairies, we are using language 'fictionally' (like when we talk about Sherlock Holmes). Imagine that everyone believed in fairies in this way. An 'error theory' of fairies would say that while talk of fairies is cognitivist, there are no fairies. It is not true that fairies have wings, because there are no fairies. It is not true that fairies don't have wings, because there are no fairies. All claims about fairies are false, because there are no fairies.

The way Mackie phrases his argument is to say that there are no 'objective' moral values. A claim is objective, according to Mackie, if:

1. It can be something we know.
2. It can be true or false.
3. Its truth is independent of what we want or choose.
4. It is about something mind-independent.
5. It is about something that is part of reality, part of the 'fabric of the world'.

His claim is that moral judgments cannot be objective in any of these senses, because there are no moral properties.

### Discussion

We looked at Mackie's defence of the claim that there are no objective moral properties when discussing his arguments from relativity and queerness. We also looked at responses to those arguments from moral realism. We won't repeat those discussions here, but it is worth briefly revisiting one of them.

Moral realists agree with much of Mackie's idea of objectivity. Moral realism wants to defend the claims that moral judgments can be true, and whether they are true does not depend on whether we want them to be so. It says that we can know some true moral judgments and that moral properties are real, so they are part of reality. However, in the discussion of Mackie's arguments from queerness, we saw that the claim that moral judgments are mind-independent was ambiguous. Moral realists claim that moral judgments are mind-independent in the sense that they are true or false whether or not we *think* they are true or false. But they may not be mind-independent in the sense of being about something other than minds. It may be that moral judgments are about psychological properties, such as happiness. One response to Mackie's error theory, then, is to say that he has misunderstood what it is for a moral property to be objective.