

Philosophy 110W - 3: Introduction to Philosophy, Hamilton College, Fall 2007  
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Lecture Notes, December 4-6: Mackie, Dworkin, and Bambrough

## I. Moral skepticism

Looking at criticisms of Mill and Kant, we saw are reasons to find both backwards-looking and forwards-looking moral theories lacking.

A combination theory, like Ross's, looks no better.

Perhaps we should give up looking for moral theories.

Mackie defends second-order moral skepticism, the claim that there are no objective values.

Claims like, 'Helping those in need is good' are false, since there is no such thing as good.

Thus, Mackie's position is called an error theory.

Any reference to the good is, strictly speaking, like a reference to Santa Claus.

Since there is no such thing, statements which refer to it must be false.

'Santa Claus lives at the North Pole' is like 'Suicide is immoral' in that they can not be really true.

While we may have certain objective standards for what are good and bad actions, the standards themselves lack objectivity.

There have been, through history, a variety of defenses of the objectivity of morality.

Mill, like Epicurus, grounded morality in happiness.

Others, like Hutcheson, appeal to a moral sense which we acquire.

Kant believed that our moral judgment was founded in our ability to reason.

Still others, like Ross, think we have a moral intuition.

Some of these views overlap.

But all of them agree that there are objective values.

Even Hume, who comes close to rejecting the objectivity of values, believes that there are objective facts about the utility of certain actions, and that these can be a ground for moral judgments.

Mackie is rejecting all of these views.

Be careful to distinguish first-order from second-order skepticism.

First-order moral skepticism either denies conventional morality, or denies that any talk of morality is sensible.

One could be a first-order skeptic without being a second-order skeptic if one thinks that the morality we are taught is wrong.

Then, one is using a value judgment to reject ordinary value judgments.

Second-order moral skepticism accepts first-order moralizing, but denies that the values it presupposes exist.

A conventionalist about morality is a second-order skeptic, even if he or she accepts ordinary moral judgments.

## II. Mackie's argument from relativity/diversity

Mackie presents two arguments for his error theory.

The first is the argument from relativity.

On the surface, the argument from relativity appears specious.

The argument from relativity is:

R1. People in different cultures have different moral codes.

R2. If there are different moral codes, there must be no objective fact about which moral codes are correct.

RC. Thus, there must be no objective values.

The problem with this argument is that R2 is false.

Mackie notes that scientists differ on important questions without abandoning objectivity.

As Dworkin notes, we do not count the popularity of moral opinions as evidence for their truth, so we should not count their diversity as evidence for skepticism.

There is a more subtle version of the argument from relativity.

Mackie alleges that people approve of monogamy because they prefer to live monogamous lives.

It is not the fact, he claims, that people live monogamous lives because of their prior approval of monogamy.

That is, our values appear to be extensions, or idealizations, of our preferences.

If so, we have an explanation of why people in different cultures have moral codes.

They have different codes because they have different preferences.

If people had different preferences based on their perceptions of a moral code, we might be tempted to posit an objective moral code, poorly interpreted at times.

Consider that some East African tribes used to throw deformed children into the river because of their belief that such children belonged to the god of the river, the hippopotamus.

(Louis Pojman presents this example in several places, though I have found no independent evidence of the claim.

It does not matter, though; let us imagine the case.)

We might claim that we, who nurture our children whether deformed or not, and those who throw them into the river share an underlying objective morality.

We agree that children should be reared by their parents, even if they believe that the parent of the deformed child is the hippopotamus.

We agree that people should return what is not theirs.

We differ only about the way that the objective morality is instantiated.

Bambrough mentions the examples from Herodotus, in this spirit.

The Callatians cannibalized their dead, while the Greeks cremated their dead.

(Bambrough cleans up the story, a bit.)

Each thought the other immoral, but only because of their moral myopia.

Each culture agreed that respect must be shown to the dead.

On the other hand, if Mackie is correct about the order of preferences and moral code, there is no reason to think there is an objective moral code.

People's preferences are prior to their codes.

We can still posit a universal moral code, but it seems to do no work.

People express moral beliefs about particular actions, and only derivatively about general moral principles.

The moral principles which the objectivist posits seem distant from people's actual moral judgments. There is thus no reason to posit the objectivity of people's moral codes.

### III. Dworkin and Bambrough respond to the argument from relativity

Dworkin responds that the argument from relativism/diversity of opinion is "radically incomplete" because it lacks a premise.

- R1. People in different cultures have different moral codes.
- R2. If there are different moral codes, then either there is no objective fact about which moral codes are correct, or we have some explanation of why different moral codes can arise despite the existence of objective moral facts.
- R3. There is no explanation of why different moral codes can arise despite the existence of objective moral facts.
- RC. Thus, there must be no objective values.

But, Dworkin argues, we might find reasons to deny R3.

That is, we can explain how different moral codes arise.

Part of that explanation has to do with different external circumstances.

In harsh environments, we can understand how moral codes might be more severe.

In a land where food is scarce, a child who has no ability to help find or produce food might not be seen as fully human, for example.

Bambrough argues that the objectivity of morality is an a priori question, while the relativity/diversity of opinion is a sociological question.

Thus, the one is irrelevant to the other.

Bambrough's argument seems a bit too quick, but he supplements it with a denial that there is as much diversity as the relativist, or the skeptic, alleges.

This supplement is the claim that apparent moral differences are often just the result of empirical differences.

Bambrough provides four cases which look like diversity, but which can easily be explained by the objectivist: burial rituals, monogamy, stealing, and leaving the infirm to die.

In each of these cases, a dogmatist might claim that the differences in codes of behavior are incompatible.

But, we can, in each of these cases, find common universal moral principles underlying all behaviors.

#### IV. Mackie's argument from queerness

Mackie's calls his second argument the argument from queerness.

The argument from queerness has a metaphysical part and an epistemological part.

The metaphysical part of the argument concerns the apparent inaccessibility of the good to our sense organs.

We do not see objective values in the same way that we see other objects.

Furthermore, values seem to have a motivating aspect to them.

Moral claims would have to have their motivations built in to them.

If we like something, we are disposed to act positively toward it.

If we think an act is good, we are motivated to do it; if we think it is bad, we are motivated to avoid it.

The problem, according to Mackie, is that we do not know how the natural properties of an act could possibly cause their evaluative properties.

Mackie argues that the objectivist has is committed to having our motivations built into the nature of evaluative claims, but that there is no way of making sense of the connection.

Dworkin wants to show that the objectivist need not think of motivation as built-in.

He expresses concern about the metaphor of motivation being built-in to evaluative claims.

He provides three interpretations.

First, if we take the claim as entailing that any one who contemplated a moral claim would feel an emotional tug, the claim would have to be false.

But it seems unlikely that the moral objectivist would have to be committed to the magnetic attraction or repulsion of moral claims.

Second, a more plausible way to understand the metaphor is meaning that the belief that something is good entails the belief that we should act in positive ways toward it.

That is, we can understand the metaphor as establishing a conceptual connection among moral qualities and beliefs about how we should act.

Dworkin worries that we seem free to pursue objectively good ends or not.

Though, to not avoid an objectively bad end would be puzzling.

Last, we might think that any one who purports to accept a moral claim without feeling motivated by it would not really be accepting the moral claim.

Dworkin argues that we might criticize some one like this for lacking moral character.

But, that person might still accept the moral claim.

Consider some one who believes that the war in Iraq is abhorrent, and must be stopped.

Now, imagine that the person does nothing to help end the war: no protests, no letters to representatives, no bumper stickers.

Must we really deny that such a person opposes the war in Iraq?

Dworkin's point in assailing Mackie's metaphor is that the objectivist is not in fact committed to the link between motivation and objective value.

We can have objective value in the absence of motivation.

So, we need not ascribe some non-natural property to actions or ends, one whose access to which we seem to lack.

Mackie's problem is that if we think that there are objective values, we seem forced to claim that we have some special ability to see these values.

The need for a special ability is the epistemological part of the argument.

The intuitionists call this special ability ethical intuition.

Mackie calls the posit of ethical intuition lame, but he also notes that it is essential to a moral objectivist position.

If we had other reasons to reject strict empiricism, then maybe we could justify intuitionism.

That is, we might be forced to think that there are other ways to gain knowledge, besides using our senses.

Mackie thinks that empiricism is fine, though, so the extra faculty of intuition, or of reason, is specious.

#### V. How much of morality can Mackie save?

Mackie claims that there are no objective values.

Still, there are differences between good and bad actions.

Such differences are completely explicable in terms of their natural properties.

The natural properties of actions can provide objective, non-evaluative, distinctions.

There are objective facts about the natures of cruel acts, say that they tend to lead to suffering, and kind acts, say that they lead to increased happiness.

Punishing an innocent person is unjust, as is rewarding the undeserving.

Put another way, Mackie denies that there are any categorical imperatives, any objectively valid moral commands.

But, he accepts the objective validity of hypothetical imperatives.

If we want to be kind to others, then there are clear ways to do so, even if there is no fact about whether it is good to be kind, or to want to be kind.

Still, it is an open question whether we should behave in just ways.

The objectivity of some standards leave open the question whether the standards themselves are good or bad.

Mackie's claim is that the standards themselves lack objectivity.

So, some evaluative standards are compatible with moral skepticism.

They are not to be explained, according to Mackie, in terms of their moral differences.

#### VI. Bambrough's argument for objectivism

Bambrough's argument for objectivism is simple, patterned on Moore's argument for the existence of the external world.

He provides one simple moral truth.

Just as Moore believed that all reasoning had to start somewhere, Bambrough argues that moral reasoning has to start somewhere.

But, the fact that reasoning has to start somewhere is no reason to think that moral reasoning is any different from other, objective pursuits.

Foundations are a problem for objective, scientific knowledge just as they are a problem for moral knowledge.

We have seen Bambrough's response to the relativity/diversity argument, above.

He argues that the examples which may be taken as supporting the anti-objectivist need not be taken as

such.

A diversity of opinion about the morality of monogamy can be explained by the diversity of social circumstances.

Would we be monogamous if there were, say, ten times as many women as men, or men as women?

In societies in which goods are scarce, we might either allow stealing of food, or give up on the notion of private property altogether.

Bambrough also argues that the parallels between morality and science, which is paradigmatically objective, are as compelling as the disanalogies.

One similarity between science and morality is that approval of the good is much like belief in the true.

To explicate the notion of belief, we need to appeal to truth.

To explicate the notion of approval, we need to appeal to goodness.

In both cases, we can be right or wrong, and we can contradict ourselves.

There is a logical character to moral speech, just as there is a logical character to scientific speech.

Another similarity between science and morality is that there are dissenting voices, despite widespread agreement on basic facts.

Most people agree on most moral issues.

But, there are people who dissent.

Similarly, there are people who believe that mainstream science is false.

Moral disputes are difficult to resolve, but so are scientific disputes.

Consider the resistance some hold to evolution, and compare this to disputes about abortion, or the war in Iraq.

The line between the factual and the moral does not seem distinct, as the anti-objectivist makes it.

The end.