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### A Summary of Mackie's "The Subjectivity of Values"

In his essay "The Subjectivity of Values", J.L. Mackie aims to show that values are not built into the structure of the universe. He begins by clarifying his position, addressing possible reactions and trying to prevent misunderstandings. Some would reject Mackie's thesis as being morally subversive, others would accept it as a platitude, and still others would say that the question of whether there are objective values is itself illegitimate. Mackie's thesis applies to all purportedly objective values, not just moral ones. Also, his thesis is a second-order rather than a first-order claim: It states that our values have nothing objective corresponding to them, but one who accepts this claim is not thereby committed to adopt any particular attitude towards private conduct or public policy. One can think that values are ultimately subjective while still valuing things, practices, or states of affairs—or perhaps not valuing much of anything at all—because valuing something does not presuppose that valuing it has an ontological ground.

Mackie's thesis should not be misunderstood as obliterating distinctions between different types of behavior. For example, he can acknowledge that some people are altruistic and others are selfish, that some people try to cheer others up while others try to make them feel bad about themselves; he just thinks that the distinctions between these types of behavior don't reflect an ontological difference that could *justify* our different moral evaluations of them.

Next, Mackie tries to distance his position from others that are also characterized as subjectivist. His position does not entail that everyone should do what they think is right, nor does it entail that moral judgments merely express approval or disapproval, because it says nothing about the *meaning* of ethical judgments or terms at all.

Mackie tries to clarify his view by comparing it to Immanuel Kant's claim that some imperatives are *hypothetical* and others are *categorical*. Roughly, a hypothetical imperative directs one to do something *given* that doing so is a means to obtaining something else that one desires, whereas a categorical imperative directs one to do something regardless of one's desires. Mackie denies that categorical imperatives have any force.

Many would be inclined to agree with Mackie that values are merely subjective. However, he doesn't think his position should be accepted uncritically. Throughout history many European philosophers have held values to be objective. Moreover, it seems that common sense agrees with them, because belief in objective values is tied to the ways in which we commonly think and talk about moral matters. This is shown by the difficulties facing both non-cognitivist and naturalist theories of ethical language. According to non-cognitivist theories, a moral judgment expresses the emotions, attitudes or recommendations of the person making it rather than describing a moral fact about the world. On naturalist theories moral judgments do describe the world, but they don't describe it as having any *irreducibly* moral characteristics, i.e., characteristics which couldn't be described equally well in non-moral terms in such sciences as physics, chemistry or biology. For these reasons both kinds of theory fail to account for the felt *authority* of ethical norms. If these theories were true, the fact that our moral beliefs hold so much sway over our behavior would be mysterious. Mackie considers an example of someone who faces a moral dilemma as to whether they should take a job that involves making biological weapons. Surely their primary concern is whether their choice is really right or really wrong, not whether, e.g., either they or others would *approve of* or *recommend* their choice, nor whether it possesses a natural characteristic which is intrinsically no more moral than mass or electric charge.

Because of this tendency to objectify values, some feel that life would have no meaning if values were not objective. Although this isn't true on Mackie's view—the second-order view that values are not built into structure of the universe has no implications for our first-order valuing—it shows how much some people have been influenced by the presupposition of objectivity.

Mackie concludes that common sense is committed to the claim that moral values are objective. This commitment is so pervasive that it is embedded in our moral concepts and in the meanings of our moral vocabulary. If the analysis of common sense thought and language were all philosophers had to go on, they should conclude that objectivism is true. But objectivism requires independent justification, and so it needs to be questioned, along with the moral concepts and vocabulary that are bound up with it.

Mackie next goes over an argument that calls objectivism into question, namely the argument from the relativity of moral codes. Moral norms regarding conduct have differed from

time to time and from place to place, both within and between different societies. Some argue that this shows that moral codes do not reflect objective values. Mackie agrees that it shows this, but he thinks it shows it indirectly. It is not just the fact that different societies disagree about moral norms that casts suspicion on objective moral values, but that people seem to approve of the moral norms they do because they practice them rather than practice them because they approve of them.

One objection to this argument is that, while there are differences in moral codes, there is still an underlying agreement on the fundamental moral norms which give rise to them. The idea is that there are certain universal moral principles which, due to the differences between the cultural contexts to which they apply, call for different types of behavior in different cultural contexts. I think the following consideration illustrates this idea because it has a similar structure, even though it doesn't involve cultural contexts. There is one version of the Golden Rule which says, "Do unto others as they would have you do unto them". This rule may be universal—barring a few exceptions, one should treat others as they wish to be treated—but different people have different wants and needs, so the actions that this version of the golden rule calls for can vary from person to person.

In reply to this objection, Mackie says that people often judge things to be right or wrong because of their automatic reactions to them, not because they are a particular manifestation of a general moral principle. In such cases people's differing judgments cannot be accounted for as being consequences of general moral principles as applied to particular circumstances, because those rules would then have no influence on people's judgments.

Mackie also gives a second reason to doubt the existence of objective moral values, which is the argument from queerness. As conceived of by objectivists, moral values would be a unique sort of thing, and because we could not become aware of them through empirical means we would need a unique source of knowledge in order to know them.

Richard Price has raised the following objection to this argument. There are many kinds of thing that we could not know about if certain forms of empiricism were true, including necessary truths, inertia, identity, as well as anything else that cannot be observed. That being so, it seems that for such empiricists necessary truths, inertia, identity and objective moral values are all in the same (sinking) boat.

Mackie agrees that if empiricism rules out knowledge of such things we should not believe in them. In spite of that, he thinks that empiricism can account for our knowledge of them, though apparently it could not account for our knowledge of objective moral values.

Mackie does not reject the existence of objective moral values merely because we could not verify that they exist. Moreover, he thinks that the question of whether they exist is meaningful even though it must be answered in the negative. He gives three main reasons to doubt their existence.

First, such values would be intrinsically motivating, irrespective of one's desires. Anyone who knew about such values would pursue them. Second, it is unclear how the moral value of a thing would be related to its non-moral properties. He thinks it cannot be a logical or semantical consequence. Suppose Chris has donated \$2,000 to charity. If the statement "Chris did something good" truly ascribes an objective moral value to Chris's action, there should be *some* kind of connection between Chris' donating the money and the fact that doing so was good. But this connection cannot be shown to hold via logical or semantic considerations, and because moral goodness is supposed to be non-natural the connection couldn't be established empirically. It seems more reasonable to suspend one's belief in this connection hold that our moral evaluation of Chris's and similar actions is based on a reaction to one's perception of some of its natural properties.

Mackie brings his article to a close with a sections where he speculates about possible sources of our belief in objective moral values, in an attempt to account for how so many have come to accept what he thinks is a false theory. One source might be the human tendency to assume that some properties of external objects must correspond to our emotional reactions to them. I think the basic idea is that the sight of something like a dead animal is bound to produce feelings of revulsion in many people, causing them to attribute an "intrinsic ikiness" to it. Similarly, it may happen that if someone finds out that Chris donated \$2,000 to charity it would cause them to feel admiration for his action and attribute "intrinsic goodness" to it. We may also project our wants onto external objects, thinking that they must be inherently desirable because we desire them.

Another possible source is the fact that we use moral evaluations to control each other's behavior in society. We can reward someone for doing what right and punish them for doing what is wrong, and this partly consists in the way we morally praise or condemn such actions.

Finally, our tendency towards objectification may stem from the history of European philosophy and theology. The Christian tradition regards God as an author of divine laws, and some of the moral notions that modern secular philosophers use derive from a system of divine law, though they think there is no God to act as a divine lawgiver. However, Mackie acknowledges that this couldn't be the whole story because quite a few would say that God commands us to do certain things because they are right, not conversely. Mackie concludes with the thought that there are many reasons why people objectify values, and that they have all had an effect on way we think and talk about morality.

## Bibliography

Mackie, J.L. "The Subjectivity of Values," *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*. Edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, Blackwell Publishing, 2007.