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Not Just Errors: A New Interpretation of Mackie's Error Theory

Victor Moberger

J. L. Mackie famously argued that a commitment to non-existent objective values permeates ordinary moral thought and discourse. According to a standard interpretation, Mackie construed this commitment as a universal and indeed essential feature of moral judgments. In this paper I argue that we should rather ascribe to Mackie a form of semantic pluralism, according to which not all moral judgments involve the commitment to objective values. This interpretation not only makes better sense of what Mackie actually says, but also renders his error theory immune to a powerful objection.

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1. Introduction

J. L. Mackie famously argued that a metaphysical error permeates ordinary moral thought and discourse. Roughly put, the error consists in a commitment to objective values, when there are in fact no such things. Mackie called this view an "error theory" (1977, 35).¹

My aim in this paper is exegetical. I will be concerned with the issue of how to properly understand Mackie's error theory. It seems to me that he is widely misunderstood, and I will suggest a different interpretation which makes better sense of what he actually says. More specifically, I will argue that Mackie's moral semantics is more complicated than is usually assumed.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2 I present Mackie's error theory and its standard interpretation. In section 3 I argue against this interpretation and in favor of my alternative interpretation, which is then further fleshed out and defended in section 4. Finally, in section 5 I suggest that the proposed interpretation renders Mackie's error theory immune to a powerful objection.

¹Mackie defended the error theory already in a 1946 paper, dramatically titled "A Refutation of Morals." The central work in this context is however Mackie's seminal *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977). Relevant discussions are also found in his *Hume's Moral Theory* (1980) and *The Miracle of Theism* (1982).

2. Mackie's Error Theory and the Standard Interpretation

Mackie's error theory has two parts, one *semantic* and the other *ontological*.

According to the semantic part, ordinary moral thought and talk involve what Mackie calls "a claim to objectivity, an assumption that there are objective values" (1977, 35).² By "objective values" Mackie has in mind facts or properties with a special kind of prescriptive or action-guiding *authority*. One gets the impression that he struggles to convey the content of this notion, using a wide variety of terms, phrases, and (sometimes bizarre) metaphors. These seemingly point in different directions, and it is a good question exactly what Mackie is after.³ For present purposes, however, it is sufficient to highlight one prominent theme in Mackie's explication, namely the idea that objective values would be *objectively* prescriptive, in that the prescriptions or requirements would be independent of us and our beliefs, desires, social conventions, and so forth. He writes:

²Unless otherwise indicated, subsequent parenthetical page references are to Mackie (1977).

³Throughout the first chapter of *Ethics* the prescriptive authority of objective values is alternately characterized as "external," "intrinsic," "objective," "necessary," "categorical," and "absolute." In addition to this action-guiding aspect, Mackie thinks objective values would also be action-motivating, in the sense that mere acquaintance with an objective value would be sufficient to ensure compliance, overriding any other potential source of motivation (23–24, 40). Concerning bizarre metaphors: At one point Mackie compares a demand for payment to an "immaterial suction-pipe" or "invisible hook reaching out... and fishing for the money". Similarly, being obligated is likened to being "tied down [by] an invisible cord" (74). Richard Joyce (2001, 28–29) suggests an interesting diagnosis of these metaphors (and a similar one used by Bentham). Rather than reflecting eccentricity on Mackie's part, they may be a symptom of *nonsensicality* built into the very heart of our notion of moral authority, a notion which (so the suggestion goes) simply cannot be explicated in clear terms without losing its pre-theoretical flavor. See also Joyce (2008, 257).

Someone who uses the concept of objective moral value will suppose that there are requirements which simply are there, in the nature of things, without being the requirements of any person or body of persons, even God. (59)

According to the semantic part of the error theory, then, ordinary moral thought and discourse involve ascriptions of objectively prescriptive properties to actions and other objects of evaluation.

According to the ontological part, however, the world does not (and perhaps could not) validate this claim to objectivity. As Mackie succinctly puts it: “There are no objective values” (15). His primary reason for drawing this conclusion is that objective values are just too metaphysically weird (or “queer”) to exist (38–42).⁴ “If there were objective values,” he says, “then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe” (38). What makes objective values metaphysically suspicious from Mackie’s point of view appears to be that they cannot be accommodated within a scientific or naturalistic worldview. Such a worldview has room for requirements or prescriptions which can be accounted for in terms of scientifically respectable natural properties, such as psychological or social properties. Objective prescriptions cannot (even in principle) be understood in such a way, however, and so to accommodate them we need to postulate metaphysically extravagant *non-natural* facts and properties. We should not just avoid postulating such facts or properties; we should *deny* that there are any such things.⁵

⁴Another reason is the prevalence of moral *disagreement*, which Mackie takes to support the claim that our moral judgments are not causally shaped by objective values; instead they reflect our “ways of life.” This, in turn, he takes to suggest that there are no objective values (1946, 78–79; 1977, 36–38).

⁵This, at least, is a common interpretation of how Mackie’s argument from queerness is supposed to work. See for example Timmons (1999, 49–51) and Sturgeon (2006, 93, 110). Note however that Mackie does not think that postulating non-natural facts and properties is *sufficient* to make room for objective prescriptions. He denies, after all, that divine commands—presumably

According to Mackie’s error theory, then, ordinary moral thought and language involve a commitment to non-existent objective values. That much is beyond controversy. There are questions, however, about how the theory construes the scope and modal status of this commitment. According to the standard interpretation (see, e.g., Smith 1994, 64; Joyce 2001, 16–17; Shafer-Landau 2003, 19–20; Finlay 2008, 347–52; Olson 2014, 41), Mackie makes the following two claims:

- (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).

This interpretation seems to me mistaken. In the following two sections I will argue that Mackie accepts neither (1) nor (2). I will also defend a specific alternative interpretation.

3. Semantic Pluralism

We should rather interpret Mackie as a semantic *pluralist*.⁶ On this interpretation Mackie holds that there are two different strands of moral discourse, about which different semantic stories should be told. One of these strands is the objectivist one, which essentially involves the metaphysically erroneous commitment to objective values. There is no doubt that Mackie thinks of this claim to objectivity as pervasive. As he puts it, “the traditional moral concepts of the ordinary man as well as of the main line of western philosophers are concepts of objective

paradigmatic examples of non-natural entities—would do (1977, 59; 1982, 114–15; cf. 1977, 48, 230–31).

⁶This type of view is developed in Gill (2009) and Francén Olinder (2012). See also Loeb (2008) and Joyce (2012). For criticism, see Johansson and Olson (2015).

value" (35).⁷ However, on the pluralist view that I will ascribe to Mackie there is also an additional strand of moral discourse, one that does not involve the claim to objectivity.

If there is such a non-objectivist strand, then it follows that moral judgments are not essentially committed to objective values—if some sentences and thoughts manage to be moral ones without involving the claim to objectivity, then this claim cannot be an essential feature of moral judgments. Thus, (2) implies (1), and so if Mackie holds a pluralist view, which implies that (1) is false, then we have to assume that he denies (2) as well. But there is also independent evidence that Mackie denies (2), as we will see below. This, in turn, supports a pluralist interpretation, as the pluralist view makes it intelligible how the claim to objectivity could be merely contingent. If all of our actual moral judgments are committed to objective values, then it is not clear how this commitment could be removed without "changing the subject." There is no such difficulty if there is *already* a non-objectivist strand of moral discourse.

In section 4 I will ascribe to Mackie a particular view of how non-objective moral judgments behave semantically. First, however, I want to support the claim that he thinks there *are* such judgments. The following four subsections build a cumulative case for this interpretation, with each of them pointing to a separate piece of evidence.

3.1. The way Mackie presents the claim to objectivity in moral discourse

Let me begin by simply quoting some passages which immediately suggest that the standard interpretation is mistaken (emphases added):

⁷Mackie cites Plato, Aristotle, Cudworth, Clarke, Price, Kant, Sidgwick, and Moore as examples of this main line of western philosophers (23–24, 30–32, 46). Here one gets the impression that Mackie thinks a person's *metaethical* beliefs bear importantly on whether or not their first-order moral judgments involve the claim to objectivity.

[I]t can plausibly be maintained at least that *many* moral judgements contain a categorically imperative element. (29)

[M]ost people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive . . . (35)⁸

[In] everyday moral judgements . . . the claim for moral authority . . . is *ordinarily* there . . . (41–42)

[E]thical uses [of "good"] are particularly *likely* to [involve] the concept of objective moral value . . . (59)

[T]he *main* ethical use [of "good"] does refer to supposed intrinsic requirements . . . (63)

The belief in objective moral requirements [is] implicit in *much* ordinary moral thinking . . . (1980, 141–42)

These would be odd things for Mackie to say if he thought that the claim to objectivity was a universal feature of moral judgments. This counts against the standard interpretation.

It is of course possible that Mackie is merely expressing uncertainty about whether the claim to objectivity applies to all moral judgments, and so the quoted passages admittedly do not force a pluralist interpretation (on which he holds that it does not). But they are at least congenial with such an interpretation.

3.2. The way Mackie formulates his ontological claim

A pluralist interpretation further allows us to make sense of the way Mackie formulates the denial of objective values. He never says that there are no moral values, only that there are no *objective* moral values. Even more telling are phrases like "values are not objective" (15) and "moral values are not objective" (18). These phrases suggest that Mackie does not deny that there

⁸Joyce and Kirchin (2010, xi–xii) notice Mackie's use of the phrase "most people" in this passage, but do not take it to indicate his real view. This would perhaps be reasonable if the passage in question were an anomaly in Mackie's presentation. But it is not.

are moral values; what he denies is rather that the moral values that exist are objective.⁹ The same goes for his choice of the term “moral subjectivism” (in addition to “moral scepticism”) to refer to the denial of objective values (the term “moral nihilism” being conspicuously absent). The title of the first chapter of *Ethics*—“The Subjectivity of Values”—is a further case in point.¹⁰

Granted, by “values” Mackie appears to have in mind moral *properties* or *facts*, rather than moral *judgments*, and the ontological claim that there are non-objective moral properties or facts does not by itself entail the semantic claim that there are non-objective moral judgments ascribing such properties or stating such facts. But the two claims are certainly congenial, and given that Mackie accepts the former it is plausible to ascribe to him also the latter.

Moreover, if Mackie accepts that there are non-objective moral properties and facts, then we also have reason to think that he does not regard the commitment to objective values as essential to moral judgments. It would be surprising if he maintained that, even though there are non-objective moral properties and facts, judgments that ascribe such properties or state such facts could not possibly count as *moral* judgments (unless they also involved the claim to objectivity). As I suggested above, this in turn supports a pluralist interpretation, since the pluralist view explains how the claim to objectivity could be a merely contingent feature of moral judgments.

⁹This is also suggested by the way Mackie at one point summarizes his argument from queerness: “The difficulty of seeing how values could be objective is a fairly strong reason for thinking that they are not so” (24).

¹⁰Similar observations are made in Berker (2011). David Brink also suggests that Mackie is not a moral nihilist, but rather “adopts a constructivist or subjectivist position about the nature of value according to which we make or choose moral value” (1984, 112n3).

3.3. Mackie’s reform proposal for moral discourse

Another virtue of a pluralist interpretation is that it helps us make sense of Mackie’s reform proposal for moral discourse. It may appear somewhat paradoxical that Mackie, having argued for a moral error theory in the first part of *Ethics*, should go on in the second part of the book to argue in favor of various first-order moral views. On the face of it this seems analogous to first putting forward arguments in favor of atheism, and then going on to engage in theological disputes.

Mackie emphasizes, however, that moral discourse fulfills a vital social function, and so we cannot just discard it the way we discarded for example phlogiston discourse upon discovering its errors.¹¹ Rather, he suggests that we stop trying to discover objective moral truths, and . . .

. . . look at the matter in another way. Morality is not to be discovered but to be made: we have to decide what moral views to adopt, what moral stands to take. . . . [T]he object of the exercise [is] to decide what to do, what to support and what to condemn. . . .
(106)

It is not quite transparent what Mackie is saying here. Evidently he thinks we should retain the moral vocabulary as a socially useful means of influencing human behavior. But it is less obvious how the sketched scenario should be understood in metaethical terms.

Let us consider three possible interpretations, two of which assume that Mackie thinks of the claim to objectivity as essential to moral judgments. One possibility, given this assumption, is that he is suggesting that we continue to make moral judgments, and thus that we continue to believe and utter falsehoods, but (somehow) consciously and with an eye to their usefulness. In other

¹¹He writes: “Men sometimes display active malevolence to one another, but even apart from that they are almost always concerned more with their selfish ends than with helping one another. The function of morality is primarily to counteract this limitation of men’s sympathies” (108).

words, nothing would change from a semantic point of view: we would still ascribe non-existent (or at least non-instantiated) objective moral properties to actions, people, social arrangements, etc.

Another possibility is that Mackie is suggesting that we stop making moral judgments altogether, and start using the moral vocabulary to do something else. Perhaps we might do with it what some rival semantic theory claims we have been doing all along, and which would amount to making moral judgments if that theory were correct. For example, we might start using the moral vocabulary to express our conative attitudes, or describe natural relations between our conative attitudes and various courses of action, or perhaps even to engage in some elaborate moral fiction. None of these alternatives would count as engaging in *moral* discourse, however.

If, on the other hand, we drop the assumption that Mackie thinks of the claim to objectivity as essential to moral judgments, then we can interpret him as saying that we should abandon the commitment to objective values without thereby abandoning moral discourse. We would still be making moral judgments, although ones that are free of metaphysical error.

This third interpretation strikes me as most plausible. The first interpretation (on which Mackie is suggesting that we continue to make objective moral judgments) is hard to reconcile with his talk of morality as something “to be made” (106). Morality would be made only in the trivial sense that we would form moral judgments, which is not plausibly what Mackie has in mind. Moreover, having weighed the pros and cons of morality, he suggests that we “are more likely to get its benefits without its disadvantages if we see through its claim to absolute or objective authority” (1980, 156). Although we might be able to see through the claim to objectivity and yet continue to make objective moral judgments, perhaps by compartmentalizing our minds in the way suggested by Jonas Olson (2014, 190–96), a

more straightforward interpretation is that Mackie is suggesting that the claim to objectivity be abandoned.¹²

The second interpretation (on which Mackie is suggesting that we use the moral vocabulary to do something other than to make moral judgments) also seems implausible, since he describes the scenario as one in which we would have a morality, and in which we would adopt moral views and take moral stands. “My hope,” he says, “is that concrete moral issues can be argued out without appeal to any mythical objective values or requirements or obligations” (199). Of course, he *might* mean by this merely that we should continue to use the moral vocabulary, but that would not be a charitable reading.

Given that the third interpretation is most plausible, we have further evidence that Mackie does not think of the claim to objectivity as essential to moral judgments—if it were essential then it would not be possible to abandon it and still make moral judgments. This, in turn, supports a pluralist interpretation, since the pluralist view explains how the suggested reform (as I have interpreted it) is possible. What Mackie is suggesting, then, is that we abandon the objectivist strand of moral discourse, and latch onto the metaphysically innocuous non-objectivist strand.¹³

¹²An anonymous referee objected that it is not so far-fetched to read Mackie as suggesting compartmentalization, the reason being that Mackie does not think compartmentalization is problematic from a psychological point of view, but rather suggests that it is a frequently occurring phenomenon, at least with respect to religious belief (1982, 220–21). But my claim is not that we should interpret Mackie as suggesting that the claim to objectivity be abandoned because he sees some *psychological* problem with compartmentalization. Rather, it is because otherwise it is hard to make sense of his talk of morality as something to be made, and because it is the natural interpretation of his talk of the benefits of seeing through the claim to objectivity. Admittedly it would have been better from my point of view if Mackie had regarded compartmentalization as psychologically intractable, but my argument does not hinge on this.

¹³How such a reform is supposed to be brought about in *practice* is of course a further issue. If we are to abandon the judgments that involve the claim to objectivity, we must first be able to identify them. Mackie does not

3.4. Mackie's clarification of his ontological claim

Further support for a pluralist interpretation is provided by some remarks that Mackie makes while countering a potential misunderstanding of his ontological claim. He emphasizes that the denial of objective values is a second-order, metaethical, thesis, not a first-order, substantive, moral view. In particular, he stresses that it should not be confused with the substantive view that the currently accepted, conventional morality is corrupt. He then writes:

These first and second order views are not merely distinct but completely independent: one could be a second order moral sceptic without being a first order one A man could hold strong moral views, and indeed ones whose content was thoroughly conventional, while believing that they were simply attitudes and policies with regard to conduct that he and other people held. (16)

Here Mackie first points out that second-order moral skepticism (that is, the denial of objective values) does not imply first-order moral skepticism (that is, the substantive view that the conventional morality is objectionable). And, interestingly, to illustrate this independence he says that the former is compatible with substantive moral views which line up with the conventional ones.¹⁴

In an attempt to reconcile this passage with the standard interpretation, Olson (2014, 41n75) interprets it as saying that the

discuss this issue explicitly, but my impression is that he would point to the speaker/thinker's *metaethical* beliefs as one important factor. Abandoning the claim to objectivity would then (at least in part) be a matter of abandoning the metaethical belief that there are objective values. How *that* might be achieved is however also a practical issue without any obvious answer.

¹⁴If the denial of objective values is compatible with conventional moral views, then presumably it is compatible also with non-conventional ones. Thus, when Mackie in the above quote says that first- and second-order moral skepticism are "completely independent," he means that they neither imply nor exclude one another.

combination in question is *psychologically* possible. I find this interpretation far-fetched in light of Mackie's agenda in the present context, which is to clarify what the denial of objective values amounts to. Clarifying a claim is a matter of spelling out its *logical* or *inferential* relations to other claims, not pointing out which claims it is psychologically possible to accept in combination with it. Moreover, the psychological possibility seems trivial, as many philosophers (coherently or not) hold strong moral views while adhering to anti-realist positions in metaethics.

Thus, Mackie's point cannot (merely) be that the combination in question is psychologically possible. A more plausible interpretation is that he (also) means to say that the *content* of his ontological view is compatible with the content of first-order moral judgments. It is difficult however to see how he could maintain this if he did not accept a pluralist semantics. If all moral judgments involved the claim to objectivity, the non-existence of objective values would render them all false.

David Enoch (2011, 42–43) also notes Mackie's compatibility claim, and suggests a different way of reconciling it with the standard interpretation (although he emphasizes that the exegetical issue as such is not his main concern). Enoch writes:

[P]erhaps Mackie thought that his metaethical error theory is not something people thinking about first-order morality should worry about, because—though it has first-order implications—it does not have discriminating implications (Enoch 2011, 43)

On this suggestion Mackie's thought goes as follows: although the denial of objective values does falsify moral judgments across the board, it has no implications concerning how to *adjudicate* first-order issues, and so can be safely ignored by those who engage in moral inquiry (assuming that moral inquiry is in some relevant sense ineliminable).

Enoch's reading is implausible, however. Mackie clearly thinks his ontological view has discriminating first-order implications, in that it leads him to think of moral inquiry as a form

of social engineering, which is subject to rather different, more practical, constraints than traditional philosophical inquiry. His dismissal of act utilitarianism as “wholly impracticable” (129) nicely illustrates this point. Hence, Mackie does not think that the denial of objective values is something with which first-order ethics need not concern itself, and so this is not plausibly what he means when he says that the two are “completely independent” (16). As I have suggested, what he has in mind is rather that no first-order moral judgment is logically implied or ruled out by his ontological view (the latter since no such judgment essentially involves the claim to objectivity).

4. Hybrid Account

What, then, does the non-objectivist strand of moral discourse amount to? Even though Mackie does not address this issue explicitly, there are passages which suggest that he endorses a kind of “hybrid account,” according to which non-objective moral judgments both describe natural facts and express the speaker’s conative attitudes.¹⁵ This account thus combines elements from two semantic theories that Mackie explicitly rejects when offered as *complete* accounts of our actual moral thought and talk, namely *non-cognitivism* and *naturalism* (32–35).¹⁶ I will now offer some support for this reading.

4.1. Speaking within the morality institution

Mackie contrasts objective requirements with what he calls “institutional” ones (82). Institutional requirements are intimately bound up with the workings of some form of human social practice (an institution), in which the participants conform to certain

behavioral patterns, and put socially backed (and perhaps enforced) pressure on each other to thus conform (80–82). Mackie points to the rules of chess to illustrate the nature of institutional requirements (80–81). Other examples that come to mind are rules of grammar or spelling, or requirements of fashion or etiquette.

In addition to non-moral institutions like the game of chess, Mackie thinks there is also an institution of *morality*.¹⁷ Just like the institution of chess requires that its participants do not move rooks diagonally, the morality institution requires of its participants not to steal, kill, break promises, etc. This talk of an institution requiring something is just a metaphorical way of talking about requirements which the participants, through complex patterns of social interaction, impose upon themselves and each other. As Mackie puts it, institutional requirements “are constituted by human thought, behaviour, feelings, and attitudes” (81).

Now, facts about what the institution of morality requires can be stated without making any moral judgment, even using seemingly moral expressions such as “stealing is wrong.” As Mackie puts it, such expressions can be used elliptically to describe the institution and its requirements “from the outside” (67), in which case we merely report a “sociological fact” (1980, 98n2). But we can also use this same language to “speak within the institution,” whereby the description of the institutional requirement is imbued with “evaluative and prescriptive force” (68), and thus counts as a moral judgment.¹⁸

¹⁷Or, rather, he appears to hold that there are several institutions which have the common property of being moral institutions, such as the institution of promising (which he focuses on) or the “institution of helping others” (79). It is not clear however by what criteria the moral institutions are to be distinguished from the non-moral ones, such as chess-playing. For example, are the institutions of etiquette or fashion moral institutions?

¹⁸According to Mackie, John Searle’s (1964) famous challenge to Hume’s Law fails partly due to equivocation on these two ways of speaking (66–72).

¹⁵See Schroeder (2009) for a critical survey of different views of this type.

¹⁶For classical statements of non-cognitivism, see Ayer (1946), Stevenson (1944), and Hare (1952). For influential statements of naturalism, see Westermarck (1932), Firth (1952), and Foot (1972).

It is not entirely easy to get a clear view of how Mackie thinks speaking within an institution differs from describing it from the outside. One possibility, congenial with the standard interpretation, is that a person who speaks within an institution believes or claims that the institution or its requirements are backed up by *objective* requirements. This does not seem to be what Mackie has in mind, however. First, he explicitly distinguishes between within-institutional judgments and judgments about objective prescriptions (69, 72). Secondly, the account is supposed to apply generally, and it would be odd if one had to believe or claim for example that the rules of chess are objectively sanctioned in order to speak within the chess-institution.

Rather, my impression is that the difference Mackie sees between the two ways of speaking has to do with certain *non-cognitive* aspects of the speaker or thinker. To speak within an institution is “to endorse the institution in a substantial way, to adopt and support certain distinctive patterns of behaviour and to condemn others” (72); someone who speaks within an institution “joins in expressing its demands” (75). This sounds like something non-cognitive.

This interpretation also gains support from Mackie’s remark that “[t]o speak within an institution is . . . to speak in those distinctive ways by speaking and thinking in which the participants help to constitute the institution” (1977, 81; see also 1980, 98n2). According to Mackie, an institution is constituted by the participants putting socially sanctioned pressure on each other (and themselves) to behave in certain characteristic ways (80–82). The relevant psychological states thus need to be motivationally efficacious, which suggests that Mackie has desire-like attitudes in mind.

The difference, then, between speaking within an institution and describing it from the outside is a matter of having and

expressing certain non-cognitive mental states in relation to the institution and its requirements. Thus, if I say that it is wrong to steal, speaking within the morality institution, then I am stating that there is an institutional requirement not to steal (this is the naturalist part), but I am also expressing certain conative attitudes pertaining to this institutional requirement (this is the non-cognitivist part).

This account of the non-objectivist strand squares with my above interpretation of Mackie’s reform proposal for moral discourse, and it is easy to reconcile with his talk of morality as something “to be made” and its object being “to decide what to do” (106). Once we abandon the old project of finding objective moral truths, what remains is to collectively shape the morality institution, the purpose of which is precisely to help us decide what to do (in particular to put pressure on individuals to act in ways that are collectively beneficial).¹⁹

4.2. A further complexity

On my interpretation Mackie thus maintains that there are two different ways of making moral judgments. One way is to ascribe to something an objective value-property. The other is to state an institutional fact while simultaneously expressing certain conative attitudes. His view is in fact even more complicated. Having distinguished between “the alleged objective intrinsic requirement” and “the speaker’s own endorsement of an institution and its demands” (72), Mackie goes on to say that these . . .

. . . do not normally occur in isolation, and views which single out any one of them as *the* meaning of moral terms are implausible and indeed incorrect analyses of ordinary moral language. (72, emphasis in original)

¹⁹This shaping of the morality institution is presumably what Mackie has in mind with the phrase “inventing right and wrong” from the subtitle to *Ethics*.

For a related criticism of Searle’s argument, and for helpful disambiguation of the is–ought gap, see Pigden (2016).

This remark is congenial with my interpretation, but it also suggests that Mackie thinks the two meanings are usually, but not always, intertwined.²⁰ Thus, in most cases when we say for example that some act morally ought to be performed, we are saying something with a composite meaning: we are saying that the act is objectively required, and that it is institutionally required, and in addition we are expressing certain conative attitudes in relation to this institutional requirement.²¹

What emerges is thus a rather complex moral semantics, much more so than is usually thought.²² But this should not be surprising in light of Mackie's warning that . . .

... [t]he more work philosophers have done on meaning, both in ethics and elsewhere, the more complications have come to light. It is by now pretty plain that no simple account of the meanings of first order moral statements will be correct, will cover adequately even the standard, conventional, senses of the main moral terms . . . (20)

By "simple account" I take it that Mackie has in mind classical accounts such as non-cognitivism, naturalism, and indeed the

²⁰This explains what Mackie means when he says that "most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, *among other things*, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive" (35, emphasis added).

²¹If this is right, and since Mackie says that most moral judgments are false (35), I take it that he thinks judgments with this composite meaning are false. Another possibility however is that they lack truth-value, due to having a non-cognitive component.

²²An anonymous referee objected that the interpretation offered here makes it puzzling why Mackie does not acknowledge a debt to Richard Robinson, who put forward a similar view in "The Emotive Theory of Ethics" (1948). Roughly put, Robinson's view is that moral judgments simultaneously ascribe (non-existent) objective moral properties and express conative attitudes (1948, 79–86). However, although there is this similarity, Robinson's view is importantly different from the one I have ascribed to Mackie. First, although Robinson (1948, 84) recognizes a certain degree of indeterminacy in the descriptive content of actual moral judgments, his view is not pluralist in the sense that it ascribes to them *variable* content. Secondly, it is no part of Robinson's view that moral judgments are descriptive of institutional requirements. Thus, it is not clear that Mackie's view is any less reminiscent of Robinson's on the standard interpretation.

view that he himself accepts on the standard interpretation. According to such accounts there is a single analysis that applies to all moral judgments, and on this analysis there is a single semantic function that they all perform. If I am right Mackie rejects both these notions.²³

5. A More Defensible Error Theory?

As we have seen, there is a lot to suggest that the standard interpretation of Mackie's moral semantics is mistaken. I conclude that Mackie accepts neither (1) that all moral judgments involve the claim to objectivity, nor (2) that the commitment to objective values is an essential feature of moral judgments. Instead he endorses a more complicated semantic view, according to which there are different kinds of moral judgments, some of which are purely institutional. Thus, Mackie's error theory should not be

²³An anonymous referee suggested that my interpretation may be anticipated in David Phillips' "Mackie on Practical Reason" (2010). Phillips ascribes to Mackie a "presupposition approach," according to which all evaluative/normative judgments make implicit appeal to some presupposed standard provided by the context (2010, 89–90). Sometimes the presupposed standard is institutional, as in Mackie's examples of "the grading of apples" and "the awarding of prizes at sheepdog trials" (26). Sometimes the presupposed standard is rather an agent's desire, as in the case of hypothetical imperatives. And sometimes the presupposed standard is objective, as in the case of categorical imperatives.

Phillips' interpretation is similar to mine in that it ascribes to Mackie a kind of pluralist semantics, according to which the propositional content of evaluative/normative thought and talk varies with contextual factors. However, the two interpretations are different in that I have focused specifically on Mackie's view of *moral* judgments, whereas Phillips ascribes to him a view of how evaluative/normative judgments function in general. Furthermore, the two interpretations are mutually independent in that neither presupposes the truth or falsity of the other. (Adopting Phillips' interpretation would however require a slight reformulation of my main claim. I would have to say instead that, according to Mackie, it is not an essential feature of moral judgments to presuppose objective standards, and that at least some actual moral judgments presuppose only institutional standards.)

understood the way it usually is, as the view that all moral judgments are false. His view is rather that *most* moral judgments are false, specifically those that involve the claim to objectivity.

Does this interpretation give Mackie a more defensible metaethical view, all things considered? This question raises many controversial metaethical issues, which I cannot do justice to here. Still, let me point to a consideration that significantly favors an affirmative answer.

It is one thing to assess how the above pluralist-hybrid semantics fares in comparison to the simpler view ascribed to Mackie by the standard interpretation, when these are looked at in isolation. Even if such a comparison should turn out to favor the latter, when conjoined with the denial of objective values (which we cannot avoid ascribing to Mackie anyway) the former does have an important advantage: it allows Mackie to deflect what would otherwise be a forceful argument against his error theory. The argument (sometimes referred to as the *Moorean* argument) goes as follows:

Mackie's error theory implies that *nothing* is morally right or wrong. But some things *are* morally right or wrong, and obviously so. For example, it is wrong to pour gasoline on a cat and set it on fire, just for a little bit of fun. Hence, Mackie's error theory is false.

This argument is potentially devastating in all its simplicity. It draws our attention to the fact that we face a choice: either deny Mackie's error theory, as construed by the standard interpretation, or conclude that all of our first-order moral convictions are false. At least some of these are about as compelling as any claim can be, and it is *prima facie* unlikely that a controversial philosophical theory could get the kind of leverage required to overturn them.²⁴

²⁴This point is stressed by Dworkin (1996, 117–18) and Huemer (2005, 115–17). See also Enoch (2011, 261–62).

Assuming the standard interpretation, then, it is safe to say that the Moorean argument puts serious pressure on Mackie's error theory.²⁵ But the pressure evaporates on a pluralist interpretation, since there will be no implication that nothing is morally right or wrong. More specifically, if we can speak within the institution of morality without committing ourselves to objective values, then their denial will not (or at least need not) contradict any first-order moral claim. Thus, we will not have to choose between denying Mackie's error theory or our first-order moral convictions.

One might worry, however, that the partly non-cognitivist semantics I have ascribed to Mackie makes his view vulnerable to a similar and perhaps equally powerful argument. Although

²⁵Perhaps Mackie could deal with the Moorean argument by offering a debunking explanation of our first-order moral convictions, as suggested by Olson (2014, 141–48). Such a strategy proceeds in two steps. The first step consists in an empirical conjecture to the effect that the best explanation, judged by ordinary scientific standards, of why we have certain moral convictions does not presuppose that those convictions are true. The second step is epistemological. It assumes the empirical conjecture, and infers from it that our moral convictions do not enjoy positive epistemic status. Thus, no matter how compelling they may seem to us, the first-order moral claims appealed to by the Moorean argument lack credibility.

It is doubtful that this strategy works, however, since it appears self-defeating. The underlying epistemological rationale is that beliefs which are not best explained by the truth of their content lack positive epistemic status. Does belief in this principle enjoy positive epistemic status? According to the principle itself, this is so only if the best scientific explanation of why it is held presupposes its truth. And that does seem rather far-fetched. Thus, unless proponents of the debunking strategy can point to some relevant difference between moral beliefs and epistemological beliefs, such that only the former are subject to the explanatory requirement, we should conclude that the debunking strategy fails. (Note, however, that even if the debunking strategy cannot show that our moral convictions *lack* credibility, it may still defeat one potential reason for thinking that they *do* have credibility. It might be suggested that our moral convictions enjoy positive epistemic status, since their truth is part of the best explanation of why we have them. If the empirical part of the debunking strategy is correct, then this argument has a false premise.)

no within-institutional moral judgment will be rendered false, they might all be rendered *neither true nor false*, at least assuming a correspondence theory of moral truth. Thus, while it will not be false that setting cats on fire for fun is wrong, it may not be true either. Perhaps, then, not much is gained by adopting my interpretation.²⁶

But this new argument is not equally powerful. Consider the following two claims:

- (i) Setting cats on fire for fun is wrong.
- (ii) It is true that setting cats on fire for fun is wrong.

On the standard interpretation Mackie's error theory contradicts both (i) and (ii). On my interpretation (ii) may be rendered meaningless, but (i) is left untouched. And I submit that, pre-theoretically, (i) is far more compelling than (ii). While there are powerful intuitions directly underpinning (i), it is a further and theoretically loaded question whether (ii) follows from (i) and thus gains support from them; (ii) is not an item of common sense in its own right.²⁷ At least with respect to the Moorean argument, then, I conclude that the interpretation offered here does give Mackie a more defensible position.

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²⁶I thank an anonymous referee for pressing this point.

²⁷Another possible strategy for countering the argument would be to adopt a deflationary account of moral truth, on which (ii) would have the same meaning as (i), and consequently would be left untouched as well. However, since Mackie (1970; 1973, chap. 2) accepted a correspondence theory of truth and criticized deflationary accounts, he would presumably resist such a move.

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