**The Argument from Queerness**

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The so-called ‘argument from queerness’ is one of two arguments against the existence of objective values put forward by J. L. Mackie in his *Ethics: inventing right and wrong* (Mackie 1977), the other being his ‘argument from relativity’ (see MACKIE, J. L.; DISAGREEMENT, MORAL). In fact, Mackie’s argument from queerness is composed of a number of distinct sub-arguments, each of which is intended to cast doubt on the existence of objective values by showing that there is no place for one or more of their allegedly essential features in a scientific, or otherwise naturalistically respectable, worldview. Although the charge of ‘queerness’ is sometimes interpreted as a claim that the notion of objective value is either metaphysically or conceptually incoherent, it is also possible to interpret it as a conservative plea for ontological parsimony, along the lines of similar claims on behalf of naturalism in philosophy more generally. The basic thought, then, is that we should not believe in objective values because no such values would figure in our best, i.e. naturalistic, account of the world.

The point of the argument from queerness is not, as is sometimes suggested, that we should deny the existence of objective values on the grounds of their strangeness alone. Defenders of the argument, including Mackie, are themselves committed to a naturalistic worldview that may force them to postulate the existence of entities that are intuitively strange, including some of the esoteric phenomena (e.g. quarks, spin, black holes etc.) that are theorised about in modern physics. The point of the argument is rather that the idea of objective value involves a kind of strangeness that has no counterpart in the kind of naturalistic worldview that proponents of the argument take as their ontological benchmark.

Nor is the argument meant to entail that we cannot speak truly about value. Thus, agents can value things, and some things can be valuable in relation to others. For example, actions can be valuable as means to ends; or be prescribed, permitted or prohibited in relation to contingent human practices and institutions. The ‘objective values’ targeted by the argument from queerness would be ones the grounding of which would somehow transcend the contingencies of human purposes and institutions. It is only values in this sense that Mackie claims are too strange to exist.

As formulated by Mackie, the argument from queerness has at least two distinguishable aspects, one metaphysical and the other epistemological. In its metaphysical aspect the argument fixes on some allegedly essential features of objective values and concludes that such features do not exist. In its epistemological aspect the argument fixes on some allegedly essential features of objective values and concludes that we would have no way of knowing about them. On the further assumption that objective values would be knowable, it then follows that objective values do not exist.

In its metaphysical aspect, Mackie’s formulation of the argument can be divided into at least three separable strands. The first strand fixes on the combination of two apparently incompatible features of objective values. On the one hand, they are supposed to exist independently of our attitudes towards them. On the other hand, knowledge of objective values is supposed to be intrinsically motivating, in the sense that correctly judging what is right or good entails being motivated accordingly. Yet nothing that exists independently of our attitudes is intrinsically motivating. So objective values do not exist.

One response to this argument has been to deny that objective values exist independently of our attitudes. Drawing an analogy with secondary quality accounts of colour, some critics have pointed out that we can speak truly of things the features of which depend on how the world appears to us as well as on how it is independently of our responses to it (McDowell 1998). Thus, there need be nothing more to being red, say, than to appear read in standard conditions. Likewise, there need be nothing more to being objectively valuable than to appear valuable to ideal, or otherwise competent, judges in favourable circumstances. Furthermore, to appear valuable is to be valued in the required sense of judging something valuable and thereby being motivated accordingly. Either way, the domain of mind independence should not be identified with the domain of the objective or real (see RESPONSE DEPENDENT THEORIES).

A second response to the argument is to apply an analogue of the so-called ‘argument from illusion’, familiar from epistemology and the philosophy of perception. Imagine a well-informed agent who correctly believes it is right for her to F and who is accordingly motivated. Now consider a scenario in which it is not right to for the agent to F, yet everything appears to be the exactly the same from her perspective as it would in the case where it is right for her to F. Arguably, the agent would still believe it is right for her to F and be accordingly motivated. So whatever is intrinsically motivating is a feature of the agent’s attitudes, not of the objective values themselves. And there is nothing incoherent about the idea of an intrinsically motivating attitude.

One problem with each of these replies is that intrinsically motivating attitudes are often classified as desires rather than beliefs (Smith 1994). The apparently paradoxical implication of locating the intrinsically motivating aspect of objective values in our attitudes rather than in the world is therefore that our value judgements fail to express genuinely cognitive states with objective truth conditions, instead being identifiable with non-cognitive, or affective, attitudes (see NON-COGNITIVISM). One response to this problem has been to deny the so-called ‘Humean theory of motivation’, according to which all beliefs are held to be motivationally inert (McDowell 1998). Another influential response has been to deny that the attitudes involved in making a value judgement are intrinsically motivating. So-called ‘motivational externalists’ appeal to examples such as that of the amoralist and other ethically problematic characters in order to argue that there is no intrinsic connection between making an objective value judgement and being motivated a certain way (see EXTERNALISM, MOTIVATIONAL; AMORALIST). The same response is available to some ethical rationalists, who hold that the connection between value judgements and motivation is causal and therefore defeasible, but is nevertheless necessary if an agent is to count as practically rational (see RATIONALISM IN ETHICS).

A second strand of the metaphysical aspect of the argument from queerness fixes on the idea that objective values would have to be objectively prescriptive, in the sense that they are supposed to be intrinsically normative, or reason giving, independently of our desires. Yet there is no coherent source of intrinsic normativity external to our desires. So values cannot be objectively prescriptive. So objective values do not exist (see REASONS, INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL).

A number of influential responses to this strand of the argument employ a so-called ‘companions in guilt’ argument in order to demystify the idea of objective prescriptivity (see COMPANIONS IN GUILT STRATEGY). Thus, it might be thought that the laws of logical inference are objectively prescriptive. Yet proponents of the argument from queerness do not reject the objectivity of logic. It has also been argued that epistemic norms are objectively prescriptive. Yet proponents of the argument from queerness do not normally deny the existence of objective reasons for belief. Finally, and according to one influential account of action explanation, the very idea of a propositional attitude is objectively prescriptive, insofar as it presupposes that agents are necessarily believers in the true and lovers of the good (Davidson 2004). In each case, the argument from queerness is accused of undermining its own premises.

The prospects of this response depend on at least two further questions (Lillehammer 2007). The first is whether the norms involved in logic, epistemology and action explanation are objectively prescriptive in the exact sense targeted by the argument from queerness. This is the sense in which Kant held that moral value, in particular, presents us with an objectively valid ‘categorical imperative’ that ought to constrain our selection of ends regardless of our contingent desires, on pains of irrationality (see CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE). This contrasts with ‘hypothetical imperatives’ that, although they ought to constrain the rational combination of means and ends regardless of contingent desire, are formally neutral about the content of rational ends. The prospects of this response therefore depend on whether the norms involved in logic, epistemology and action explanation are categorical or hypothetical imperatives in this sense.

The second question relates to the range of values that is objectively prescriptive in the relevant sense. Suppose the norms involved in logic, epistemology and action explanation give rise to some objectively valid categorical imperatives. It does not follow that these imperatives include the kind of substantial norms of right action that we normally associate with the demands of morality. One sceptical possibility is that the range of objectively valid categorical imperatives is restricted to comparatively formal relations of consistency and coherence between desires and beliefs. If so, they may not include the kind of substantial constraints on the content of ends that have traditionally been associated with moral rightness and goodness. Even so, however, it would still be the case that the argument from queerness fails in its unrestricted form.

The third metaphysical strand of the argument from queerness relates to how objective values would relate to the descriptive, or natural, facts on which they are said to ‘supervene’ (see SUPERVENIENCE, MORAL). On the one hand, objective values would require a descriptive base to explain why some situations are evaluatively different from others. On the other hand, there can be no logical entailment by the descriptive base of the objective values, at the cost of making the values themselves explanatorily and metaphysically redundant. Yet the combination of dependence and non-entailment apparently implies that the very same descriptive facts that make an action impermissible in our actual world could either be morally neutral, or even make that action obligatory, in some different possible world. And this, even if not strictly speaking inconsistent, is at least ‘philosophically uninviting’ (Blackburn 1993). Moreover, this kind of ‘queerness’ is relevant across a wide range of theories about the nature of value, as most theories about the nature of value are committed to the supervenience thesis on which it depends.

One response to this argument is once to once more seek companions in guilt. Thus, it has been argued that the combination of dependence and non-entailment involved in the supervenience of objective values on descriptive facts is no more problematic than the same combination elsewhere in nature. Thus, it is widely acknowledged that mental states are supervenient on physical states of the body, without this in any way casting doubt on either the existence of mental states or on the explanatory value of attributing them either to ourselves or to others.

One problem with this response is the apparent weakness of the analogy between the evaluative and the mental on which it depends. Thus, it is widely believed that the relationship of dependence in the first case is much stronger than it is in the second. If we accept a broadly naturalistic worldview, it arguably makes no sense to imagine objective values being grounded in anything else than descriptive natural facts in the way in which it arguably does make sense to imagine mental states being grounded in something else than physical matter. If so, the two cases are not relevantly similar.

A second response to this argument is to reject the assumption of non-entailment while denying that this makes objective values explanatorily redundant (see NATURALISM, ETHICAL; REALISM, MORAL). This response to the argument can take at least two forms. One is to attempt a conceptual reduction of value judgements to descriptive judgements by analysing the content of evaluative claims in terms of a (potentially infinite) list of descriptive claims that describe the world as it is in non-evaluative terms in all the actual and possible situations in which the evaluative claims in question are true. On this view, the reduction of objective values to descriptive facts is in principle knowable *a priori* (Jackson 1998). Defenders of this response are committed to explain why, if thoughts about value are reducible to thoughts about descriptive facts, it can reasonably seem as if it is always an open question whether we should think that something is valuable, even when all the relevant descriptive facts are known (see OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT). In its other form, the naturalist response accepts the conceptual irreducibility of objective values to descriptive facts in order to attempt a metaphysical reduction *a posteriori* (Brink 1989). Drawing an analogy between theoretical reduction in value theory and theoretical reductions in natural science, the claim is that evaluative properties, such as human good, are identical to descriptive properties, such as bodily health, in the same way that the property of being water is said to be identical to the chemical property of being H2O. This response is not vulnerable to the open question argument in its traditional form. It is, however, vulnerable to the concern that by modelling the use of evaluative terms on the theoretical terms of descriptive natural science it fails to respect the sense in which objective values are supposed to be intrinsically normative. Like the *a priori* strategy to which it is the natural competitor, this response is therefore sometimes likened to a naturalistically motivated strategy of conceptual revision. Thus understood, each of the two reductive naturalist strategies are consistent with the soundness of the argument from queerness, insofar as that argument is targeted at the idea of irreducibly non-natural objective value.

In its epistemological aspect, the argument from queerness asks how objective values could possibly be known. Objective values are supposed to be intrinsically normative entities, irreducibly distinct from the natural entities in the causal nexus postulated by the descriptive natural sciences. It might therefore seem that knowledge of objective values would require us to have some special faculty of evaluative intuition that connects us to this realm of non-natural and causally inert entities (see INTUITIONISM, MORAL). Yet we don’t possess any such special faculty of evaluative intuition. So we would not be able to know about objective values, even if they did exist. Yet an unknowable objective value is as good as an objective value that does not exist. So we should not believe that objective values exist.

One response to this argument is to deny that knowledge of objective values entails the existence of a special faculty of evaluative intuition. Critics will once more look for companions in guilt (Wiggins 2006). Thus, it might be argued that the truths of logic, for example, are as causally inert as truths about objective value. Yet this fact does not entail that we must choose between either postulating a special faculty of logical intuition or denying the obvious truth that we have logical knowledge. One alternative is to say that the only sense in which logical knowledge depends on intuition is the unproblematic sense in which we are able to grasp, without inferring it from any further statements, that some elementary logical statement is true, and in that sense self-evident. As for logic, so for value. There need be nothing more to the idea of an evaluative intuition than what is entailed by the idea of an elementary evaluative truth. No-one can seriously doubt that there are such truths, however trivial or vacuous. It follows that there is nothing unacceptably ‘queer’ about the idea of evaluative intuition merely as such.

A second response to the argument follows naturally from the naturalist response to the problem of supervenience. If objective values were either identical to, or constituted by, descriptively natural features of the world, there would be no special problem about how we are able to stand in the appropriate causal relations to them. The relations in question would be the same causal relations in which we stand to other descriptively natural features of the world. This naturalistic response to the argument is consistent with the claim that we are able to grasp at least some elementary evaluative truths without having to infer them from other truths. Indeed, it is possible that any plausible account of objective value will have to include at least a conceptual core of intuitively knowable evaluative truths, if only to fix the meaning of our most basic evaluative terms and the most platitudinous relations between them.

A third response to the argument from queerness in its epistemological aspect is to invoke the aforementioned distinction between objectivity and mind independence. If objective values are suitably response dependent, there need be no more difficulty about how we can know about them than there is about how we can know that competent judges will respond to the world in certain ways in favourable circumstances. Moreover, this response is available to naturalists and non-naturalists alike, depending on whether or not the responses and circumstances in question are characterised in descriptively naturalistic or irreducibly evaluative terms. Either way, the claim that the existence of objective values would place impossible demands on our epistemic capacities remains unproven.

Mackie’s formulation of the argument from queerness was targeted at a very strong form of ethical non-naturalism. Such a strong form of ethical non-naturalism is unlikely to be accepted by many of Mackie’s contemporary critics. On the contrary, many contemporary critics of the argument from queerness appear share with Mackie a broadly naturalistic worldview, the remaining point of controversy being whether a commitment to such a worldview implies the further commitment to a reductive form of ethical naturalism (Shafer-Landau 2003). If so, the argument from queerness may not strike at the heart of what is really at issue in most contemporary discussions about the objectivity of value. Whether this is a result of genuine progress in the project of discovering the true nature of objective value or the result of philosophers changing the subject is a matter of debate.

[Cross References]

AMORALIST; CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE; COMPANIONS IN GUILT STRATEGY; DISAGREEMENT, MORAL; EXTERNALISM, MOTIVATIONAL; INTUITIONISM, MORAL; MACKIE, J. L.; NATURALISM, ETHICAL; NON-COGNITIVISM; OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT; RATIONALISM IN ETHICS; REALISM, MORAL; REASONS, INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL; RESPONSE DEPENDENT THEORIES; SUPERVENIENCE, MORAL

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