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Mackie and the Meaning of Moral Terms

Tammo Lossau

Moral error theory is comprised of two parts: a denial of the existence of objective values, and a claim about the ways in which we attempt to make reference to such objective values. John Mackie is sometimes presented as endorsing the view that we necessarily presuppose such objective values in our moral language and thought. In a series of recent papers, though, Victor Moberger (2017), Selim Berker (2019), and Michael Ridge (2020) point out that Mackie does not seem to commit himself to this view. They argue that Mackie thinks this reference to objective values can, and perhaps should, be detached from our moral statements and judgments. In this paper, I argue that Moberger, Berker, and Ridge are right to point out that Mackie stops short of claiming a necessary connection between moral language and a commitment to objective values, but that he does not endorse the contrary claim either. Instead, Mackie stays neutral on the question whether it is possible to assert moral statements or make moral judgments without presupposing objective value. This is because he does not need to take a position on this matter. Mackie only engages with the conceptual analysis of moral language and thought to the extent required to achieve his argumentative goals: he wants to reject revisionary analyses of moral language and to refute the idea that we can assume moral truths to be in alignment with ordinary moral language.

Mackie and the Meaning of Moral Terms

Tammo Lossau

“It is impossible to make a truthful moral statement.” This is famously *not* the opening line of John Mackie’s *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Mackie (1977, 15), who is generally not shy to make a bold statement, instead begins the book by stating that “[t]here are no objective values.” And as far as the claim about the untruthfulness of our moral statements goes, he never offers any unqualified endorsement of that claim throughout the rest of the book. Nonetheless, Mackie is often used as a stand-in for this position when introducing students to the landscape of metaethics. In a series of recent papers, Victor Moberger (2017), Selim Berker (2019), and Michael Ridge (2020) push back against this presentation of Mackie and suggest that his view is more subtle, namely that moral statements typically combine an appeal to objective value with an appeal to moral institutions. They argue that, according to Mackie, it is at least possible to detach the appeal to objective values from our moral talk—and that that is what Mackie is in fact proposing later in the book.

Moberger, Ridge, and Berker are right to emphasize that Mackie does not endorse the kind of strong error theory that has often been attributed to him. However, I want to argue that Mackie does not commit himself to something like a linguistic reform proposal either. As far as the meaning of moral language is concerned, he is deliberately not committing himself one way or the other—because he thinks that he does not need that commitment. After reviewing the observations made by the recent work on Mackie, I will show that Mackie nonetheless showed sympathies for a strong moral error theory, even though he did not endorse it. I will then argue that the dialectic goals driving Mackie do not depend on such an endorsement, which explains Mackie’s hesitancy to give us a clear and complete statement of

how our moral discourse should be conceptually analyzed. Finally, I will discuss how Mackie’s subjectivist ethical views fit in with this interpretation.

1. Mackie’s Hesitancy and the Two Sides of Moral Statements

Mackie’s moral error theory consists in two central claims:

- (I) There are no objective moral values.
- (II) A commitment to the existence of objective moral values is embedded in our moral statements.

It is clear that Mackie (1977, 36–42) fully endorses (I): he argues that what is considered to be morally right appears to depend on the cultural context, making it implausible that we are on to objective values or facts when making moral judgments. And moreover, objective values would be “queer entities” unlike anything we are familiar with. But Mackie’s exact position relating to (II) is much more contentious. Moberger, Ridge, and Berker all take issue with what they call the “standard interpretation” (or “orthodox reading,” in the case of Ridge) of Mackie. According to Moberger (2017, 2), that standard interpretation ascribes the following two claims to Mackie:

1. *All* moral judgments involve the claim to objectivity.
2. The commitment to objective values is an *essential* feature of moral judgments (in the sense that no judgment counts as a moral one without it).

A clarificatory note is in order here: Mackie talks about sentences and terms, about statements and concepts, and about judgments. As we will see in Section 2, distinguishing these layers is important to him. However, at least in *Ethics* Mackie does not argue that there is a misalignment between the level of language, the

level of statements, and the level of judgments. Moberger here is characterizing the standard interpretation on the level of judgments. I will mostly present my interpretation of Mackie on the level of statements—but the way I interpret Mackie on that level should carry over to the both the level of judgments and the level of sentences.

Moberger presents a series of commentators who have endorsed the standard interpretation which includes Michael Smith (1994, 64), Richard Joyce (2001, 16–17) (compare 2005), Russ Shafer-Landau (2003, 19–20), Stephen Finlay (2008, 347–52),¹ and Jonas Olson (2014, 41). I would note, though, that the standard interpretation was less prevalent in the decade or so after the publication of *Ethics*. For example, R. M. Hare (1981, 78) states that “[Mackie’s] view (1977, 35) is that in ordinary use these words connote objective properties of actions, etc.” David Brink (1984, 112) only talks of “our commitment” to objective values that Mackie is rejecting. Simon Blackburn (1985, 1) presents Mackie as stating that that our moral judgments “include an assumption that there are objective values” and that “this assumption is ingrained enough to count as part of the meaning of moral terms, but it is false.” And Bernard Williams (1985, 204) states that Mackie’s moral skepticism “exposes as false something that common-sense is disposed to believe.”

We may call the view ascribed to Mackie by the standard interpretation a *strong moral error theory*: such a theory states that any moral statement necessarily makes a mistake, rendering all those statements untrue.² This kind of error theory has some more recent advocates, including Joyce (2005) and Olson (2014).

¹Finlay (2008, 347, my emphasis) actually states that according to Mackie “when people make moral assertions, they are *ordinarily* uttering falsehoods, because these assertions mistakenly suppose the instantiation of fantastical moral properties.” This seems to put him outside the standard interpretation, as presented by Moberger.

²I follow Berker’s move of side-stepping the issue whether an error theorist should claim that that moral statements are false, or whether they should say that these statements are neither true nor false, by using the word “untrue.”

By contrast, a *weak moral error theory* states only that there is a common mistake embedded in most of our moral statements; it does not state that this is necessarily the case for all such statements. Berker’s (2019, 6) argues that the term “moral error theory” has come to be identified with something more akin to what I call strong moral error theory, and that therefore we may say that Mackie was not an error theorist. Of course, Mackie (1977, 35) refers to his view as an “error theory,” but Moberger, Berker, and Ridge all agree that this is merely what I call a weak moral error theory.

Our three commentators present a series of important pieces of textual evidence against the standard interpretation which I want to review here briefly:

1. Mackie consistently hedges the way he talks about how the claim to objectivity is embedded in our moral statements and judgments. For example, Mackie writes (compare Moberger 2017, 3):

“[In] everyday moral judgements...the claim for moral authority...is ordinarily there[.]” (Mackie 1977, 41–42)

“[E]thical uses [of “good”] are particularly likely to [involve] the concept of objective moral value.” (Mackie 1977, 59)

But if it was really the case that moral statements are *necessarily* ridden by error, then this hedging would not be needed. And even though Mackie has no trouble being outspoken in other respects, there is no *unhedged* assertion of this thesis in the entire book.

2. As Moberger (2017, 3–4) and Berker (2019, 9–10) point out, Mackie denies the existence of “objective values” and sometimes “objective moral values” throughout the book, but he never once denies the existence of moral values. Instead, Mackie (1977, 17–18) suggests that his position might be called “moral subjectivism.” But this suggests that he thinks

that there is such a thing as subjective moral values—which would suggest that there is at least an aspect of moral judgments that can be correct.

3. Finally, in Part II (chapters 5–8) of *Ethics* Mackie appears to essentially be discussing normative ethics (compare Moberger 2017, 4–5; Berker 2019, 7–9). Mackie (1977, 106) prefaces this by saying that “Morality is not to be discovered but to be made: we have to decide what moral views to adopt, what moral stands to take.” He thinks that considering these choices will reveal our (considered) “sense of justice,” although he rejects the notion that this is a merely descriptive exercise. But in any case, this suggests that he thinks that the commitment to objectivity could be detached from the moral statements, and that we can still take a “moral stand” even if we do not believe that there are objective values.³

I agree that these observations make a convincing case that Mackie was not trying to advance a strong moral error theory in *Ethics*. (The word “advance” is a case of hedging on my part here, as will become apparent later.) But then, what was his position? Moberger and Ridge think that Mackie implicitly endorses a form of semantic pluralism according to which there are two different strands of our moral discourse: one that presupposes (or embeds in some other significant way) a commitment to objective moral values, and one that feeds from moral institutions. (Moberger 2017, 7–8) According to Mackie (1977, 81), “to speak within an institution is to use its characteristic concepts, to assert or appeal to or implicitly invoke its rules and principles. . . .” And Mackie goes on to say

³Moberger (2017, 6–7) presents a fourth argument against the standard interpretation: Mackie (1977, 16) states that second-order moral skepticism is compatible with holding first-order normative views. However, as Ridge (2020, 7) points out, this argument is undermined by a later paper by Mackie in which he clarifies that he had emotivist attitudes in mind when he wrote this. (Mackie 1985, 147)

[N]ot all “oughts,” let alone all reasons for action, are institutional, but many are. And it is not surprising that widespread, socially diffused, and not obviously artificial institutions—including. . . promising. . . —should have helped to produce the notions of what is intrinsically fitting or required by the nature of things. (Mackie 1977, 82)

This supports the idea that Mackie thinks the two strands of moral discourse are often combined in our moral statements. It is in this sense that we might claim that the commitment to objective values is detachable from our moral discourse: it may be possible to isolate the subjectivist strand of our moral discourse.

As Ridge (2020, 1–2) points out, this view is supported by the fact that Mackie provides analyses of the terms “good” and “ought” that seem to allow for our moral discourse to rid itself of the requirement of objectivity. According to Mackie, the terms “good” and “ought” can be generally analyzed to include both moral and non-moral usage (“good kitchen knife,” “that ought to be enough plastering.”) According to Mackie (1977, 55–56), “good” means that something is “such as to satisfy requirements (etc.) of the kind in question.” But Mackie (1977, 79–80) later argues that we are not forced to interpret the requirements of an institution as requirements stemming from the “nature of things.” Remarks like these lead Moberger and Ridge to suggest that Mackie is advocating what they call “conceptual pruning”: we should change our moral discourse and judgments such that they no longer embed the presumption of an objective requirement, and instead be honest enough to admit that the requirements we are referring to are purely institutional.

Berker does not endorse Moberger’s and Ridge’s idea of “conceptual pruning” as an interpretation of Mackie. However, he argues (based on a similar body of evidence) that Mackie believes in the existence of subjective moral values (Berker 2019, 7). A further claim in his paper is worth mentioning: Berker (2019, 8–9) argues that Mackie is not committed to the idea that

the false assumption embedded in our moral sentences leads to them being untrue. According to Berker, Mackie states only that the embedded assumption is false; Mackie does not go so far as saying that the sentence embedding it becomes untrue. Both of these claims are consistent with the “conceptual pruning” reading: Mackie might be taking the position that moral statements express a commitment to subjective values stemming from moral institutions *alongside* an assumption of there being objective values behind this. If Mackie believes in conceptual reform, it would help his case if moral statements could be true; this would make sure it is actually possible to “prune” the assumption of objectivity without endangering the institutional statement or judgment.

So, by way of summing up, we have seen two interpretations of Mackie:

The standard interpretation: Mackie endorsed a strong moral error theory according to which moral statements necessarily embed a reference to objective moral values.

The pruning interpretation: Mackie merely endorsed a weak moral error theory and thought that moral discourse without reference to objective values is possible.

As noted above, I agree that our three commentators have brought forward convincing textual evidence against the standard interpretation. However, I will argue below that the case for the pruning interpretation is not as clear-cut either. Instead, I will argue that we can make better sense of Mackie’s treatment of moral discourse in *Ethics* by accepting the following reading:

The neutral interpretation: Mackie endorsed a weak moral error theory, but did not take a position on the question whether a strong moral error theory is correct.

I will raise a textual problem for the pruning interpretation in the following section. I will then argue in Section 3 that the neutral interpretation makes better sense of his dialectical strategy in

Ethics overall. The general idea is that Mackie ventured only as far into a conceptual analysis of our moral discourse as his purposes in *Ethics* required. One of his goals was to refute the idea that ordinary moral discourse (and moral judgments) can tell us anything about the nature of value itself. A weak moral error theory achieves this goal. Whether or not we would also need to accept a strong moral error theory remains an open question, but Mackie does not give us a definitive answer to that question.

2. Mackie’s Attitude Towards Strong Moral Error Theory

We have seen good textual evidence against the idea that Mackie’s goal is to argue for a strong moral error theory. In particular, Moberger has pointed out that he consistently hedges his purported endorsements of that view; but we also saw that attributing this view to him is in tension with the fact that Mackie labels himself as a moral subjectivist and discusses normative ethics at length in part II of *Ethics*. However, there are also some passages that raise questions about reading him as *opposing* a strong moral error theory. Berker (2019, 9, 11–12) himself accepts that there are at least two indications against his interpretation, although he argues that on balance the textual evidence in favor of his proposal is stronger. First, Mackie (1977, 25) writes that “[o]ne way of stating the thesis that there are no objective values is to say that value statements cannot be either true or false.” And while Mackie does not endorse this characterization, he only refuses to do so because, as he points out, there are value statements that rely on agreed upon standards, such as in sheepdog trials. While this does not contradict Berker’s interpretation, he admits that it “loses plausibility points” here. Second, Mackie refers to his position as “moral scepticism” and says that the “error theory” about the implicit claim of objective values in moral judgments makes this label appropriate. (Mackie

1977, 35) Berker responds that while this label is indeed problematic for his reading, the fact that Mackie also labeled his view as “moral subjectivism” is equally problematic for the standard reading; and moreover, Mackie stopped labeling himself as a skeptic in writings after *Ethics*, which may indicate that he came to appreciate this as a mislabeling.

In adding to the problems for the pruning interpretation, I would like to draw attention to a passage right before Mackie explains the label of “moral scepticism.” At the end of his remarks on the analysis of our moral thinking Mackie writes:

I conclude, then, that ordinary moral judgements include a claim to objectivity, an assumption that there are objective values in just the sense in which I am concerned to deny this. And I do not think it is going too far to say that this assumption has been incorporated in the basic, conventional meanings of moral terms. Any analysis of meanings of moral terms which omits this claim to objective, intrinsic, prescriptivity is to that extent incomplete; and this is true of any non-cognitive analysis, any naturalist one, and any combination of the two. (Mackie 1977, 35)

We can see some form of hedging in the first sentence here: Mackie is talking about *ordinary* moral judgments. He then turns to moral terms and hypothesizes that the assumption of objective values is part of their “basic, conventional meaning.” These are technical terms for Mackie which he also uses in his 1973 collection of papers *Truth, Probability, and Paradox*. So let us take a closer look at how Mackie understands these terms.

Mackie uses the phrase “basic meaning” on several occasions throughout *Truth, Probability, and Paradox*. (1973, 35–36, 51, 77, 101) He defines it as follows:

The basic meaning of a declarative sentence both fixes and is fixed by how things are said to be when it is used assertively. A sentence will be true if, and only if, things are as they are then said to be. (Mackie 1973, 35)

So the idea of basic meaning applies to sentences, and basic meaning is in essence truth-conditional meaning—Mackie con-

trasts this with the illocutionary or perlocutionary functions of the use of a sentence. This already gives us an important hint: if the assumption of objective value is incorporated into the basic meaning of a moral term, as Mackie suggested above, then it would plausibly be a part of the basic meaning of the sentence it occurs in as well. But this then entails, *pace* Berker, that those sentences would be untrue.

What about “conventional meaning”? Around two of the passages that use the term “basic meaning,” Mackie also uses the term “conventional meaning.”⁴ That term is first introduced in relation to Paul Grice’s work:

[A material interpretation of the conditional] has been developed particularly by H.P. Grice as part of a general theory which centers on the distinction between what is said and what is merely ‘implicated’... between conventional meaning and (in particular) ‘conversational implicature.’ (Mackie 1973, 75)

Mackie continues to use the term “conventional meaning” over the next four pages and uses it once again later. (1973, 101) In the passage quoted here, conventional meaning is applied to “what is said.” Mackie provides some remarks that help clarify his view here:

On [Strawson’s] view, not only is ‘is true’ applied to statements (what is said) and not to sentences, so that questions of meaning do not arise. . . (Mackie 1973, 45)

So “what is said” is a statement, which can be expressed by a sentence but is not identical to it—Mackie’s understanding of “statement” would nowadays more commonly be described as a proposition.⁵ It is worth explaining his remark that “questions of meaning do not arise” in this context. Here is an instructive passage from *Problems from Locke*:

⁴Mackie also writes about “conventional meaning-rules” right after first introducing the idea of “basic meaning.” (1973, 35)

⁵Mackie (1973, 20–21) at one point uses “statement” and “proposition” as interchangeable terms.

[W]hat has (or lacks) meaning will be a sentence or some such linguistic entity, while what can be true or false, verified or falsified, confirmed or disconfirmed, is a statement, something which a meaningful sentence may be used to express or convey. (Mackie 1976, 56)

So there is no question about the meaning of a statement—a statement *is* the meaning. More precisely, it is what by convention is counted as the meaning of a sentence. This explains the contrast with conversational implicatures in the discussion of Grice: these implicatures may give rise to meaning as well, but by reference to the assumption that the speaker is trying to make a cooperative contribution towards the goals present in the conversational context, and not by convention.

In the passages I have discussed, Mackie is trying to express a contrast between things that are conveyed in virtue of when and how a sentence is used—illocutionary and perlocutionary meaning and implicatures—and things that are expressed by a sentence regardless of that. The terms “basic” and “conventional meaning” express different aspects of what we might call semantic meaning: the basic meaning of a sentence are its truth conditions, and the conventional meaning is the part of its meaning that is *always* expressed by it, regardless of the contextual setting. But if we express the conventional meaning of a sentence on any occasion of its use, this means that it cannot be detached from this sentence. And even though Mackie does not specifically talk about terms in *Truth, Probability, and Paradox*, it is fair to assume that the conventional meaning of terms is equally nondetachable from them.

I think it is fair to assume that Mackie’s terminology in *Ethics* follows that from *Truth, Probability, and Paradox*. But this means that if an assumption of objective value is part of the basic, conventional meaning of moral terms, then this assumption cannot be detached from those terms. This also explains why Mackie states that “[a]ny analysis of meanings of moral terms which omits this claim to objective, intrinsic, prescriptivity is to that extent incomplete.” (1977, 35)

But then again, Mackie’s statement in the passage quoted above is hedged as well: he writes that “I do not think it is going too far” to say that the assumption of objectivity is part of the basic, conventional meaning of moral terms. I suggest that we read this an expression of sympathy for a strong moral error theory, but it certainly falls short of an endorsement. If this was one of his central theses, he most likely would have chosen a different wording. “I do not think it is going too far” leaves the impression that he is not really all that clear himself whether his position vindicates a strong or merely a weak moral error theory. I will try to explain why he may have felt that settling this question is not essential for his philosophical project in the next section.

3. How Much Conceptual Analysis Does Mackie Need?

Early in his career, Mackie wrote quite a bit about ethics. His very first⁶ publication (1946) was “A refutation of morals,” which already contains some crucial elements of *Ethics*—including versions of Mackie’s arguments against objective values, although there stated as arguments against objective moral facts. Notably, Mackie (1946) does endorse a strong moral error theory in this paper:

If moral predicates were admitted to be what the moral sceptic says they are, we should never be able to extol a state of affairs as good in any sense which would induce people to bring it about, unless they already wanted it, though we might point out that this state had features which in fact they did desire, though they had not realised this: we should never be able to recommend any course of action, except in such terms as “if you want to be rich, be economical”; nor could we give commands by any moral authority, though we might again advise “if you don’t want a bullet through your brains,

⁶A list of Mackie’s publications was compiled by Joan Mackie (1985) in a volume in honor of Mackie after his death.

come quietly”; and we should never be able to lecture anyone on his wickedness—an alarming prospect. (Mackie 1946, 83)

Later in that paper, Mackie (1946, 85) states that in using moral terms “we are falsely postulating or asserting something of the form ‘this is right.’” So, contrary to Berker, Mackie *was* an error theorist even in the modern sense, at least at some point in his life—but, of course, he may well have changed his mind in the following 30 years.

Perhaps more important for us, though, are his views on other ethical theorists at the time. On the one hand he opposes non-cognitivism, specifically emotivism as advocated by Charles Stevenson: he agrees with others that to say that moral talk amounts to merely expressing attitudes like the exclamations “boo!” and “hurray!” do is just implausible as a matter of conceptual analysis. (Mackie 1946, 80–81) However, he also opposes another perspective that he considers to be quite common within Ordinary Language Philosophy. This comes out in his discussion of Stephen Toulmin.⁷ Mackie (1951a, 123–24) ascribes a “conformist” tendency to Toulmin according to which an ethical theory would need to be “true to the facts of our usage” (Toulmin 1950, 191) of ethical terms. In a later methodological lecture, Mackie (1956, 9–14) uses this attitude exhibited by Toulmin (and by Kurt Baier, who advocates a similar methodology) as an example of Ordinary Language Philosophy overstepping its boundaries and inferring facts about the world from linguistic analysis. Notably, Mackie uses the term “conformist” in that lecture as well. (Mackie 1956, 13)⁸

We can find that rejection of “conformism” in Mackie’s methodological work in *Truth, Probability, and Paradox* again. He writes there:

⁷The same point about methodology also comes out in his response to criticisms of his teacher John Anderson, brought forward by Gilbert Ryle. (Mackie 1951b)

⁸I discuss Mackie’s distinction between conceptual and factual analysis in greater detail in Lossau (2019).

[T]here is the question whether a certain concept has a correct or legitimate application, whether there is anything in the world—as contrasted, perhaps, with our established ways of thinking and speaking—which conforms to that concept, or which we have reason to believe to conform to it. (Mackie 1973, 155)

In the most general methodological paper of that volume, Mackie (1973, 11) writes that he wants to reject the assumption that “ordinary language is in order.” Instead, he proposes that we distinguish between conceptual analysis and “factual analysis.” The purpose of conceptual analysis is to understand the concepts present in our thinking and expressed by the terms we use; meanwhile a factual analysis is supposed to reveal what kind of entities exist in the world. These two investigations are, according to Mackie, both important parts of philosophy, but they are independent insofar as the factual analysis may show that the things our concepts appear to refer to actually do not exist. Mackie (1973, 11) there cites Hume’s analysis of causation as an instance of such a situation.

These methodological remarks cohere with his criticisms of moral theorists I cited above: emotivism fails on account of bad conceptual analysis. While attitudes of approval and disapproval may very well go along with moral judgments, it is implausible to say that this is all we mean when we attribute moral goodness or badness to an action. On the other hand, Toulmin neglects the factual analysis: even if he is right about the meaning of moral terms, this should not allow him to infer that the expressed moral statements are actually correct. We need to do further work to investigate the nature of moral values to establish any conclusion regarding the question whether our ordinary language and thinking are “in order” or not.

This shines some light on Mackie’s dialectical goals in *Ethics*. At the end of chapter 1, he argues that aside from the case for moral skepticism,

of almost equal importance are the preliminary removal of misunderstandings that often prevent [moral skepticism] from being

considered fairly and explicitly, and the isolation of those items about which the moral sceptic is sceptical from many associated qualities and relations whose objective status is not in dispute. (Mackie 1977, 49)

I think we can characterize the removal of misunderstandings with the two following points:

Against revisionary analyses: Our moral terms assume (or largely assume) the existence of objective values. But this means that naturalism and non-cognitivism as theories of moral discourse fail.

Against conformism: No objective values exist, but our moral language and thought assume the existence of such values. That means that moral terms cannot be guides to what value really is.

We have already seen the way Mackie uses the conceptual analysis of moral statements as a way of repudiating non-cognitive and naturalist analyses, calling them “incomplete” on account of not accommodating the “claim to objective, intrinsic, prescriptivity.” (1977, 35) He reiterates this point in the conclusion of chapter 1, stating that “ordinary moral judgements involve a claim to objectivity which both non-cognitive and naturalist analyses fail to capture.” (1977, 48) Mackie also is clear throughout the book that the “ingrained” assumption of objectivity is false, thereby rejecting the conformist attitude in general. We can see a more specific rejection of that attitude towards the end of the book when talking about determinism. (1977, 219) Mackie there argues that even if our moral thought may presuppose that we are not determined, this would not be an argument against determinism. “The facts have to be determined by empirical evidence, and our thinking has then to conform to the facts, not the facts to our thinking.”

I have argued that Mackie’s primary goals in part I of *Ethics* are to reject analyses of moral terms and concepts that omit the claim to objectivity and to repudiate the conformist methodology. But this can explain why he is so non-committal with respect to the

exact role the assumption of objectivity plays in our moral judgements. All Mackie needs to show is that this assumption exists and that it is *at least* typically part of the meaning of moral statements. It may or may not be possible to make moral statements that do not imply this assumption—this is a question Mackie does not need to decide on. Objective values may be typically or universally implied by moral statements. But in either case, a conceptual analysis has to accommodate this implication, or else it will be incomplete—and that is something non-cognitivist and naturalist analyses of moral language and thought cannot do. Even if it is possible to assert moral statements without implying that objective values exist, there remains a problem of explaining why there is such an implication in the vast majority of cases. But once we accept a naturalist or non-cognitive analysis of moral statements, we have deprived ourselves of the explanatory resources needed to give such an explanation—we are precisely claiming that *there are no such implications* of the existence of objective values. All that remains for the non-cognitivist and the naturalist is to frame their position as one that, on reflection, provides a charitable re-interpretation of moral statements.

This role of the assumption of objective values, combined with Mackie’s arguments against their existence, also means that conformism is bound to fail: there is at least some error in our ordinary language and thinking, showing that simply trusting our common sense will not be enough. Both of these points can be made without deciding whether to accept a weak or a strong moral error theory. And this is why Mackie hedges himself consistently when hinting at a strong moral error theory: he wants to allow this view, and may even find it plausible, but he may want to side-step actually committing himself to it so as to avoid criticism that misses his main point. As Mackie (1977, 48) puts it, “moral scepticism, the denial of objective values, is not to be confused with. . . any linguistic or conceptual analysis.”

4. Mackie on Subjective Value

So far, my argument has been that Mackie wants to reject both revisionary and conformist views, and that he does not need to take a stance on whether strong moral error theory to do so. This explains why Mackie consistently hedges any endorsement of strong moral error theory: he wants to—and can—stay neutral on whether anything beyond a weak moral error theory is actually correct. But as I discussed in Section 1, Moberger, Berker, and Ridge provide two other observations in favor of their reading: the fact that Mackie labels himself a “moral subjectivist,” and the fact that Mackie appears to be engaging in normative ethics in part II of *Ethics*. Do either of these observations create a problem for the neutral interpretation?

First, Moberger, Berker, and Ridge rightly emphasize that Mackie really was a moral subjectivist. As Berker (2019, 20) points out, Mackie (1985, 108) writes shortly after *Ethics* that “[m]oral entities—values or standards or whatever they may be—belong within human thinking and practice: they are either explicitly or implicitly posited, adopted, or laid down.” Berker also complains that Mackie offers no convincing account of how exactly these entities come into existence. Moberger (2017, 7–8) and Ridge (2020, 9), however, point out that Mackie talks at some length about the requirements arising through *institutions*, including moral institutions. So, roughly speaking, moral values could be socially constructed by reference to societal institutions.

Mackie provides some clarifications about the sense in which he may be called a moral subjectivist, of which Berker (2019, 10–11) gives some useful discussion. In particular, Mackie (1977, 17) makes it clear that he *neither* endorses a first-order subjectivism according to which “everyone really ought to do whatever he thinks he should,” *nor* does he accept a second-order view about the meaning of moral terms and statements according to which “moral judgements are equivalent to reports of the speaker’s own feelings or attitudes.” Mackie distinguishes his view from this latter position in two ways:

First, what I have called moral scepticism is a negative doctrine, not a positive one: it says what there isn’t, not what there is. It says that there do not exist entities or relations of a certain kind, objective values or requirements, which many people have believed to exist. . .

Secondly, what I have called moral scepticism is an ontological thesis, not a linguistic or conceptual one. It is not, like the other doctrine often called moral subjectivism, a view about the meaning of moral statements. (Mackie 1977, 17–18)

Around these passages, Mackie clarifies that in order to be plausible, his theory will need to say something about what the meaning of moral statements is, and how we have come to have false beliefs about moral values. But he insists that any such explanation would be a development of moral skepticism, not its core.

Mackie goes on to acknowledge that his denial of objective moral values is indeed a consequence of the type of moral subjectivism he is distinguishing himself from, but that the converse is not true:

Indeed, if all our moral statements were subjective reports [of feelings or attitudes], it would follow that at least so far as we are aware of them, there are no objective values. If we were aware of them, we would say something about them. In this sense this sort of subjectivism entails moral scepticism. But the converse entailment does not hold. The denial that there are objective values does not commit one to any particular view about what moral statements mean, and certainly not the view that they are equivalent to subjective reports. No doubt if moral values are not objective, they are in some very broad sense subjective, and for this reason I would accept ‘moral subjectivism’ as an alternative name to ‘moral scepticism.’ But subjectivism in this broad sense must be distinguished from the specific doctrine about meaning referred to above. (Mackie 1977, 18)

Berker (2019, 11) rightly points out that this passage refutes the idea that Mackie was a moral nihilist, i.e., someone who believes that there is no such thing as moral value whatsoever. That view would indeed be inconsistent with semantic subjectivism, rather

than being entailed by it. The point Mackie is trying to make here, though, is rather clear: semantic subjectivism entails (or at least makes it highly plausible) that there are no objective values; but the claim that there are no objective values does not entail semantic subjectivism. Mackie, once again, is trying to distance himself from views about the meaning of moral statements here.

These passages can provide further evidence for the claim that Mackie opposes revisionary analyses of our moral language: he points out that if we can show that there are no objective values, this does not entail any particular view about the meaning of moral statements. He, quite clearly, adopts subjectivism about moral values that is limited to the level of factual analysis and does not require any commitment to a conceptual analysis. The fact that Mackie identified as a moral subjectivist in this sense, then, does not establish the pruning interpretation to be correct: for pruning to be possible, we need to assume that the commitment to objective values is detachable from our moral statements. The fact that Mackie thought that subjective values *exist* does not suffice to vindicate that idea. Instead, I think that Mackie's insistence on rejecting any conceptual analysis as part of the "core" of his subjectivism favors the neutral interpretation. If it does indeed turn out that while a commitment to objectivity is merely typically part of the meaning of moral statements, then the pruning interpretation could provide a useful extension of Mackie's view. But if it turns out that the commitment to objective values is necessarily tied to our moral statements, then moral subjectivism as Mackie formulates it will not be refuted by that fact—because it is limited to the nature of value, and is not committed to a particular conceptual analysis of moral statements.

What about the second point: Mackie's engagement with normative ethics in part II of *Ethics*? He begins this part by summing up his work so far, stating his anti-conformist position that "no substantive moral conclusions or serious constraints on moral views can be derived from either the meaning of moral terms or

the logic of moral discourse." (Mackie 1977, 105) Instead, he suggests that "[m]orality is not to be discovered but to be made: we have to decide what moral views to adopt, what moral stands to take." (1977, 106) Mackie (1977, 199), at the end of part II, states that he is most concerned with the "method implicit in my treatment" which avoids appeal to "mythical objective values." He admits that his approach "could be called, in a very broad sense, a rule utilitarian one, since any specific development of it would be based on some conception of the flourishing of human life," but he rejects any unitary idea of "happiness" that is typically associated with these views.

A good illustration of his approach are his remarks of international treaties as an example of promising:

What if the rulers of country A have promised those of country B that if country C attacks B then A will go to war with C? If C does attack B, should the promise be kept? On a particular occasion, this may be very hard to decide. Nor is it easy to say when, if ever, it will be right to give such assurances. But once again it is better to turn from the problem of deciding in a particular case to the choice of a regular pattern of conduct. One fairly clear point is that as a standing practice the giving of shaky assurances of this sort... is likely to be worse than either giving no such assurances or giving only ones which will be fulfilled. For where there are shaky assurances, the opposing parties are likely each to interpret them optimistically from their point of view. That is, the rulers of C are likely to believe that A will not go to war if they attack B, while the rulers of B are likely to believe that A will do so. (Mackie 1977, 185)

Mackie's approach here is to evaluate a "pattern of conduct" rather than an individual action, in this case the pattern of giving "shaky assurances." He concludes that this pattern overall has bad consequences for everyone involved. Importantly, this evaluation applies to the institution of promising in general: all sides will benefit if such an institution is in place, and if promises are given with a full degree of assurance, so that not keeping one's promise can be reprehended. For these kinds of reasons, Mackie (1977, 190) argues more generally that "almost everyone

should, in his own interest, welcome the fact that there is, and hope there will continue to be, some system of morality” and that if one is unsatisfied with the existing system, one may try to modify it, but cannot have an interest to destroy it.

Again, we can see that Mackie thinks that the factual existence of such a system relies on institutions, and not on moral discourse or judgments. It is possible to theorize about such a system, both in terms of its actual features and in term of what features would make it more beneficial, without reference to moral discourse. Neither do we need to rely on evidence from our moral language, nor do we need to suggest that our language should be re-interpreted to match our results. We may want to put forward a “reform proposal” aimed at changing the meaning of our moral terms in a way that better reflects realities; but such a proposal would not be an *analysis* of these terms in any sense.

One might have a more subtle worry about Mackie’s proposal in part II of *Ethics*, though:⁹ if a strong moral error theory was indeed correct, then how could it be possible to even talk about subjective moral value? After all, it would seem that to do so one would need to employ moral terminology. And given this, is the fact that Mackie talks about morality, even as something to be invented, not evidence that he presupposes that strong moral error theory is false? I think there is indeed a philosophical tension here, and I do not wish to make a judgment as to whether Mackie manages to avoid this problem. He does, however, seem to be aware of this tension, and appears to make an effort to avoid reliance on “loaded” moral terminology. For example, consider this passage at the beginning of chapter 8:

When we set out to sketch a practical system of morality in the broad sense, the question which we naturally begin by asking is Aristotle’s: ‘What is the good life for man?’ And, remembering the discussion in chapter 2, we may willingly admit that ‘good’ here is indeterminate. The good life will be such as to satisfy the interests

⁹I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this worry.

in question; that is, the interests of those who participate in the good life. . . but also ours: what we call the good life must be one that we can welcome and approve. (Mackie 1977, 169)

Mackie here continues to use the word “good” in a broad sense that does not assume objective value, and he relies on notions such as *interest*, *welcoming*, and *approving*. This, I think, indicates that Mackie is at least attempting not to rely on language that could potentially “smuggle in” objective value—language that could be used to make truthful statements even if a strong moral error theory was correct.¹⁰ Whether Mackie succeeds in avoiding this is, I think, an open question. But the fact that he appears to recognize this as a potential problem indicates that Mackie considers strong moral error theory to be at least a “live” option.

I have argued that Mackie is primarily interested in the question about the nature of moral value: he argues that there are no objective values, and he believes that there is a kind of subjective value that arises through things like institutions. The standard reading of Mackie also attributes to him the view that our moral language and thinking is necessarily tied to the idea that there

¹⁰There is a sense in which Mackie is relying on moral truths here: statements like “The good life will be such as to satisfy the interests in question” must be able to be truthful even if a strong moral error theory is correct (if Mackie is indeed to stay neutral on whether it is correct). Mackie makes an effort here to avoid distinctively moral vocabulary like “right,” “duty,” or the word “moral” itself. Mackie (1977, 199–200) later states that his approach could be called rule utilitarian “in a very broad sense,” but that “it would be utilitarianism without its characteristic fictions.” But a naturalist may be satisfied with this broad sense of what constitutes a moral theory, and might be happy to call statements moral that involve only terms like “interest” and “approving.” While Mackie has argued against revisionary analyses that reduce terms of the first category to terms of the second category, which naturalists sometimes suggest, he does allow that there are moral truths (in a wider sense of “moral”) that can be expressed in terms of the second category. A strong moral error theory can therefore be taken to only hold for a narrower understanding of “moral” statements and judgments, ones that are not straightforwardly descriptive of features of the natural world. (Thanks to Anthony Skelton for raising this point.)

are objective values. Moberger, Berker, and Ridge rightly point out that this reading is not supported by the way Mackie states his position in *Ethics* and in papers following it. Moberger and Ridge furthermore argue for a different interpretation, namely that the reference to objective values can be detached from our moral statements and judgments, and that this is what Mackie recommends. I have made the case that this interpretation is also not supported by Mackie's writings. Mackie appears to leave the door open for both possibilities: it may or may not be possible to re-state moral claims in a way that not imply the existence of moral values—Mackie takes no position on this question. On my view, Mackie is not primarily interested in laying out the meaning of moral statements, and he engages in it only insofar it supports his views about the nature of value. In particular, he wants to reject the “conformist” view, according to which we are entitled to take the meaning of moral statements to be indicative of the nature of moral value. Mackie argues that the fact that we *at least typically* assume the existence of objective values shows that conformism cannot be correct—because those objective values do not exist. In addition, Mackie also rejects the revisionary strategy according to which we can re-interpret the meaning of moral statements in a way that allows for them to be true. This, Mackie argues, is methodologically unsound, which is why he makes it clear that this is not a part of his position. Mackie can achieve both of these goals without providing a full conceptual analysis of our moral language and thought. My view therefore is that Mackie remains neutral on the question whether we are able to make moral statements without assuming the existence of objective values.

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