

The Origin of Queerness of Moral Value

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Take the following statements:

- “Murder is wrong.”
- “Telling the truth is right.”
- “Stealing is bad.”
- “Helping others is good.”

We make these kinds of statements constantly, without stopping to think about the nature of the claims we are making, or the nature of the words “good,” “bad,” “right,” and “wrong”. Moral judgments such as “murder is wrong” are made with the intention of influencing the actions and attitudes of others. We expect other members of society to accept such statements without question, but what is it about them that inclines us to take moral judgments as axioms for our code of conduct? Why is it we recognize these statements as moral facts containing certain prescriptions for our behavior? John Mackie, David Brink, and Richard Garner are three philosophers who have grappled with these questions, and each presents a different view as to the nature of moral facts. It is my aim to show that if we desire our society have standards we are able hold others accountable under, none of these conclusions about moral values are desirable conclusions to accept.

To show this, I will start by explaining Mackie’s argument for the subjectivity of value. Mackie contends there exist no objective moral facts. I will explain his two arguments supporting this assumption, the Argument from Relativity and the Argument from Queerness. Mackie claims moral facts are mistakenly seen as objective so they can function to effectively counter our human impulses. In response to Mackie, I will first present an objection to the Argument from Relativity and then present David Brink’s opposition to the Argument from Queerness, where Brink refutes Mackie’s depiction of the perplexing nature of moral

value. Without the Arguments from Relativity and Queerness, Brink concludes Mackie's claim that moral values are subjective cannot stand. Lastly, I will present Garner's defense of the queerness of moral value, in which Garner argues values are indeed queer in that they are objective as well as prescriptive of our behavior. In conclusion, I will explain why it is that we should not desire that any of these conclusions are the truth about moral value.

Mackie

In his essay "The Subjectivity of Value," Mackie presents his Error Theory, a negative account of the objectivity of value. Before presenting the theory, Mackie's distinction must first be made between moral facts and moral judgments. Moral judgments are claims made about morality, such as "murder is wrong." Moral judgments have a clear truth value. False moral judgments cannot be moral facts. Moral facts are always true moral statements, and they are always objective. Mackie contends moral facts do not exist, because all moral judgments are false because their content is subjective.

According to Mackie's Error Theory, we claim when we are talking about moral values we are referring to objective moral facts that have some type of authority over our actions. In actuality, according to the theory, we make an error in assuming that because we *use* moral judgments as though they identify objective moral values they must be moral facts. Mackie's theory claims moral judgments are actually subjective claims presented in the form of an objective standard. Mackie uses two different arguments to support the Error Theory.

The first argument is what Mackie calls the Argument from Relativity. This argument states that even after we have come to an agreement on what different terms mean, there are still significant discrepancies between moral codes. Mackie believes it is evident that there is no universal moral code to which different societies all adhere. He contends we participate in the actions sanctioned by the moral code of the society that we live in. By participating in actions endorsed by particular moral values of our society, we learn to approve of those values. Thus, values appear culturally

dependent. Culturally dependent values cannot be universally objective.

The second argument Mackie uses to support his Error Theory is the Argument from Queerness. This argument has two parts, which Mackie calls the metaphysical and the epistemological. The metaphysical part of the argument claims if objective values did exist, they would be things of a very odd nature. Somehow, they would be able to motivate us to perform moral actions. The queerness argument's epistemological part states that since we are obviously aware of these dictums on morality, we must have some way that we become aware of them. Mackie claims it would have to be by some faculty we have no knowledge of that we would come to know moral values. He likens this moral perception to intuition, which he says has "long been out of favor" (Mackie 1997, p. 452) among epistemologists because we have no idea of where "knowledge" given by intuition comes from.

Mackie compares objective values to Plato's Forms, saying that the Forms are the closest approximation of what objective values would have to be. What he calls "The Form of the Good" would have to provide "the knower with both a direction and an overwhelming motive" for moral behavior (Mackie 1997, p. 453). In this way, a moral fact would have to be both objective and inspirational, as it would have to provide not only the guidelines for moral behavior, but also an internal motivation for acting in accordance with those guidelines. Mackie concludes objective moral values do not exist, because if they did, they would be strange forms we have access to through a faculty we know nothing about. The principle of parsimony allows us to assume things do not have to be complicated beyond necessity. Instead of holding onto such a complicated idea of objective values, Mackie contends that the most parsimonious, rational view is that moral facts do not exist as objective claims.

Refuting the Argument from Relativity

Mackie's two arguments in his Error Theory are not without opposition. The Argument from Relativity faces a very simple objection. It states that the objectivity of value lies in

general concepts of morality, not in specific moral duties having specific actions sanctioned by them. There exist broad moral values that all the different moral codes of societies fall into. These general principles, when coupled with the circumstances and social patterns of different cultures, create the variations in moral codes we see in society. They are united, however, under broad principles of moral conduct. These principles are objective, though the specific moral duties different societies draw from them may be subjective. Mackie acquiesces the point that objectivity does exist in these broad moral values and gives no reason why the objectivity of the broader principle cannot be the origin of the imperativeness of the more specific moral duty. He is unable to effectively counter this objection, which discredits the Argument from Relativity.

Brink

David Brink, in response to the Error Theory, attempts to discredit the Argument from Queerness in his essay "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness." He claims moral facts do exist because moral judgments can be objective. Brink first makes a distinction between externalist and internalist moral realism. He accuses Mackie of being an internalist, saying

"[I]n claiming that moral facts would have to be objectively prescriptive, Mackie is claiming that moral realism requires the truth of internalism...the *a priori* thesis that 'the recognition of moral facts itself either necessarily motivates or necessarily provides reason for action'." (Garner 1990, p. 142)

According to Brink, the Argument from Queerness contends that objective moral values would be queer in nature because they would have to carry an internal motivation, a prescription, for acting in a moral manner. Brink believes if he is able to show moral facts are not internally motivating, he will show there is no queerness about moral facts. If he removes the queerness, the Argument from Queerness no longer stands as a reason why moral values cannot be objective.

Brink argues that a person can understand they have a moral obligation and yet feel uncompelled to fulfill that

obligation. Brink claims motivation must lie in something external to the moral fact. The fact itself does not oblige us engage in behavior sanctioned by the moral fact. In particular, the motivation to be moral comes from our moral education and the sanctions imposed for not acting as this education would prescribe. Brink claims these lessons and sanctions, which are external to the moral facts themselves, are the motivation to fulfill moral obligation. In making motivation external to moral facts, Brink believes he has successfully removed the queerness from moral value, which would in turn relieve the sanction against moral values being objective.

Garner

In "On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts," Richard Garner makes an attempt to defend and clarify Mackie's skeptical position from the attack by Brink. Garner endorses the queerness of moral values, saying the queerness lies not in an objective value's power to motivate, as Brink interpreted it, but in its internal imperativeness (Garner 1990, p. 137). He contends that Brink's externalist argument does not discredit the argument from queerness because the internal motivating factor Brink refuted is not the only queer property of moral values. Moral facts exhibit another, more intriguing queerness that Brink overlooked. This queerness lies in the fact that moral facts are both objective and prescriptive. Garner claims moral realists like Brink do not deny the objectivity nor the prescriptivity of moral facts. Brink's disagreement with Mackie was over the origin of the prescriptivity of objective values. If moral realists are not going to deny moral values are both objective and prescriptive, they cannot refute the Argument from Queerness as presented by Garner.

Garner supports his defense of the queerness of moral value saying, "Moral facts are not just unusual in the way that facts about quarks and black holes are unusual, they are unusual in an unusual way—they demand...a legitimate and justifiable directive that *applies* to us" (Garner 1990, p. 143). Garner claims antirealists interpret this demand as a reflection of the demands people place on each other. "It is hard," he says, "to make sense of a demand without a

demanders" (Garner 1990, p. 143). Garner contends that the only way we can make sense of morality's prescriptivism is to view its demands as demands we make. That is, the only way to understand an objective value's prescriptivism is to also assign to value a sense of subjectivism. Garner determines that this is where the confusion about the queerness of moral value lies.

Garner faults Mackie for focusing on morality's power to motivate action rather than its authority over our actions. This mistake, Garner claims, led Mackie to see objective moral values as queer in nature to the point of being implausible. "The question," Garner says, "is not whether there are *intrinsically motivating* moral facts, but whether there are *objectively obligating* ones" (Garner 1990, p. 146). In focusing on the second question, rather than the first, Garner determines the true queerness about moral values. The fact they are both objective and prescriptive is brought to light. This queer property, Garner claims, is not refuted by Brink's version of external moral realism. Mackie, in his assumption that moral values must be subjective, missed the fact values are not queer only because of their objectivity, but also because of their prescriptivity.

Drawing Further Conclusions

In his clarification of Mackie, in which he actually reverses Mackie's original pretenses, Garner thinks he has successfully determined the nature of moral value, but in making a decision about the actual character of moral value, one has to look at the ramifications of accepting each different position. I started out by saying moral judgments, like "murder is wrong," are made with the intention that others will accept such statements without examining whether they are matters of moral fact. Our society endorses the enforcement of laws prohibiting crimes that go against society's moral code. We codify moral values into our legal system. We accept such restrictions on our own behavior because we see those restrictions as being objective—they apply to everyone else's behavior as well as our own, and while prohibiting us from being immoral in the way the law condemns, they protect us from other people's immoral behavior as well. If the restrictions were subjective, they

would not apply to everyone in the same way, and thus they would lose their enforceability.

Mackie proposes moral judgments are subjective and we only pretend they are objective. The consequence of this is that the laws of our society are not enforceable, we only pretend they are. There is no stability and no real authority in a legal system we trick ourselves into believing is objective. It is safe to say we desire a legal system that has both stability and authority, not one we only pretend is stable and enforceable.

Brink proposes moral judgments are objective, which effectively resolves Mackie's problem. However, Brink claims we are motivated to moral conduct through external factors, which he names as education and environment. The conclusion drawn here is that each different society will have different external factors that motivate a member of society to moral conduct. This inevitably leads to differences in moral codes, which undermines the idea that they are objective in the first place. If one society teaches lying is wrong because it is bad for your soul, while another society teaches lying is bad because it hurts other people, and yet another society teaches lying is wrong because you may be punished for it, the societies do not actually share the same objective moral codes. The only way this is possible is if the moral fact itself motivates moral behavior.

Lastly, Garner argues moral judgments are queerly objective and prescriptive. They have the objectivity to be enforceable and unlike Brink's external motivating factors, they have an internal obligatory factor. Yet Garner claims we assign morality a sense of subjectivism so we can make sense of this demand for moral action that seems to come from nowhere. My question is simple: Why is a value we pretend is subjective any less dangerous than a value that actually is subjective? The simplest answer is, it's not. A value we incorrectly interpret as being subjective is no less dangerous to its own authority than a value that actually is subjective. Without a sense of authority, we have no reason to require punishment for those engaging in actions not sanctioned by a particular moral. This deduction is detrimental to the enforceability of our penal system.

In conclusion, the arguments put forth by Mackie, Brink, and Garner do not present a satisfactory depiction of the

nature of moral statements. We desire certain moral facts to have the authority necessary to compel members of our society to abide by their axioms about the rightness and wrongness of actions. We also desire justification for punishing those who do not abide by these axioms. After Mackie, Brink, and Garner, there remain few options as to the nature of moral facts. It is possible they are, and we view them as being, completely objective and internally motivating. It is also possible moral facts are not objective, and we lack the authority necessary to require punishment be given for actions we, as a society, find morally reprehensible.

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