

Chapter 1: Mackie's Error Theory

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1 Introduction

Are there objective moral values? This is a bald statement of a main question of this work. J.L. Mackie champions a negative answer to the question. In this chapter, I will explicate Mackie's "error theory" about morality. The goals of the chapter are threefold.

This work is a thesis in meta-ethics, about the nature of moral reality, language, and thought. The first goal of the chapter is to situate Mackie's views, and views like Mackie's, in the broader meta-ethical terrain. A rough divide in meta-ethical topics is one between metaphysical questions – whether there is a moral reality, and what is its nature – and linguistic questions – whether moral discourse is descriptive and cognitive, and what are the crucial relations between moral discourse and reality. I'll distinguish various general ways to answer these questions.

There is a need to clarify some of the subject matter of meta-ethics. The second goal of the chapter is to stipulate some technical terminology, which will help to clarify my topic, and which will be useful throughout this work. On the metaphysical side, the main goal will be to clarify, to a certain extent, the meaning of 'objective value'. On the linguistic side, the main goal will be to clarify the meaning of 'moral discourse' and related terms, importantly, 'moral judgment'.

Mackie is the arch-error theorist about morality. The third goal of this chapter is to explicate his views in meta-ethics. I take a historical approach in my exposition of Mackie. One part of the approach will be to say in what respects we can come to determinate conclusions about what his views are. The upshot of this will be that, to a large extent, his positions in meta-ethics are under-specified. The second part of the approach will be to say, with regard to the under-specified parts of his views, what are the admissible specifications. The upshot of this will be that his views should be taken as roughly compatible with a wider range of meta-ethical views than is commonly supposed.

2 The Uncontroversial Elements of Mackie's Position

In this section, I'll lay out what I take to be relatively uncontroversial elements of Mackie's position – not uncontroversial in the sense that almost anyone will readily agree that they are *true*, but in the sense that almost anyone will readily agree that they are *his views*. Before I do that, though, I'll roughly explicate two main questions in meta-ethics.

2.1 The Questions of Realism and Cognitivism

A quick look at the literature in meta-ethics will confirm that meta-ethicists hold views on what are the elements of the world, and what are their natures. Included in these broad metaphysical views are claims about the putative moral elements of the world, and their natures. According to some, there is no place in reality for anything moral, because the moral is in some way defective. Perhaps morality isn't properly "natural" or "scientific"; perhaps it is in some way metaphysically "queer". These philosophers are anti-realists about morality; for short, 'anti-realists'.¹

According to others, there is a place in reality for the putative moral elements, because the moral is not in the suggested way defective. Perhaps morality has some of these allegedly defective feature – being unnatural, unscientific, or queer – but this is no defect; perhaps it doesn't have these features at all. These philosophers are realists about morality; for short, 'realists'.²

Thus, anti-realism is the view that moral reality is in some way defective. Realism is the view that moral reality is not in this way defective. There are two important things to note about the way I am using '(anti-)realism'. First, the anti-realist's crucial claim need not be one about the non-existence of elements of moral ontology. She may claim that some elements of moral ontology – moral facts, properties, standards, propositions, etc. – don't exist. Perhaps this is, in her view, the defect of moral reality. Alternatively, she may claim that, although there is a moral reality – there are moral propositions and properties, say – it bears some crippling defect.³

This way of putting it suggests that realism/anti-realism should be relativized to a certain defect. I do not mention this in the main text.

Second, the realist need not claim that the moral part of reality is "sui generis" or "free-standing". She may claim that there is no overlap between moral reality and the rest of the world; that moral facts do not reduce to some more fundamental part of reality. But she may, alternatively, claim that moral reality overlaps with, say, naturalistic elements of the world. The former sort of view is, broadly speaking, a brand of 'anti-reductionism'; the latter is a brand of 'reductionism'.⁴

Another quick look at the literature in meta-ethics will confirm that meta-ethicists

¹See, e.g., Ayer, 1952; Mackie, 1977, Joyce, 2001; Dreier, 1990, 2005; Harman, 1996; Lewis, 1989; and Schiffer, 1990.

²See, e.g., Moore, 1903; Huemer, 2005; Shafer-Landau, 2003; Brink, 1989; and Boyd, 1989.

³This distinction in kinds of anti-realism is especially important in order for an understanding of Schiffer's (2003, 1990) position.

⁴Moore (1903) is standardly thought to be an anti-reductionist; see also Huemer, 2005; and Shafer Landau, 2003. The views of Brink (1989) and Boyd (1989) are, allegedly, paradigm examples of reductionist views.

hold views about the nature of thought and language. These views will help to fix their general standpoints about ordinary moral discourse – about the nature of moral language and thought. According to some, it is essential to a moral judgment that it involves the expression of a belief about moral reality. These philosophers are cognitivists about moral discourse; for short, ‘cognitivists’.⁵

According to other philosophers, moral judgments need not involve the expression of beliefs about moral reality. Perhaps this is because moral judgments are inherently “prescriptive”, and thus are never expressions of belief. Or perhaps this is because there is nothing – no moral reality – for moral judgments to be about. These philosophers I will call ‘non-cognitivists about moral discourse’; for short, ‘non-cognitivists’.⁶

There is one important thing to note about the way I am using ‘cognitivism’. It is that there are roughly two ways to be a cognitivist. First, one might claim that moral thoughts – the psychological attitudes that are expressed by people’s moral judgments – are naturally tied with certain beliefs, but are not even partially identical with those beliefs. Such a view might hold that moral thoughts are, as a matter of psychological law, tied to states of belief. Second, a philosopher might claim that the beliefs that are necessarily tied to moral thoughts are identical to (or partially identical with) those beliefs. This view may hold that part of the analysis of moral thought will involve reference to belief of a certain kind. Either way, in my terminology, the philosopher qualifies as a cognitivist.

It is worthwhile to consider an example. Suppose I hold a view according to which, associated with any imperative judgment, one must hold a particular belief and a particular desire. On this view, whenever someone issues a command, to, say, shut the door, that individual, as a matter of psychological law, believes that the door is not shut. The proponent of such a view might simply hold that this is a contingent matter of fact – falsified in worlds where the laws of psychology are different. If she holds this claim, she might go on to identify the thought expressed by a demand that the door be shut as the desire for the door to be shut. Even so, this theorist qualifies as a cognitivist about imperative judgments, in my terminology.

The proponent of this general view might instead hold that the existence of a belief is essential to the thoughts expressed by imperative judgments. On this alternative view, when we write out the correct analysis of an imperative thought, it must contain a belief of this type. As a matter of analysis, if someone commands that the door be shut, then she believes that the door is not shut. Someone simply

⁵See, e.g., Moore, 1903; Huemer, 2005; Shafer-Landau, 2003; Brink, 1989; and Boyd, 1989; and Schiffer, 1990.

⁶See, e.g., Ayer, 1952; Hare, 1999; Gibbard, 1990, 2003; and Kalderon, 2005.

doesn't count, in any possible world, as commanding that the door be shut, unless she also believes that it is not shut.

So we have a pair of questions, and a pair of roughly contradictory sorts of positions about each question: realist cognitivism, anti-realist cognitivism, realist non-cognitivism, and anti-realist non-cognitivism. In the following sections, I will put these distinctions to work in explicating Mackie's views in meta-ethics.

I do not claim that either development of this view is, in the end, plausible. I merely mention this sort of view in order to explicate my distinction between kinds of cognitivism.

2.2 Mackie's Major Theses

I distinguish between Mackie's major theses and his minor theses. Here I begin to explain his major theses: the parts of his position that, as I see it, play the biggest role in shaping his position. In the next subsection, I present some of his minor theses, claims that play less of a role, but an important role nonetheless.

I can discern three major theses in Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (hereafter: *EIRW*), which he summarizes, somewhat sporadically, in various places.^{7,8} He writes,

There are no objective values. (15)

...although most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false. (35)

The first part of this citation involves an ontological claim, and so I take it to be partially determinative of Mackie's views on the debate between realism and anti-realism. The second part is a thesis about moral discourse, about what happens when someone makes a moral judgment. So it helps to determine his position on the debate over cognitivism. The final phrase in the passage indicates, roughly, Mackie's position about the relation between moral discourse and moral reality.

2.2.1 The Metaphysical Thesis

Consider, first, the ontological claim. It is this claim that fixes Mackie as an anti-realist:

Thesis 1: The Metaphysical Thesis. There is something seriously defective with moral reality, viz., it is supposed to be objective.

⁷See also pp. 48-9.

⁸Unless otherwise noted, citations in this chapter are to *EIRW*.

My statement of this thesis may seem odd to the reader. Doesn't Mackie clearly commit himself to the denial of an existence claim? Doesn't he explicitly say that objective values do not exist? I do not present Mackie's metaphysical thesis simply as the denial of the existence of objective values, because it is controversial whether this statement should be read in this way.⁹ Insofar as I wish to present Mackie in as uncontroversial a manner as possible, I avoid this natural interpretation.

There are two important parts of Thesis 1 that require clarification. First, it is unclear what is supposed to be the constitution of moral reality, on Mackie's view. What are the ontological categories of the elements into which moral reality decomposes? Is it comprised fundamentally of moral objects and properties; moral states-of-affairs; moral propositions; moral standards? It is my opinion that there is no clear, determinate answer to this question. However, Mackie suggests that objective values would have to be properties, and in this chapter I shall work under that supposition. I will spend part of Chapter 3 of this work on exactly this question, as well as the question of how to interpret Mackie's claim, 'There are no objective values.'

I also suppose this throughout most of the next chapter.

The second point that requires clarification is what is meant by 'objective' in 'objective values' and 'objectively prescriptive', both in Thesis 1, and in the above passage from *EIRW*. As before, I believe that it is impossible to provide a perfectly precise meaning for Mackie's use of 'objective'.¹⁰ But there are several suggestions about the meaning of 'objective', which I shall turn to in Section 4 of this chapter, when I explicate Mackie's arguments for Thesis 1.

So I have made two promises. First, I promise to explicate Mackie's views in moral metaphysics, but only in a later chapter. Second, I promise to explicate, as far as is possible, the meaning that Mackie gives to the word 'objective', but I'll do this in Section 4 of this chapter.

2.2.2 The Discourse Thesis

Contained in the above passage is a claim about moral discourse, about what happens when someone makes a moral judgment. This thesis is repeated in various ways throughout *EIRW*. He writes,

...ordinary moral judgements include a claim to objectivity, an assumption that there are objective values... (35)

⁹Hare, 1981; 1985.

¹⁰See, e.g., Sinnott-Armstrong, 2010; Joyce, 2001: 16-7, for an introduction to Mackie's use of 'objective'.

...a belief in objective values is built into ordinary moral thought and language... (48-9)

As I understand this thesis, it strongly suggests that Mackie is a cognitivist about moral discourse:

Thesis 2: The Discourse Thesis. All moral judgments involve a claim to the effect that morality is objective.

The discourse thesis, however, does not decide whether, in Mackie's view, moral thoughts contain, as parts, beliefs in objectivity, or whether these beliefs are merely necessarily tied (perhaps as a matter of general psychological law) with moral thoughts.

Consider the following ways of filling out Mackie's view. On the first way, each moral judgment just is the expression of a belief that an objective value holds of some object. If this were the correct way of interpreting Mackie, then he would be a cognitivist of a strong sort: moral thoughts just are beliefs. On the second way, each moral judgment is the expression of some feeling of approval or disapproval about some object, but associated with these feelings are beliefs that objective values hold of certain objects. If this were Mackie's view, then, again, he would be a cognitivist, but of a weaker sort: moral thoughts, although they always carry with them beliefs, are not themselves beliefs.

These correspond to the two ways, noted above, of being a cognitivist about morality.

So the discourse thesis does not decide an important question in moral psychology. It does not decide whether moral judgments are, as a matter of analysis, expressions of belief, or whether they express some other kind of psychological attitude. It does not tell us what is the general nature of moral thought. I shall turn to Mackie's answer to this question below, in Section 3 of this chapter.

There are two further important features of Thesis 2. First, the notion of a moral judgment, as it is used in Thesis 2, must be clarified. I shall use 'moral judgment' as a piece of technical terminology, and so I will make some important stipulations about the term. These stipulations will be in play throughout this work. So Section 3 is also partially devoted to providing a meaning for 'moral judgment'.

Second, the "claim to objectivity" that Mackie sees in ordinary moral judgments can be taken in, roughly, three ways. The claim to objectivity may be a pragmatic phenomenon. Then Thesis 2 will be a claim about what people do when they make moral judgments.¹¹ This is the way I have been reading the discourse thesis so far. The claim can, instead, be given a strongly semantic reading. On

¹¹Hare, 1999; and Huemer, 2005 seem to interpret the claim to objectivity in this way.

this reading, Thesis 2 is naturally taken as a thesis about the semantics of pieces of ordinary moral language.¹² Finally, the claim to objectivity may be taken as a conceptual claim. Taken in this way, Thesis 2 is a claim about the concepts that people associate with moral terminology.¹³ I discuss more fully the question of how to interpret the claim to objectivity in Chapter 2 of this work.

I have made three more promises. I promise to clarify, to a certain extent, what I shall mean by 'moral judgment'. I promise to explicate what I take to be Mackie's views on the nature of the psychological attitudes that are connected with moral judgments. I shall fulfill these obligations in Section 3 of this chapter. I promise also to explain, in Chapter 2 of this work, in what respects the "claim to objectivity" may be precisely specified.

2.2.3 The Error Thesis

I turn now to the final major part of Mackie's position. This is what he calls his "error theory" about morality. He writes,

...a belief in objective values is built into ordinary moral thought and language, but ... this ingrained belief is false. (48-9)

This is something of the capstone of Mackie's position. It depends upon Theses 1 and 2. It is, essentially, an inference based upon those them:

Thesis 3: The Error Thesis. Since objectivity is a defect in morality, and moral judgments involve a claim to objectivity, moral judgments are infected with widespread error.

Thus Mackie believes that there is a mistake that people make when they are judging things morally. It is, however, very unclear what exactly Mackie thinks is the mistake. There is a weak reading, and there is a strong reading (they correspond very roughly with the various ways of taking the claim to objectivity).

On the weak reading, people merely make the error of trying to "point" to something that is not there, much in the same way that Macbeth tries to ostend his floating dagger.¹⁴ It is clear that Mackie believes at least that people make this error.¹⁵ However, it is important to note that this weak reading of Thesis 3 is not a

¹²This is, roughly, the way Shafer-Landau (2003 and 2005) seems to read Mackie.

¹³This is the way Joyce (2001) seems to read Mackie.

¹⁴Shakespeare, *Macbeth*.

¹⁵See, for example, Thesis 6, below. The analogy to Macbeth is not that far off!



semantic claim about what is required in order for a moral judgment to be true. It is thus consistent with the general truths of moral judgments. In Section 5 of this chapter, I will further discuss this weak reading of Thesis 3.

On the stronger reading, people systematically make the error of uttering claims that are not true. According to this stronger reading, there would have to be objective values in order for moral judgments to be true. The strong reading, of course, is consistent with a wide variety of different ways of failing to secure truth. Moral judgments may be false, indeterminate, contentless, or even meaningless combinations of words. In Chapter 2 of this work, I'll further discuss these ideas.

Again, I have made more promises that I am obliged to keep. Before I fulfill these promises, I will introduce some minor theses that play a role in the development of Mackie's position, and which will be important in this work.

2.3 Mackie's Minor Theses

2.3.1 Evaluative Indexicalism

Mackie holds a general thesis about the meanings and contents of evaluative utterances. In *EIRW*, he writes,

We can then offer a general definition of 'good': *such as to satisfy the requirements (etc.) of the kind in question.* ... This general definition covers different uses of the word 'good' ... because it leaves open just how the requirements in question are specified or indicated; it leaves room for different interests to be fed in in different ways in different sorts of cases. (55-6)

This passage is an echo of his earlier work. In "Aesthetic Judgments – A Logical Study", he writes,

In making an evaluative judgement we are at once saying or hinting that the object judged has certain natural characteristics, and commending it, or perhaps condemning it, on that account. The good-making characteristics are natural features which we are using as criteria or standards of value: we commend something which satisfies these standards, and condemn something which fails to satisfy them. Evaluative judgement is relative to standards or criteria, and presupposes them. (65)

The following analogy, I believe, helps to elucidate Mackie's claim.

Consider our judgments involving tallness. At a basketball game, I utter, 'Mike is tall'. You might dissent, claiming that six-and-a-half feet is, all things considered, pretty short for a basketball player. At a cocktail party full of professors, you utter, 'Mike is tall'. It would be reasonable for me to agree, perhaps noting that everyone at the party is relatively **stout** in comparison to Mike. Intuitively, since we utter the same sentence, and we are speaking the same language, the meanings of our utterances do not differ. However, intuitively, the contents of our utterances differ. A possible explanation of this is that, although the meaning of 'tall' doesn't vary between our contexts, its content does, because we have in mind different standards of tallness. It is harder to be judged tall relative to the standards I have in mind in the basketball context than it is to be judged tall relative to the cocktail context. 'Tall' is an indexical: the content of a tallness judgment is determined both by some salient standard of tallness, and by the meaning of the whole uttered sentence. As a result, the contents of tallness judgments can vary between contexts.¹⁶

But I recognize that what I say here is controversial. It is only meant as a bit of explanation.



As I understand Mackie, he means to accept the following (admittedly rough) thesis about evaluative judgments:

Thesis 4: Evaluative Indexicalism. The content of an evaluative judgment is partially fixed, in context, by some salient standard of evaluation, and partially by the meaning of the the sentence that is uttered in making the judgment.

The thesis of evaluative indexicalism involves some new terminology. The terms 'content' and 'meaning' require some stipulative fixing, for they are notoriously vague. The discussion in Section 5 will help to fix how these terms are used in my statement of evaluative indexicalism. The notion of an evaluative judgment shall be explained in Section 3, as a generalization of moral judgment.



do not, however, stipulate any meanings for these terms. You might think of my discussion there as simply helping to implicitly fix what they mean. This is a problem.

There are some important things to note about the notion of a standard of evaluation. First, in the first of the above passages, Mackie indicates that standards of evaluation involve, and are composed of, certain natural features of the world. Second, these natural features need not be mind-independent features: they may involve our desires or interests – but they may not. Third, the natural features from which standards of evaluation are composed are supposed to serve as a basis for

¹⁶I choose to use 'tall' instead of 'T', because it is a predicate, and it is plausible to think that there are varying standards. 'T' is a singular term, and there is no real "variability of standards". I need to flesh out my examples, maybe.

our affective attitudes, viz., commendation and condemnation. I will further explain the notion of a standard of evaluation, as they tend to be conceived in the literature, in Chapter 3 of this work.


2.3.2 Humeanism about Reasons

Mackie holds a general thesis about the nature of reasons. In *EIRW*, he writes,

Confining ourselves to human agents and their choice of action, we might then hope to determine what people ought to do by seeing what can count as reasons for action. There seem to be several kinds. Most obviously, we would say that there is a reason for *a*'s *G*-ing, or that *a* has a reason to *G*, if *G*-ing would lead to the fulfillment of some desire or purpose or ideal that *a* now has, and *a* knows this. (77)

Here he accepts that someone has a reason to do something if he knows that a present desire of his would be satisfied. He goes on,

Someone can have a reason ... for doing what will lead or is likely to lead or even is wrongly believed by him to be likely to lead to the satisfaction, perhaps in the remote future, of some desire (etc.) that he now has. (77-8)

Here he accepts that someone has a reason to do something so long as he has some positive credence that a desire of his would be satisfied. He goes on, 

But what if he will have (and knows that he will have) some desire or purpose at some future date, and something that he can do now is likely to lead to its fulfillment; does this constitute a reason for his now doing this? ... Do the desires and especially the sufferings of other people, if known to me, constitute a reason for me to do something, if I can...? (78)

Since he answers 'Yes' to these questions, he accepts that others' desires can be a basis for someone's reasons to act.

As I understand Mackie, he means to accept some thesis to the following effect:¹⁷

Thesis 5: Humeanism about Reasons. Whenever someone has a reason to do something, there are some desires, interests, or ends that would be promoted by his doing it.

It is important to notice how loosely 'promotion' is construed in Thesis 5.¹⁸ The desires that are the ground of a reason can come from just about anywhere. They may be future desires; perhaps the desires of others; perhaps the ends of some "institution"; and so on. The desires need not even be actual; it may merely be that someone has a positive credence in the existence of some desires.



Thesis 5 shall be the main topic of Chapter 4 of this work, where I explicate Richard Joyce's error theory about morality. It is the basis of Joyce's position. I will thus spend some time explicating how to understand Humeanism about reasons.¹⁹



2.3.3 The Objectification of Values

Finally, Mackie holds a general thesis about the psychological process involved in the making of moral judgments. In *EIRW*, he writes,

If we admit what Hume calls the mind's 'propensity to spread itself on external objects', we can understand the supposed objectivity of moral qualities as arising from what we can call the projection or objectification of moral attitudes. (42)

In earlier work, he writes,

...in using moral terms we are as it were objectifying our own feelings, thinking them into qualities existing independently of us. For example, we may see a plant, say a fungus, that fills us with disgust, but instead of stating that we have this feeling, or merely expressing and relieving it by an exclamation, we may ascribe to the fungus a semi-moral quality of foulness, over and above all the qualities that a physical scientist could find in it. ... The feeling and the supposed quality are related as a seal or stamp and its impression. (1948: 81-2)

I here use 'has a reason' and 'there is a reason' interchangeably (much in the same way I would use 'has a part' and 'there is a part' interchangeably). Since I plan on discussing Joyce in a later chapter, this distinction will become relevant. But not now.

Apparently they hadn't yet distinguished plants from fungi in 1948.



As I understand Mackie, he is explaining what he thinks is the causal chain that leads to our moral judgments. First, we see something happen, or think about

¹⁷Compare the formulation of Mackie's position on reasons in Phillips, 2010.

¹⁸Compare Schroeder's formulation of Humeanism about reasons in his 2007: 110-3.

¹⁹Joyce, somewhat deceptively, calls his view about reasons a 'non-Humean' account of reasons.

some possible state of affairs. Perhaps, in reaction, we experience a feeling of approval; perhaps a feeling of condemnation; perhaps we think that someone else might have such a feeling about the state of affairs. Finally, we project onto that state of affairs a certain feature, viz., an objective value, that is supposed to be necessarily connected with that feeling of approval or condemnation.

Mackie calls the process that leads up to this projection the 'objectification of values':

Thesis 6: The Objectification of Values. When someone makes a moral judgment, he projects onto the world his, or someone's, affective attitude about something.

There are two important things to note about Thesis 6. First, the notion of 'projection' is unclear: Is projection an irreducible psychological relation that bears between a person, an affective attitude, and an object in the world? Or can the notion of projection be reduced to more well-understood psychological notions? For example, perhaps someone projects a quality onto the world when he believes that the quality holds of a certain object. I shall discuss this issue in Section 3 of this chapter.

Second, I believe that the thesis of the objectification of values is importantly related to Thesis 2, the thesis about the claim to objectivity. However, they are not identical. Thesis 6 is more specified, in two respects. Whereas Thesis 2 makes no claim about the relation between supposed objective values and the affective feelings of people, Thesis 6 entails that there are purported necessary connections between these items. Mackie says that "The objective quality is not simply the feeling itself transferred to an external object, but is something that would inevitably arouse that feeling."²⁰ And whereas Thesis 2 isn't obviously a claim about moral psychology, Thesis 6 makes an empirical claim about the process that results in a psychological attitude called 'projection'. As I understand the thesis of the objectification of values, it thus determinately purports to tell us the truth of what moral thoughts are.

I'll discuss the implications of Thesis 6 further in the next section. I have made many promises, and thus incurred many obligations. It is time to start fulfilling them.

²⁰1946, 81-2.

3 Moral Judgments and Moral Thoughts

In this section, I explain how I will use the terms ‘judgment’, ‘evaluative judgment’, and ‘moral judgment’, throughout this work. I do this in Subsection 3.1. What I say in this regard should be thought of as mostly a matter of stipulation. However, my stipulations fit well enough with the use of these terms in the literature, and they circumvent certain possible technical problems for the views I’ll discuss in this work. In Subsection 3.2, I clarify what I believe are Mackie’s views on the nature of the psychological attitudes involved in making moral judgments. In the end, we shall see that he should be understood as a cognitivist about morality.

This tends just to be assumed in discussions of Mackie. But it is not at all clear that it is true.

3.1 Judgments, Evaluative Judgments, and Moral Judgments

3.1.1 Judgments

In this work, I will use ‘judgment’ to designate a broad class of phenomena. The class of judgments will include beliefs and assertions. Thus, when someone asserts something to be the case, he judges it to be true; when someone believes something, he judges it to be the case. I take this to fit well with ordinary usage.

But I will also use ‘judgment’ to talk about particular utterances of sentences. When someone utters, ‘It is raining’, his uttering it on that occasion is a judgment. I’ll assume this, whether or not he asserts that it is at the time raining, and whether or not he believes that it is raining in his circumstances. I take this not to fit as well with ordinary usage. It seems odd to my ear to say that someone has judged that it is raining, even when he hasn’t asserted it, and doesn’t believe it.²¹

I’ll also use ‘judgment’ to refer to the assumptions of speakers in context.²² Suppose I ask you, ‘Have you stopped beating your wife yet?’ In doing so, it is plausible that I assume that, as of some recent time, you were in the habit of physically abusing your partner. Perhaps, however, I neither believe, nor assert, that you are an abusive spouse. For example, in the context, I might only be using the phrase to elucidate the notion of a speaker assumption. Nonetheless, I have judged that

I’m not sure I need to mention this anymore. For some reason, I did think I needed to mention it.

²¹It is common, in the meta-ethical literature, to use ‘judgment’ in roughly the way that I shall use it. Thus, non-cognitivists about morality tend to claim that there may still be moral judgments, even if there are no specifically moral beliefs. Thus Hare, Gibbard, and Blackburn use ‘moral judgment’-talk, even while denying that (strictly speaking) there are moral beliefs.

²²So a speaker’s pragmatic presuppositions, background beliefs, or tacit beliefs are included in his judgments. I’ll discuss this further in Chapter 2 of this work.

you abuse your partner. Again, I think this an odd way to use 'judgment', but I shall still use it in this way.



Finally, I stipulate that 'judgment' is to apply to what are intuitively non-cognitive and non-propositional sorts of phenomena: viz., commands and affections. Suppose I command you to shut the door, uttering as I do, 'Shut the door!' I shall refer to what I do in this context as a judgment. Likewise, suppose that I open my refrigerator, hoping to eat some of last week's leftovers. Finding a certain foul-smelling fungus in my leftovers, I say 'Ewww!' and toss them in the compost. My utterance to the effect that I disapprove of the leftovers' smell is, in my terms, a judgment.²³

I included this so as not to beg any questions against prescriptivists like Hare and expressivists like Gibbard. I'm not so sure that this is necessary anymore.

3.1.2 Evaluative Judgments

Among our judgments, there are evaluative judgments. In making an evaluative judgment, I may purport to describe something as foul, desirable, good, wrong, fair, and so on. For each of these kinds of judgment, it seems that I am committing myself to a certain evaluation of something or other.

Among the evaluative judgments are the moral judgments. An important question to ask is: What is it that delimits the moral judgments from the rest of the evaluative judgments; and from the rest of judgments, more generally? I'll take the following approach in response to this question.²⁴ There are some uses of evaluative terms that are, intuitively, paradigmatically moral uses. I shall call these uses of evaluative terms 'moral terms'. Sentence utterances in which the moral terms occur are then moral statements. Moral judgments, broadly construed, are judgments that would naturally be expressed via the use of moral statements. Consider a few examples.




First example. A young woman who aligns herself with the feminist movement is parading outside a courthouse with other like-minded people. She believes that a woman has an inalienable right to bodily integrity, one that even trumps a fetus's right to life. The sign she is holding has written on it some slogan to the effect that abortion shouldn't be illegal. She is chanting, 'Abortion is permissible!' Her use of 'permissible', in this context, is a moral use of the term.

Here I am trying to make it clear that the speaker is not confusing moral uses of the vocabulary with legal, prudential, aesthetic, etc., uses.

²³In each of these cases, it may be appropriate to paraphrase what I do into ordinary judgment-talk. In the first case, you may say that I have 'judged that you (are to) shut the door'. In the second case, you may say that I have 'judged that the leftovers are disgusting'. These paraphrases may be correct in some sense, but I want to use 'judgment' to apply to these phenomena, even if these end up being the "wrong" paraphrases.

²⁴Cf. Jackson, 1998.

Second example. A balding middle-aged man is sitting at the breakfast table, reading the local newspaper. He sees a headline that reads 'Canine Killer Strikes Again', and reads about a police investigation into the mysterious drowning of dogs in the area. The police think there is a unique human criminal who has, thus far, drowned ten canines. Somewhat disturbed about the prospects for his own puppy, he thinks to himself, 'It's wrong for the murderer to kill those dogs – whether or not he first asks their owners.' His use of 'wrong' is a moral use of the term. 

Third example. A high school student is learning about the persecution of the Jews during World War II. He finds out that they went through all sorts of painful experiences. They were starved, tortured, worked to death, beaten, and so on. He figures they must have felt a lot of pain. He disapproves of what happened to them; he finds it repugnant. While giving a presentation on this topic, he announces to the class, 'All that pain the Jews experienced was bad.' His use of 'bad' is a moral use of the term.

Thus, there are moral uses of 'permissible', 'wrong', and 'bad'. Each such use is a moral term. I will not, however, restrict the application of 'moral term' just to uses like the ones described in the above examples. There are also moral uses of the following words: 'good', 'desirable', 'evil', 'should', 'ought', 'just', 'fair', and 'deserving'. In any case, the judgments that the individuals in the preceding examples expressed are moral judgments, because they involve moral uses of evaluative terms.

There are, clearly, many more moral judgments than the above paradigms. Utterances of the following sentences can give voice to moral judgments:

What the murderer did was wrong.

You ought to save the drowning child, though he is an evil little boy.

Abortion is permissible.

Pain is bad.

Capital punishment is unjust.

If torture is an evil, then you shouldn't do it.

Either stealing isn't wrong, or getting your little brother to steal is wrong.

There are some important differences, however, between the first two of these sentences and the rest. Compare the first sentence with the third. *Prima facie*, the first sentence asserts of a particular action (what the murderer did) that it was wrong.


Similarly for the third: *prima facie*, it asserts of an action (abortion) that it is permissible. But it seems that the third sentence has a feature that the first does not. It is natural to prefix the third sentence with ‘sometimes’, ‘typically’, or ‘always’, where this is unnatural for the first sentence. We get the following variants of the third sentence:

Sometimes, abortion is permissible. / Abortion is sometimes permissible.

Typically, abortion is permissible. / Abortion is typically permissible.

Always, abortion is permissible. / Abortion is always permissible.

Similar features hold of the fourth and fifth sentences. Thus, I take sentences like the third, fourth, and fifth, to be generalizations in a way that the first two are not.

Now compare the first two sentences with the last two sentences. *Prima facie*, the last sentence doesn’t assert of anything that you shouldn’t do it. Likewise for the final sentence. They are conditioned, or qualified, in a way that the first two sentences are not. The second to last sentence, intuitively, is compatible with the permissibility of torture. Likewise, the final sentence is compatible with it being morally permissible to steal. 

Finally, compare the first two sentences with each other. Whereas the first seems to make just one moral judgment (that a certain action was wrong), the second seems to make two (that you have a certain obligation, and that a certain little boy is evil). The first seems to express a simpler judgment than the second. The second is compounded from more basic judgments in a way that the first is not.

I shall refer to judgments that might be expressed by sentences like the first as ‘basic moral judgments’. Judgments that can be expressed by sentences like the last six sentences (conjunctive, general, or conditioned), I shall refer to as ‘complex moral judgments’.²⁵

²⁵One might object to my stipulation that the first sentence is ‘basic’. After all, on a natural analysis of that sentence, it comes out as nothing near basic. The sentence seems to say something like this: ‘There was a murder; and so, there was someone who committed it; and, moreover, in committing that murder, the person who committed it did something that was wrong.’ I admit that this is something of a problem. I have two things to say in response.

First, it’s natural to think that the bulk of this alleged analysis is non-moral. Indeed, all of the preliminaries involving the existence of a murder, and the existence of a murderer, are non-moral. The part of that judgment that is moral is, intuitively, basic.

Second, if I cannot be allowed stipulate that judgments like ‘what he did was wrong’ are basic, then we can get nowhere in a discussion of the error theory. These are the paradigm examples of what the error theorist intends to talk about.

3.1.3 Further Stipulations Concerning Moral Judgments

With this distinction – between complex and basic moral judgments – in mind, we are in a position to further clarify Mackie’s Thesis 2, the discourse thesis. According to that claim, moral judgments essentially involve a belief in the objectivity of values. Thesis 2 therefore implies that, for example, the young feminist, the balding man, and the high school student, in making their respective judgments, are all somehow committed to the objectivity of values. I believe that, on its face, we cannot reject these implications as totally absurd.

Consider, however, a *Fourth Example*. David Hume, a devout skeptic about morality, is trying to decide what to do. His little brother could steal for him a book from his friend Cleanthes’ library. Hume really wants the book. Another friend, Philo, tells him that, since stealing is wrong, getting your little brother to steal is wrong. Hume replies: ‘I understand that much. If stealing is wrong, then getting your little brother to steal is wrong. But I doubt that it matters. There probably isn’t any such thing as wrongness. So stealing probably isn’t wrong.’ Given my stipulated meaning of ‘moral judgment’, Thesis 2 implies that, in making this moral judgment, Hume is in something of a paradoxical situation. He has made a moral judgment, and therefore committed himself to the objectivity of values. But, being a moral skeptic, he rejects any such commitment.

I find this troublesome. It seems more or less absurd to say that Hume has made any kind of “claim to objectivity”. Indeed, it seems to me that a conditional claim like the one Hume makes above should not be taken to commit *any* ordinary speaker to much in the way of objective values.²⁶ Conditional claims like this are too weak to entail such a commitment. Notice, however, that a revision of Thesis 2 that only quantifies over *basic* moral judgments does not have this implication. So understood, Thesis 2 would be silent on whether Hume is committed to the objectivity of values, in making a conditional moral judgment. I take this as a reason to prefer this weakening of the discourse thesis. Moreover, I doubt that Mackie intended to imply that Hume might have been committed to objective values in making conditional moral judgments.²⁷

Hereafter, in this work, I will use ‘moral judgment’ to mean what I have stipulated ‘basic moral judgment’ to mean, unless otherwise noted. Thus, unless I specifically say that I am talking about complex moral judgments, the subject mat-

²⁶I have similar intuitions about moral judgments involved in propositional attitudes and negative moral judgments. E.g., ‘Philo believes that stealing is wrong’, and ‘It’s simply not true that stealing is wrong.’ Cf. Joyce, 2001: 6.

²⁷Thus, we should read Thesis 6, the objectification of values, in a similar way. It only purports to tell us what happens when someone makes a basic moral judgment.

Even without further explication of ‘objective value’.

I am not sure I want to say this anymore, given what I have read about presupposition projection. It begs the question against the error theorist who wants to accept a semantic presuppositional reading of the discourse thesis.

ter of my discussion should be understood to be in this way restricted.

I can think of two worries for restricting my discussion in this way. Both involve the idea that, when the discourse thesis is understood in this way, it is objectionably weak. First, when someone makes a conjunctive or general moral judgment, it seems that he is committed to whatever he would have been committed to had he made a more specific judgment. For example, in uttering, 'Abortion is permissible', our young feminist seems committed to at least what she would have been committed to, in the way of objective values, had she judged of a particular act of abortion that it was permissible. But my understanding of Thesis 2 doesn't allow us to derive this result.²⁸

Long sentence.

Second, a philosopher might accept a principle to the effect that standard deontic notions are inter-definable. According to such a view, there may be a basic deontic notion, say, wrongness. Other notions, such as permissibility, are definable in terms of wrongness: for an action to be permissible is for it not to be wrong. Such a philosopher might claim that, therefore, a judgment to the effect that an action is permissible is a complex moral judgment. Then Thesis 2 goes silent with regard to all moral judgments of permissibility.²⁹

I have no straightforward reply to these objections to my stipulation. My indirect reply is that it is profitable to abstract away from the issues that these objections raise. My discussion can maintain a comfortable level of precision, given the way I have set things up. But to introduce a barrage of qualifications in reply to these problems would clutter my discussion beyond comprehension. Thus, I acknowledge that these issues must be dealt with. But not by me; not right now.

3.2 Moral Thoughts

Correlated with a typical judgment is a psychological attitude, or thought, that the judgment expresses. Intuitively, a judgment expresses a certain thought if it would be appropriate for someone to make the judgment only if she had the thought. Thus an audience to the judgment might reasonably infer that the individual making the judgment has the thought.³⁰ When I say, 'Snow is white', in a certain context, and you are my audience, it is reasonable for you to think that I

²⁸This also holds for claims like, 'All actions have a deontic status', or 'Everything is either good or bad.' Presumably, I am committing myself to particular actions being right or wrong, or good or bad, in virtue of these sorts of claim.

²⁹See, e.g., Pidgen, 2010. He claims that an error theorist must deny the inter-definability claim, which I outlined above. Whether this is a cost of the error theory, however, is unclear.

³⁰This is the idea that Schroeder explicates in his 2008: 28-34.

have a belief in the proposition that snow is white. When I say, 'I am sitting', you may reasonable infer that I believe I am sitting. Or suppose I utter the following prefixed claim: 'I hereby express my belief that Moriarty has arrived.' You ought to take my utterance to be an expression of my beliefs about Moriarty's location.

Gibbard's example, I think.

The psychological attitude need not be a belief. When I find the foul-smelling fungus in my refrigerator, and exclaim, 'Ewww!', perhaps you should think I disapprove of the smell of the leftovers. In this situation, my utterance is an expression of disapproval. If I claim, 'There's probably no God', you should think that my credence in the proposition that there is no God is high. Here, it is natural to take my utterance as an expression of my credences about religious matters. But it would be going too far to interpret me as having expressed a belief – I may be agnostic about the matter.

The psychological attitude that a moral judgment gives voice to, I shall call a 'moral thought'. There is an important general question about moral thoughts: What sort of psychological attitude are they? I will not argue for an answer to that question here. However, there is restriction of the question: What sort of psychological attitude does Mackie think moral thoughts are? This question I will answer. In short, I believe Mackie thinks moral thoughts are beliefs.³¹ There are, however, other possibilities, which are suggested by Thesis 6.

Recall Thesis 6, the principle of the objectification of values. According to this principle, when someone makes a moral judgment, his judgment is a result of an internal process of recognizing his own affective attitude, and then projecting this attitude onto the world. There are thus apparently two psychological states that Mackie thinks are involved in the making of a moral judgment: an affection, and a projection.

Should we read Mackie as accepting the idea that moral thoughts are mere affections? On this interpretation of Mackie, he would hold that moral thoughts are just the feelings of commendation or condemnation that are part of the process of objectification. I believe we should not read him in this way, for two reasons. First, because the affective attitude that is part of the process of objectification is supposed to be prior to the moral judgment. That is, on Mackie's view, first we have a feeling of commendation; this causes us to project our feeling onto the world; which in turn gives rise to our moral judgment. Second, because there is some

³¹It is hard to find a commenter on Mackie's work who doesn't agree with me on this point. Indeed, I cannot find one. However, it is also hard to find anyone who actually argues for this claim. Everyone seems simply to take it for granted that Mackie believed moral thoughts were beliefs. This is unfortunate, because it is not at all obvious that he accepted this cognitivist thesis. At least, it seems to me not to be a trivial matter.

textual evidence that he rejected this idea. In his earlier work, he wrote, "...we do not think we are merely ejaculating when we talk in moral terms."³² I take him here to be rejecting the idea that a moral judgment is merely an expression of condemnation or commendation.

I believe that, on Mackie's view, moral thoughts are the final result of the process of objectification. I.e., moral thoughts are our "projections" of our feelings onto the world. There are, however, two general ways to understand Mackie's notion of projection.

On the first way, the psychological attitude of projection is not reducible to more basic psychological notions. Thus, when someone projects his feeling onto the world, a certain irreducible attitude holds between an object in the world, and his feeling. I will not interpret Mackie in this way. I have two reasons for rejecting this interpretation of Mackie. The first, in brief, is that I cannot understand what this attitude would be. I cannot interpret Mackie as accepting a certain thesis, when I cannot understand the thesis.³³ The second is that there is an easily graspable alternative interpretation of Mackie, according to which projection is not some kind of irreducible attitude.

I therefore will interpret Mackie in a second way, according to which the attitude of projection reduces to other psychological attitudes, viz., cognitive attitudes. Projection, for Mackie, is supposed to reduce to belief. There is textual evidence for this. He writes, "...we are as it were objectifying our own feelings, thinking them into qualities existing independent of us."³⁴ On the most natural understanding of this quote, Mackie is claiming that, when we make moral judgments, we believe there is a property that is had by something we have an affective feeling about.³⁵ Our belief, in such a situation, is our moral thought. Thus, for Mackie, someone has a moral thought just in case she believes that a certain affective attitude is necessarily connected to an objective value, and that this objective value holds of something.

When interpreted in this way, Mackie is a cognitivist about morality. On his view, moral thoughts just are beliefs, in certain complex propositions involving the existence of objective values and their necessary connections with certain affective attitudes. But what are these objective values supposed to be? What is it

³²1946, 80-1.

³³Joyce (2010: 39) takes the thesis of objectification to involve the idea that, when someone projects his feeling onto the world, he "experiences" some object "as" having an objective feature. I simply do not know how to engage with this idea. What is it to experience something as being good (if it is not just to believe that goodness holds of that thing)?

³⁴1946, 81

³⁵See also Mackie, 1980: 150.

that makes these properties “objective”? I will begin to answer these questions in Section 4.

4 Mackie’s Arguments for the Metaphysical Thesis

Each of Mackie’s main theses involves the notion of objectivity. Thus far, I have not had much to say about what Mackie means by ‘objective’. In this section, I elucidate Mackie’s notion of objectivity, by quickly explicating his arguments that there can be no objective values.

There are a few preliminaries to note. First, I will only discuss versions of Mackie’s “argument from queerness”. I’ll not discuss his “argument from relativity”.³⁶ My justification for this is that a discussion of his argument from relativity would not help to elucidate Mackie’s notion of objectivity. It does not involve any assumptions about the nature of objective values.³⁷

Not sure I need
fn. 37.

Second, the main theme of the argument from queerness goes roughly as follows: “Objective values, if they existed, would have to be queer entities; but it is implausible to think there are such entities; and so, there can be no objective values.” Thus understood, each version of the argument from queerness involves two steps: first, a claim about the essence of objective values; and second, a claim about whether objective values, so conceived, exist. The first step in each version is non-substantive: it is merely supposed to be a partial definition of the notion of objective value. The second step is supposed to be more substantive: it is about what is in the world.

Finally, I shall not have much commentary on the soundness of these arguments, nor on their substantive premises. My main goal is to explicate Mackie’s idea of an objective value. Suffice it to say that I do not think the arguments, taken either individually or jointly, establish Mackie’s metaphysical thesis.³⁸

³⁶1977, 36-8.

³⁷The argument from relativity is roughly this: “There is widespread moral disagreement, and this is best explained by the nonexistence of objective values.” You might think that this *does* involve some assumptions about the nature of objective values, viz., that they would cause us not to be in widespread disagreement about morality, if they existed. Thus understood, objective values would be involved in causation. But Mackie cannot have made this assumption, because he clearly thought that, if there were objective values, they would stand outside of the causal order. See below.

³⁸For discussions of Mackie’s arguments, see Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006; Huemer, 2005; or Shafer-Landau, 2003.

4.1 Objective Values and Unnatural Epistemology

Roughly, according to Mackie's first version of the argument from queerness, if there were objective values, then we could have no knowledge of them, since they would not be part of the natural world. Mackie writes,

...if we were aware of [objective values], it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else. (38)

The reason why knowledge of objective values could only come by way of a faculty of intuition is that they would have to be non-natural, mind-independent features. Mackie does not have much to say about what he means by 'non-natural'.³⁹ It is reasonable to suppose, however, that for Mackie, non-natural properties are ones that aren't studied in the natural sciences.⁴⁰ He does, however, have various explications of mind-independence. He writes,

The ordinary user of moral language means to say something about whatever it is that he characterizes morally, for example a possible action, as it is in itself, or would be if it were realized, and not about, or even simply expressive of, his, or anyone else's, attitude or relation to it. (33; cf. 29-32, 35)

As I understand Mackie, his claim here is that, if there were objective values, then whether they held of certain objects would depend on the intrinsic natures of those objects, and not necessarily on the existence of any psychological attitudes.

So, in the context of this first version of the argument from queerness, Mackie conceives of objective values as properties that the natural sciences don't purport to study, and that are intrinsic to their bearers. According to Mackie, properties like this could only come to be known via a "special faculty of moral intuition".



4.2 Objective Values as Motivating

On this second version of his argument from queerness, Mackie claims that objective values would have to be essentially motivating. He writes,

³⁹See, e.g., Mackie, 1977: 31-2.

⁴⁰This is a somewhat standard rendering of 'non-natural'. See, e.g., Shafer-Landau, 2005.

Plato's Forms give a dramatic picture of what an objective value would have to be. The Form of the Good is such that knowledge of it provides the knower with both a direction and an overriding motive; something's being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it. An objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it. (40)

It is unclear how strongly to take Mackie's claim here.⁴¹ On one interpretation, if there were objective values, then it would be impossible for them to hold of something without people having certain motivational reactions to them. On a weaker reading, people would only have to have motivational reactions to their beliefs that objective values were instantiated. According to either of these readings, the notion of necessity involved is supposed to be broad, metaphysical necessity. But there is an even weaker reading, according to which, as a matter of general psychological law, people have motivational reactions to their beliefs involving objective values.

In any case, Mackie attempts, while giving this argument, to draw a strong connection between objective values and motivation. He conceives objective values as essentially motivating properties. Thus, understood, we can add to Mackie's definition of objective values: they are non-scientific, intrinsic, essentially motivating properties, ones that we can only grasp via a faculty of intuition.


4.3 Objective Values as Supervenient

According to Mackie's last version of the argument, the queerness of objective values would consist in their supervenient nature. He writes,

What is the connection between a natural fact that an action is a piece of deliberate cruelty – say, causing pain just for fun – and the moral fact that it is wrong? It cannot be an entailment, a logical or semantic necessity. Yet it is not merely that the two features occur together. The wrongness must somehow be 'consequential', or 'supervenient'; it is wrong because it is a piece of deliberate cruelty. But just what *in the world* is signified by this 'because'? (41)

⁴¹See Dreier, 1990, 2010; and Sinnott-Armstrong, 2010, for good discussions of this point.

So, although objective values are, for Mackie, supposed to be distinct from natural properties, they are supposed to hold in virtue of these properties. There still are supposed to be necessary connections between the natural features of the world and objective values. I.e., for any objective value, there are some natural properties, whose instantiation would guarantee the instantiation of the objective value. These necessary connections would not hold in virtue of logic; one cannot simply derive an 'ought' from an 'is'. Nor would they hold in virtue of facts about the meanings of terms.⁴² They are, instead, supposed to be brute metaphysical necessities.


The alleged connection between objective values and natural properties provides us with another feature of Mackie's conception of objective values. On his analysis of 'objective value', an objective value is non-scientific, intrinsic, essentially motivating, brutally supervenient, and such that it can only be known through the lens of intuition. 

4.4 Objective Values as Reason-Giving

There is another version of the argument from queerness, which seems implicitly to be in Mackie's work, although he does not explicitly endorse it in *EIRW*.⁴³ According to this line of argument, the queerness of objective values would consist in their being "objectively reason-giving". Mackie writes,

A categorical imperative, then, would express a reason for acting which was unconditional in the sense of not being contingent upon any present desire of the agent to whose satisfaction the recommended action would contribute as a means. ... So far as ethics is concerned, my thesis that there are no objective values is specifically the denial that any such categorically imperative element is objectively valid. The objective values which I am denying would be action-directing absolutely, not contingently ... upon the agent's desires and inclinations. (29)

This is, roughly, Joyce's argument for the error theory. I shall discuss it more fully in Chapter 4 of this work.

On Mackie's view, then, if there were objective values, then whenever they held in the world, some reasons for action would also come into existence. Since objective values are mind-independent, on Mackie's view, the existence of these reasons would depend only on the intrinsic states of whatever had the objective values. 

Provided with these features of Mackie's conception of objective values, we are now in a position to state a rough definition of 'objective value', at least as Mackie

⁴²See, e.g., Mackie, 1977: 64-73.

⁴³See 1977: 49, for Mackie's quick list of his arguments for Thesis 1, the metaphysical thesis.

seems to use the word. It is useful to think of this definition as another one of Mackie's minor theses:

Thesis 7: The Analysis of Objectivity. Objective values would have to be non-natural, intrinsic properties; nonetheless, they would have to supervene on natural properties; they would also have to be essentially motivating and reason-giving; and, to top it all off, they could only be knowable via a special faculty of intuition.

I genuinely believe that Thesis 7 embodies Mackie's conception of objective values, at least as it is presented in the first chapter of *EIRW*. Hereafter, however, I will not use 'objective value' with the explicit meaning that we might take Thesis 7 to inject into it. I will work under the assumption that the reader has at least an intuitive grasp of the notion of an objective value. This is because, usually, when I use 'objective value', what I will be trying to communicate will not depend on Mackie's understanding of the notion.

This is problematic, I guess. But what else could I do?

It is important to be clear about why I have gone through the process of **explicating** Mackie's notion of an objective value. First, it is important, for historical reasons, to get Mackie's views about objective values on the table. More recent versions of the error theory should be seen as rough elaborations of Mackie's approach, and so his notion of an objective value helps to expose error theories in general. Second, it is important to see what sorts of features are supposed to be defective, according to the error theorist. By considering what Mackie took to be queer characteristics of morality, we are better able to understand why a more contemporary error theorist might reject morality.



5 Mackie and Relativism

In this section, I'll continue to explicate what I take to be a good candidate for Mackie's official position. I'll argue that Mackie can easily be understood as a sort of relativist about morality. Mackie's explicit views are under-specified enough so that he can be made out to hold such a view. This is not acknowledged in the literature – indeed, there is no commenter on Mackie's writings who interprets him in anything near the way I do. I therefore take it to be an interesting result.

According to a relativist about morality, we can understand moral judgments to be true only relative to moral standards. Such a view holds that, even if ordinary speakers think they are describing an objective, mind-independent moral reality, it would be best to interpret moral judgments differently. When we interpret those

Vague, I know. But too vague? Maybe; but, in my opinion, the level of vagueness is juuust right.

judgments as involving this sort of relativization, we are able to make true much of our moral discourse. I believe that Mackie held such a view about morality.

5.1 What is Explicit in Mackie's Writings?

Recall the three main elements of Mackie's position: the metaphysical thesis, the discourse thesis, and the error thesis. Mackie sums up these elements of his view in the following passage, which I have presented above. It will be worthwhile to present them again:



...the denial of objective values will have to be put forward ... as an 'error theory', a theory that although most people in making moral judgments *implicitly claim*, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, *these claims* are all false. It is this that makes the name 'moral skepticism' appropriate. (35; italics my own)

Almost the same summary occurs a few pages later in *EIRW*, at the close of the first chapter. He writes,

Moral skepticism must, therefore, take the form of an error theory, admitting that *a belief in objective values* is built into ordinary moral thought and language, but holding that *this ingrained belief* is false. (48-9; italics my own)

These are Mackie's most explicit full statements of his view. It is important to notice, however, that neither of them includes a claim about the truth-values of the moral judgments themselves. Consider the emphasized parts of the former passage. On a natural reading of this passage, 'these' is anaphoric on 'implicitly claim': an implicit claim is not the moral judgment itself. This is even clearer in the later passage. The ingrained belief, whose truth he denies, is not identical with any of the ordinary moral judgments of the average man on the street.

There is a number of disagreements, or something, though. How can 'these' be anaphoric on a singular expression? The second passage is better.

So Mackie's explicit formulations of his "error theory" lack any thesis about the truth-values of moral judgments. This extra thesis, however, is not missing from contemporary explications of the error theory.⁴⁴ Perhaps this is because it seems like such an obvious consequence of what Mackie has already said, in the earlier parts of *EIRW*. Commentators on Mackie's "error theory" seem just to assume that Mackie held this extra thesis.

⁴⁴See the explications of moral error theories in Huemer, 2005; Joyce, 2001; and Shafer-Landau, 2003; inter alia.

Mackie, however, is not so sanguine about this alleged result of his view. He writes, in the last paragraph of the first chapter of *EIRW*,

But what if we can establish this negative conclusion, that there are no objective values? How does it help us to say anything positively about ethics? Does it not at one stroke rule out all normative ethics, laying it down that all affirmative first order judgements are false, since they include, by virtue of the very meanings of their terms, unwarranted claims to objectivity? I shall take up these questions in Chapter 5... (1977: 49)

Thus we flip ahead to the fifth chapter, expecting a clear and explicit statement of his view about whether moral judgments are true. When we get to that chapter, though, we are left wondering what he really thought. About all he says on the matter is this:

I have argued in Chapter 1 that there are no objective values, and in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 that no substantive moral conclusions or serious constraints on moral views can be derived from either the meanings of moral terms or the logic of moral discourse. (105)

He never says, there or elsewhere in *EIRW*, whether moral judgments are generally true, false, or otherwise.

This absence, I claim, is evidence that he thought his view allowed for the truth of positive first order moral judgments. I grant that it is not yet very strong evidence. But the systematic untruth of moral judgments would be a surprising result – so surprising that we should expect Mackie to come out and say that he believed it, if he did. Since he never explicitly wrote that moral judgments systematically fail to secure truth, we have reason to reconsider the ubiquitous claim that Mackie accepted this thesis.

At least, at the time it would have been surprising, I suspect. Maybe my rhetoric here is overblown.

In the next section, I shall draw an extended analogy between Mackie's position and certain versions of relativism. This is meant to further support my contention that Mackie's view is roughly compatible with relativism.

5.2 Relativism about Mass and Morals

The following line of thought results in a relativist view about mass. On the resulting view, there are no intrinsic, non-relational, properties that it would make sense to call 'mass properties'. Instead, there are only relational mass properties,

and so it is these properties that should figure in to the truth-conditions of our mass judgments.

Contemporary scientific theories seem to indicate that there is not really any such property as mass, *in rerum natura*. At least, if a mass judgment is to have any prospect of being true, then it can only be true relative to some frame of reference or other. Another way of putting this is that anything in the fabric of the world that somewhat satisfies our concept of mass is a relational property. There are no intrinsic mass properties.⁴⁵

Suppose that a farmer, while out in his hay field, says, 'My little red tractor is a thousand kilograms.' He seems to be expressing the idea that his tractor has a certain property, viz., being a thousand kilograms.

It seems that, when our farmer judges that his red tractor is a thousand kilograms, the thought he expresses does not involve any relativization. His concept of mass is not of a feature that is relational to frames of reference. It would be better to describe his concept as an idea of something that is intrinsic and non-relational. Unless there were some internal change in the composition of the tractor, he would stick to his guns about its mass. If we removed the tractor's engine, he would agree that its mass changed. If we replaced the hard metallic seat with a shiny new cushioned one, he might say that lost a little mass. But he would be just as inclined to judge that his tractor is a thousand kilograms, even if it were placed on a high-speed train, or in a warp-speed spaceship. Insofar as the farmer tacitly accepts this, he presupposes that non-relational mass properties are part of the fabric of the world. Most people probably have a similar "tacit theory" about mass.⁴⁶

So far, this line of thought is in exact parallel with Mackie's explicit statement of his "error theory". We could even paraphrase the view as follows, mimicking Mackie's formulation of his own view: "Mass skepticism must take the form of an error theory, admitting that a belief in intrinsic, non-relational masses is built into ordinary mass thought and language, but holding that this ingrained belief is false."

Many philosophers, when confronted with this triad of claims, are loathe to conclude that our mass judgments are systematically false.⁴⁷ This leads them to

⁴⁵As I will use 'relativism', I intend to denote a class of views that it would perhaps, in the present philosophical climate, be more appropriate to call 'contextualism' or 'indexicalism'. See, e.g., Cappelen and Hawthorne, 2009: 19-20.

⁴⁶That is not to say that anyone's theory is developed; or that the average man believes in an abstract plenitudinous realm of properties; or that he has a full understanding of the notions of intrinsicality and relationality; or even that his tacit theory is nearly coherent. See, e.g., Dreier, 2005: 261-2.

⁴⁷See Dreier, 2005; Harman, 1996; Lewis, 1989. But compare Boghossian, 2006 and 2011.

I do not intend most of what I write in this section to commit me to any of these versions of relativism, or any of the claims that go along with them. I don't think I've made this obvious. It gets old prefixing everything with 'According to ...'.

suggest views that allow mass judgments to be true, even if their truth must be, in some way, relativized. Thus, on this relativist line of thought, although there's nothing that exactly corresponds to the ordinary concept of mass, there are the materials, *in rerum natura*, with which we can construct good substitutes. The good substitutes are those relational mass properties. They are supposed to take the place of the nonexistent intrinsic ones in the truth-conditions of our mass judgments.

What makes them good substitutes? One thing is that ordinary speakers never explicitly said they weren't talking about relational mass properties. The ordinary man in the street is unaware of any metaphysical implications of contemporary scientific theories.⁴⁸ Moreover, as it happens, our ordinary mass judgments track sufficiently well these relational mass properties. They are eligible, simply in virtue of the way we use 'mass' and related terms, to serve as the contents of our ascriptions of mass in ordinary discourse.

However, according to the relativist, none of these substitutes is, strictly speaking, fit to play the role of the meaning of 'mass', since the ordinary concept of mass is an idea of a non-relational feature.⁴⁹ They are merely fit to be the contents of our mass predications. As Harman puts it,

Einstein's Theory of Relativity does not involve a claim about meaning or about what people intend to be claiming when they make moral judgments about an object's mass. The point is, rather, that the only truth there is in this area is relative truth. (1996: 4)



So, according to this line of thought, although the meaning of 'mass' may be infected with an inaccurate conception of the world, for the purposes of assigning truth-conditions, our mass judgments are to be taken as relativized. An important aspect of this final step is that, although our ordinary concept of mass helps to determine certain aspects of the meanings of our mass claims, it doesn't fix their truth-conditions. So there is a disconnect between, on the one hand, our ordinary concept of mass and the conventional meaning of 'mass'; and on the other hand, the content of mass judgments and their truth-conditions.


Some relativists about morality have argued for their brands of relativism via an analogy to this line of thought.⁵⁰ As Dreier puts it,

⁴⁸Thus, according to this line of thought, these properties will not be admissible substitutes for someone who explicitly accepts a non-relativistic ontology of the natural world (say, a present day advocate of Newton).

⁴⁹See Harman, 1996: 4-5; compare Boghossian's (hostile) formulation of relativism in his 2006: 16-7; and 2011: 55.

⁵⁰Harman's brand of moral relativism may not quite fit the mold that I have created. It seems

For pre-theoretic moral ideas to be all they aspire to be, ... there would have to [be] absolute standards for moral concepts to latch onto. But since there aren't any, relativism suggests, why not make do with the relative standards that we actually do have? There is no need to abandon moral judgment altogether, so long as we are willing to tone down its aspirations. (2005: 261)


This conception of moral relativism may thus be seen as subscribing to a line of thought that consists, roughly, in steps I have described: there are no objective values; but people implicitly presuppose that there are such values when they make moral judgments; there are plenty of admissible substitutes; so, we can take these substitutes to be fed in to the truth-conditions of our moral judgments. As a result, many of our mass judgments can come out as true. 

5.3 Mackie's Construction of Right and Wrong

Mackie, I have noted, accepts a principle to the effect that evaluative terminology is indexical. Roughly, according to the thesis of evaluative indexicalism, in order to find out whether an evaluative judgment is true, we must first figure out what standard of evaluation is salient in the context.

Thus, in order to determine what Mackie would take to be the truth-values of moral judgments, we must determine what standards of evaluation are salient in moral contexts.⁵¹ It is difficult to say exactly what is Mackie's view about this issue. He writes,

Someone who uses the concept of objective moral value will suppose that there are requirements which are simply there, in the nature of things, without being the requirements of any person or body of persons, even God. To be morally good will then be such as to satisfy these intrinsic requirements. (59)

In this passage, he seems to be suggesting that, in any moral context, the salient standard is determined by "the intrinsic requirements". No doubt Mackie thinks it would be a mistake to express a judgment that could only be true relative to such 

that he might not accept the third step, according to which people make the presupposition that morality is objective. It is, however, unclear to me, since he *does* try to motivate his moral relativism by appeal to the analogy to relativism about mass and simultaneity. Cf. Harman, 1978 and 1975.

⁵¹A moral context is just a context in which a moral judgment is made.

standards. Elsewhere in *EIRW*, however, Mackie suggests that the salient standard is not determined by “the intrinsic requirements”.⁵² He writes,

...‘ought’ seldom, if ever, in ordinary use, refers to such supposed intrinsic requirements alone; it typically refers also to reasons or requirements of at least one of the other sorts, the intrinsic requirements being seen as backing them up. (76)

It seems to me that, in these passages, Mackie is acknowledging the possibility that we may take the truth-conditions of our moral judgments to be determined by whatever it is that “the intrinsic requirements” are supposed to “back up”. The point of recognizing this strain in Mackie is to recognize that he thought there are perfectly good, non-defective, subject matters for our moral judgments. In what follows, I’ll call these alleged substitute properties ‘subjective values’, and their standards of evaluation I’ll call ‘subjective standards of evaluation’.

I believe that, on Mackie’s view, we may take the truth-conditions of our moral judgments to be partially fixed by these subjective standards of evaluation, even though the presuppositions of ordinary speakers seem to suggest otherwise. Thus, although our ordinary moral concepts, and the conventional meanings of our moral terms, involve some defect, the truth-conditions of our moral judgments should not involve this defect. When writing out the truth-conditions of moral judgments, we need merely make reference to subjective values, and their standards of evaluation.

On my interpretation of Mackie, then, many of our moral judgments may come out as true. The truth-conditions of moral judgments need not mention any philosophically problematic objective standards of evaluation, for, in any moral context, there are salient subjective standards. These subjective standards will be contained in the truth-conditions. And if the world is the way the truth-conditions demand, then the moral judgment will come out true.

My reason for adopting this reading of Mackie’s view is that, without it, there is an unsolvable puzzle about how to understand the relation between the first

⁵²See also his 1948: 90: “In fact, without going into further detail we may say that there may be an objective quality which we have confused with our objectifications, but if so it has few of the relations and other features that we have been in the habit of associating with goodness.” And, in *EIRW*, he writes, “...it is not surprising that widespread, socially diffused, and not obviously artificial institutions ... should have helped to produce the notions of what is intrinsically fitting or required by the nature of things. These notions, which in turn contribute significantly to our ordinary concepts of good reasons and of moral obligation, embody very natural errors; but errors none the less.” (82)

See the next chapter, at the end of section 3.3.2, where I state this more explicitly.



and second parts of *EIRW*. The puzzle is this: If Mackie systematically rejected the truths of moral judgments, then there is no good way to interpret him as even minimally rational. Suppose that, in the first part of *EIRW*, Mackie's main conclusion is that moral judgments, by and large, fail to secure truth. Notice, now, that in the second part of *EIRW*, he makes a number of claims that imply the truth of moral judgments. For example, he writes, at the end of the eighth chapter,

This chapter, and indeed the whole of this part of the book, has done no more than sketch the outlines of a first order moral theory. ... No doubt my approach could be called, in a very broad sense, a rule utilitarian one ... but it would be utilitarianism without its characteristic fictions. (199-200)

We must here take Mackie as expressing his *belief* in some kind of utilitarian view. On any utilitarian view, there will be principles that connect facts roughly about the happiness of people to moral facts.⁵³ Insofar as he believes this sort of utilitarianism, and insofar as he accepts that utilitarianism implies the truth of moral judgments, he is explicitly committed to the truth of moral judgments. Therefore, if Mackie rejected their truth in the first part of *EIRW*, then he is explicitly committed to the truth of a contradiction.

I cannot, in good faith, interpret Mackie in this way. He did not publish a book wherein the main message of the first part was a certain proposition (that all moral judgments are untrue), and the main message of the second part was its denial (that some moral judgments are true). Even if there are some inconsistencies around the edges of Mackie's work, such a blatant inconsistency cannot be attributed to him. In any case, I refuse to do it.

Someone might claim that it is possible to interpret Mackie as expressing something less than belief in utilitarianism.⁵⁴ On such a view, we may say that he "merely accepts", or "pretends to believe", or "makes as if to believe", the utilitarianism that he outlines in the second part of *EIRW*. One might cite, as evidence for this claim, Mackie's famous quote, "Morality is not to be discovered, but to be made: we have to decide what moral views to adopt, what moral stands to take."⁵⁵ There is a natural interpretation of 'decide what views to adopt' that takes 'adopt' as expressing an attitude short of belief.

⁵³Example: 'If people would tend not to be happy as a result of your action, then the action is wrong.' And so on.

⁵⁴This "fictionalist" alternative seems to be a somewhat standard interpretation of Mackie. See, e.g., Nolan, Restall, and West 2005; and Joyce, 2001.

⁵⁵1977:106.

On such an interpretation of Mackie, however, we are unable to explain why he takes it to be so important to his positive moral system that it contain no reference to the “characteristic fictions” of utilitarianism. He writes,

My hope is that concrete moral issues can be argued out without appeal to any mythical objective values or requirements or obligations or transcendental necessities, but also without appeal to a fictitiously unitary and measurable happiness or to invalid arguments that attempt to establish the general happiness as a peculiarly authoritative end. (199)

If Mackie is merely pretending to believe the moral views that he adopts, then why does he take such great care to avoid attributing a mythical quality to them? There is no good answer to this question, other than that Mackie is simply not pretending. If he were merely expressing a make-believe story about morality, then he would have had the second part of his book published by the same outfit that put out Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. He didn’t do that, so he’s not pretending.

More overblown rhetoric here. Not sure how to fix it.



5.4 Analogies and Disanalogies

There are some important respects of analogy between Mackie’s view and the relativist view that I outlined in the preceding section. First, Mackie’s view shares the ontology of relativism, in a negative respect. Neither view, presumably, accepts the existence of objective values.⁵⁶ But both views hold that people systematically presuppose that there are objective values, and that the notion of an objective value is essentially involved in the meanings of moral terms.⁵⁷

I need to qualify all this in light of my opinion that we should not come to any concrete conclusions about what Mackie really thinks.

Second, Mackie’s view shares the ontology of relativism, in a positive respect. Both views accept the existence of “subjective values”, values that are determined merely by the interests and desires of speakers, or some contextually salient audience, in context. Mackie and the relativist both think there are plenty of materials in the world with which we can construct these subjective values (viz., the desires and interests of the people in question).

Do I have to explain more what I mean by ‘subjective value’? Could I just cite something, like Lewis 1989?




Third, Mackie, like the relativists, thinks these subjective values are “good enough” for the purposes of figuring in the content of morality, even if they don’t adequately capture the meanings of moral terms, or our ordinary moral concepts. In a typical moral context, even if we are invoking objective evaluative standards, there are also contextually salient subjective standards. A corollary of this third point is

⁵⁶See, e.g., Boghossian, 2006 and 2011.

⁵⁷See, e.g., Dreier, 2005.

that there is a disconnect between the thoughts we express with moral judgments, and the truth-conditions of those judgments. The meanings of our moral terms don't determine their contents, and so the thoughts expressed by moral claims don't determine their truth-conditions.

On Mackie's view, the truth of a moral judgment depends on whether there is a certain kind of value, one that is salient in the context of the utterance, and which corresponds with the moral judgment in the right way. When I utter, 'pleasure is good', my judgment will be true if there is a contextually salient subjective value on which pleasure ranks highly. Perhaps the salient value is fixed by my own moral sensibility; perhaps it is composed of some collective sensibility that is shared in my society; perhaps it is determined in some other way. This is exactly analogous to the above relativism about mass. When a farmer utters, 'my little red tractor is a thousand kilograms', his judgment will be true if there is a salient frame of reference, relative to which his tractor has a mass of **three hundred** kilograms. Perhaps the salient reference frame is one in which the tractor is at rest; perhaps it is one in which all the conversational participants are at rest; perhaps it is some other salient reference frame. 

There is an important respect of disanalogy, however, between the sort of relativism Mackie accepted, and the sort of relativism some want to use to interpret mass discourse. Plausibly, no philosopher would recommend of ordinary speakers that they stop using a concept of intrinsic mass, and start to think in terms of a relational notion of mass. It would simply be too unwieldy; everyone would first have to learn complex physics. But Mackie seems to suggest that we should stop using the concept of objective value, and replace it with certain subjective ideas of value. This respect of disanalogy does not suggest that Mackie did not hold the relativist view that I have attributed to him. It merely suggests that he believed that, since we already have these subjective values in mind, we may as well do away with the defective objective concepts of value.

6 Conclusion

Where are we now? In this chapter, my main goal has been to explicate the views of J.L. Mackie, who is allegedly the paradigm example of an error theorist. We have seen that, in many respects, it is very unclear what views he really held. This is, in part, because the technical terms he used – among them, 'moral judgment' and 'objective value' – are notoriously slippery. I have tried to clarify, to a certain extent, their meanings. I have not provided perfectly precise meanings for these

terms. But I believe I have done enough in order to conduct a profitable discussion of how to formulate the error theory.

Another main goal was to situate the subject matter of this work into the broader philosophical terrain. I have explained Mackie's position as a version of cognitivism, and as a version of anti-realism. Thus, on my interpretation of Mackie, moral thoughts are beliefs, but these beliefs often involve propositions with a defective subject matter. Finally, I have argued that Mackie can be construed as a sort of relativist about morality. On his view, our moral judgments may be true, so long as we have an appropriate subjective value in mind – and we typically do. We should eradicate the defective ideas of objective value from our conceptual schemes, since they don't correspond to anything in reality.

My discussion of Mackie has had a historical flavor. I have not engaged thoroughly with his arguments, and I have not voiced many opinions about his various views. But I do not take this to be a defect of my discussion. Indeed, I believe that it would be naive to present any opinions about a view that is as under-specified as Mackie's, other than that it is under-specified, and here are the possible specifications. I use Mackie's writings as a starting point from which a rigorous discussion of the error theory may begin.

Is this true?

In this vein, I continue the discussion in the next chapter, where I make precise a variety of ways of understanding Mackie's Thesis 2, the discourse thesis.