Do Objective Moral Values Exist?

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Introduction

• What is the difference between metaethics and ethics?
• Key Terms
• What is Moral Value?
• J. L. Mackie’s Error Theory: An Overview
• Some food for thought…
Ethics vs Metaethics: what’s the difference?

- The difference between ethics and metaethics is their **function**.
- Ethics or ethical theory tells us what we ought or should do.
- It tells us what we ought to do according to a particular theory (like Utilitarianism, Consequentialism, Kantian Ethics, or Virtue Theory).
Ethics vs Metaethics: what’s the difference?

- Metaethics focuses on the meaning of ethical judgements like “murder is morally wrong”.
- Metaethical theories seek to explain what concepts like “morally good” or “morally objective” mean.
Key Terms: Objective

• When we say something is objective we mean that it is independent of our own judgement, belief, or feelings.
• An objective rule is a rule which is in place regardless of what people think of it.
• They may hate the rule, but that doesn’t matter.
• Their view, in other words, has no impact on the rule itself.
Key Terms: Subjective

- Subjective: if a rule is subjective, it’s dependent on our views, beliefs, or feelings.
- If you hate the rule, this matters.
- You might even be able to ignore the rule.
Moral Value

• We’ll be looking at a theory called error theory today.
• Argued for by J. L. Mackie.
• He argues against a particular way of understanding the concept of objective moral value.
Moral Value

• He argues that there are no objective moral values.
• What does this mean?
Mackie’s Error Theory: Aims

- Objective = mind-independent, action guiding, not dependent on human beings.
- This is a very strong understanding of objectivity!
Mackie’s Error Theory: Aims

Values = moral goodness, duties, obligations, beauty, artistic merit and so on.
Is Mackie a moral skeptic?

Yes and no.

- **Yes: he doubts objective values exist.**
- **No: he does not intend to target first order ethics/ethical theory.**
- **So he thinks even if there are no objective moral values, that this has no impact on ethics and what we ought to do.**
Mackie’s Error Theory: Aims

• His point is that the metaethical theory one subscribes to doesn’t necessarily also subscribe you to a particular first order ethical view.
Mackie’s Error Theory: Subjectivism

- Mackie is keen to stress that his view is not Subjectivist.
- His view is a form of ontological skepticism.
- Ontology is the philosophy of what exists.
- It is a branch of philosophy which asks whether numbers, values, music, stories and so on, exist.
Key Term: Ontology

• Ontology explores what exists and the arguments for the existence of various objects like numbers or values.

• Ontological questions are asked in many branches of philosophy including metaethics.
Mackie’s Error Theory: Subjectivism

• But what are the differences between subjectivism and skepticism?
Mackie’s Error Theory: Subjectivism

• Mackie makes a distinction between subjectivism as just another name for skepticism, subjectivism as a first order doctrine, and subjectivism as a metaethical view.
Mackie’s Error Theory: Subjectivism

• He denies that his view is a first order (ethical) subjective view. Where everyone ought to do whatever one wants to do.
Mackie’s Error Theory: Subjectivism

- Mackie characterises metaethical subjectivism as the report of approval toward x.
Mackie’s Error Theory: Subjectivism

- Subjectivism is not to be confused with Emotivism.
- According to the emotivist we express approval (but we do not report our approval).
- Emotivism is non-cognitivist.
- Subjectivism is cognitivist.
Mackie’s Error Theory: Subjectivism

- Mackie makes a further distinction.
- His thesis is ontological, he argues that objective facts don’t exist.
- Whereas subjectivism is metaethical, it is about the meaning of moral judgements.
Mackie’s ontological concerns are, now, part and parcel of metaethics.  
Although this wasn’t always the emphasis of metaethics.
Mackie’s primary target is the concept of moral objectivity.
What is objectivity?

• Standards?
• Independent facts?
• Non-natural?
• Natural?
• No such thing as objectivity?
Mackie’s Error Theory: Objectivity

- Mackie argues against a very strong sense of moral objectivity.
- Whereby objectivity means non-natural, mind-independent, and intrinsically action guiding.
Key Terms

• **Non-Natural**: not in this material world, cannot be observed by science.

• **Mind-independent**: not dependent on our thoughts, desires or beliefs for existence.

• **Intrinsically action guiding**: once you know what is morally valuable, you can’t help but be moved to act in accordance with it.
Mackie’s Error Theory

- He claims that ordinary people assume that moral values are prescriptive and objective.
- But, objective moral values don’t exist (more on how he argues for this later!)
- If objective moral values are presupposed to exist when people utter moral judgements, but they don’t actually exist.
- Then people are talking erroneously.
Mackie’s Error Theory

• Now, clearly Mackie needs to give us an argument here.
• He needs to argue for the claim that objective values don’t exist.
• Next we will look at the two arguments he provides.
• The argument from relativity.
• And the argument from strangeness.
Mackie’s Error Theory: The Argument from Relativity

- The argument from relativity starts with the claim that most cultures have different moral codes.
Mackie’s Error Theory: The Argument from Relativity

• If moral value is objective, then why do sometimes wildly different – sometimes opposing – first order (ethical) claims arise?

• In other words, why do people have different moral beliefs if there are objective moral values.
Mackie’s Error Theory: The Argument from Relativity

• You might think this shows nothing.
• Just because people disagree about morality, doesn’t mean there are no objective values.
• As Mackie points out, disagreement in other fields doesn’t mean that there isn’t objective truth (science).
• BUT!
Mackie’s Error Theory: The Argument from Relativity

• Morality is not much like science, we can’t experiment to find the truth.

• Reply 1: might we just say that people’s views may differ, but only one is right?

• Reply 2: Or might we say that perhaps cultures share norms (anti-incest norm) but not specific moral judgements.
Mackie’s Error Theory: The Argument from Relativity

- Mackie notes the differences in moral values across cultures.
- He suggests that the simplest explanation is that different moral codes “reflect different ways of life” (p. 37).
- Rather than thinking moral codes are a response to perceiving objective value.
Mackie’s Error Theory: The Argument from Relativity

Reply:

Objective value shaped norms for behaviour and those norms shaped our moral codes.
Mackie’s Error Theory: The Argument from Relativity

- Claiming that norms were shaped by objective moral values still requires an argument.
- It also seems like other explanations of prevalent norms like evolutionary influence on norms can explain widespread moral norms.
Mackie’s Error Theory: The Argument from Relativity

• So it doesn’t seem like prevalent cross-cultural norms help us to argue that objective moral values exist.

• If we can explain moral norms via other theories (evolution) or other metaethical understandings of objectivity, then it seems clear that we can’t assume that prevalent norms are evidence for objective moral values.
Mackie’s Error Theory: The Argument from Strangeness

- Two-part argument: metaphysical and epistemological.
- Metaphysics – what there is, investigation into concepts and how we use them.
- Epistemology – what we can know.
The Argument from Strangeness

- On the metaphysical argument an objective moral value which is independent of us and non-natural seems like a very odd object indeed.
The Argument from Strangeness

• On the epistemological argument, it is puzzling how we could perceive a non-natural mind-independent object at all.
The Argument from Strangeness

• How can we perceive something non-natural and mind-independent?
• Further, how are we aware of “authoritative prescriptivity”?
• We can’t use our senses for such a thing, it has no taste, or smell.
• We can’t touch it or hear it, nor can we see it.
The Argument from Strangeness

• Our usual explanations and typical types of evidence are not available for this type of object.

• Perhaps we could suggest that we have a moral sense, or a moral faculty?

• In other words, should we claim that we have a special faculty in the brain which can perceive moral values?
Mackie writes:

“The assertion that there are objective values or intrinsically prescriptive entities or features of some kind, which ordinary moral judgements presuppose, is, I hold, not meaningless but false” (p. 40)
The Argument from Strangeness

- Mackie asks whether it make sense to say that deliberate cruelty is morally wrong because of a moral fact?
- Would we want to say that deliberate cruelty wrong because it’s cruel?
- But if we do, we don’t seem to need an objective moral value to explain this.
Some food for thought...

1. Do you think objective moral values exist?
2. Does it make sense to say moral values exist independently of the material physical world?
3. If there are no objective moral values, then does this undermine ethical theory?
4. Do you think the difference in morals between cultures means there are no objective moral values?
5. Do you think the argument from relativity succeeds?
6. Do you think the argument from queerness succeeds?