

Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy

Volume 8, Number 4

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ISSN: 2159-0303

jhaponline.org

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Reinventing *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*

Michael Ridge

I offer new arguments for an unorthodox reading of J.L. Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, one on which Mackie does not think all substantive moral claims are false, but allows that a proper subset of them are true. Further, those that are true should be understood in terms of a "hybrid theory". The proposed reading is one on which Mackie is a conceptual pruner, arguing that we should prune away error-ridden moral claims but hold onto those already free of error. This reading is very different from the standard ones found in the literature. I build on recent work by Moberger and argue that this reading is better corroborated by close attention to the way in which Mackie argues at length that terms like "good" and "ought" are *systematically* context-sensitive, as well as by considerable additional textual evidence. This reading, however, faces an important challenge—to explain in what sense, if any, morality retains its "normativity" on the proposed reading. I argue that this challenge can be met, at least given some of Mackie's further assumptions about the nature of rationality.

Reinventing *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*

Michael Ridge

Chapter one of J. L. Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* is part of the "canon" of modern metaethics, appearing on any Introduction to Metaethics syllabus worth its salt. The orthodox reading has Mackie offering a powerful battery of arguments for the "moral error theory", according to which all substantive moral claims are untrue. Ordinary moral judgments, Mackie is taken to argue, commit us to an ontologically "queer" kind of objective value for which a plausible epistemology is problematic. Moreover, Mackie argues, such an objectivist interpretation of our moral practice does not fit well with the kind of widespread moral disagreement within and between communities. A better explanation is that our judgments involve a kind of projective fallacy, whereby in Humean fashion we "gild and stain" the world with our sentiments, taking what are really our subjective reactions to be objective features in the world. These arguments influenced generations of future self-styled error theorists, who typically take Mackie's work as their jumping off point.¹

There is an elephant in the room, though. The rest of Mackie's book does not sit comfortably with the orthodox reading of chapter one. After supposedly having argued that all of morality is bunk, Mackie goes on to defend a number of substantive moral claims. On the standard reading of chapter one, this flagrantly contradicts chapter one. As one commentator put it, it would

¹I do not mean to suggest, of course, that Mackie is the first philosopher to defend (or be taken to defend, anyway) an error theory of this sort. Moral nihilism has a rich and storied history in philosophy, one which I cannot even usefully summarize here. The point remains, though, that contemporary discussions of the error theory take Mackie's work as canonical. For a useful discussion of the broader history, see [Olson \(2014\)](#).

be as if someone argued that "astrology is all the rankest, most hopeless nonsense, only to go on, in Part II, to argue that you can never trust Librans" ([Lenman 2013](#), 399).

Somewhat scandalously, discussions of Mackie often ignore this apparently glaring contradiction. The few commentators who have discussed the issue have tried to resolve the contradiction in one of two main ways: either by reading Mackie as a "conservationist", who implicitly encourages us to live with the contradiction (cf. [Olson 2014](#), chap. 9) or by reading him as a "fictionalist", who encourages us to continue to make moral claims but only as a sort of make-believe. Neither reading is very plausible (Section 1).

In my view, a much more credible interpretation has recently been put forward. In particular Victor Moberger has offered an interpretation of Mackie as encouraging us to engage in what I shall here refer to as "conceptual pruning" ([Moberger 2017](#)). This is a form of conceptual reform, but not the standard form associated with so-called "reforming definitions" (cf. [Brandt 1979](#); [Köhler and Ridge 2013](#)). Rather than offering entirely new definitions for moral terms and recommending them, Moberger reads Mackie as holding that our moral terms *already* have senses which are entirely error-free. To this extent, Mackie is somewhat surprisingly, not an error theorist—at least not in the standard contemporary sense of "error theory". The problem with our common-sense moral practice, on this reading, is simply that we do not typically use those terms in their error-free sense. Instead, our default is to use moral language in a problematically objective sense. If we simply *prune away* the error-ridden uses of moral language, then we can get on with moralizing by using moral terms in their error-free, subjective senses. As it happens, the error-free meanings of moral terms are such that they are best understood not only as adverting to subjective values, but in terms of what nowadays is called a "hybrid theory" (cf. [Ridge 2014](#), chap. 3; [Fletcher and Ridge 2014](#)). A hybrid theory in the relevant sense is one on which the relevant judgments are partly

constituted by non-cognitive attitudes (other hybrid views build the non-cognitive attitude only into the implicatures of speech-act, but these views are less similar to Mackie's).

Although this reading is very promising, Moberger's case for it is, in my view, incomplete in two important respects. First, the positive case for this "conceptual pruning" interpretation can be substantially amplified by connecting that reading to Mackie's more extensive semantic treatment of evaluative and deontic terms ("good", "reason", "ought", etc.) as systematically context-sensitive, as well as by noting the textual evidence in sources beyond *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* and Mackie's own characterization of the works which heavily influenced his metaethical views. Here the influence of Hume on Mackie's thinking cannot be underestimated.

Second, Moberger's reading raises a pressing question: If the only moral truth worth taking seriously is a purely subjective or culturally relative one, then what sorts of reasons do we have for "reinventing" morality? The proposed reinvention is meant to be one undertaken for good reasons—that would be rational, as Mackie sometimes puts it. Are the reasons to embrace Mackie's proposed reform moral, prudential, both or some other kind altogether? Finally, in what sense, if any, are the reasons we have for reforming morality "normative" for Mackie? This last question might seem anachronistic, given that the turn from morality to the more broadly "normative" came into full swing well after Mackie's death. However, Mackie still would have wanted *some* way of distinguishing the reasons we have for re-inventing morality one way rather than another as being less arbitrary than reasons fixed by some arbitrary principle or convention—"good", the reasons given by some "holy text", the wishes of some tyrant or the reasons laid down by a thieves' code. The suggestion is that it would be most charitable if the kinds of reasons we attribute to him are normative in some recognizable sense; this appeal to the principle of charity does not presuppose that Mackie himself traded in the language of normativity.

Fortunately, both these lacunae in Moberger's argument for the "conceptual pruning" interpretation can be filled, and in this essay I do just that. Here is the plan. First, I briefly explain why rival interpretations (conservationism and fictionalism) are implausible (Section 1). I then lay out Moberger's interpretation and his arguments for it (Section 2). I then bolster those arguments with additional positive arguments and textual evidence, showing that the conceptual pruning interpretation can be justified much more directly via Mackie's broader semantic theory (Section 3). Finally, I turn to the challenge of explaining what sorts of reasons we have for re-inventing morality on this interpretation, and the sense in which those reasons are normative; this leads to a discussion of Mackie's implicit view of practical rationality (Section 4). Here again, Hume's influence on Mackie is evident.

1. Rival Interpretations

In this section, I consider fictionalist and conservationist readings of Mackie in turn. Because the debate over these interpretations is well-worn, I will be brief.

Fictionalism is a revisionary doctrine—a doctrine about how we ought to use moral discourse once we have been convinced that our existing discourse is thoroughly error-ridden. Revisionary fictionalism itself comes in at least two varieties: content-fictionalism and attitude/force fictionalism. According to content fictionalism, moral judgments should be ordinary beliefs with contents about what is true in a given fiction—"the morality fiction", or some such. According to attitude/force fictionalism, moral judgments are not ordinary beliefs, but are some other propositional attitude, perhaps of the sort we characteristically take when engaging with proper fiction (novels, films, etc.) in various ways—something akin to *pretence* or *make-believe*. My critique of fictionalist readings of Mackie will not depend much on which of these two versions is attributed to Mackie.

What is the textual evidence in favour of a fictionalist reading? Richard Joyce offers the following evidence:

On the very last page of his book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, John Mackie (1977) suggests that moral discourse—which he has argued is deeply error-laden—can continue with the status of a “useful fiction”. (Joyce 2005, xx)

This is not convincing. First, Mackie’s remark is presented in a somewhat offhand way, at the very end of the book, with no elucidation. Second, and much more importantly, what Mackie actually says in this passage is *not* that we “can continue” with morality as a useful fiction, as Joyce glosses the passage, but rather that “the objectification of moral values and obligations is not only a natural but also a useful fiction” (Mackie 1977, 239). Mackie here says nothing about *continuing* with the relevant fiction, but instead uses the present tense, and is pretty clearly describing our *current* practice, which he clearly took not to be one which embodies fictionalism—if it did, then ordinary practice would be guilty of no error! When Mackie attributes a “useful fiction” to ordinary practice here, he is not attributing any of the fancy machinery of fictionalism, but is instead using the phrase in one of its vernacular senses, as when one attributes a false belief to someone but allows that the belief, while false, is useful. That Mackie here is discussing our existing practice, rather than any intended reforming fictionalism, is even more clear in that he immediately considers the worry that it might be dangerous “to expose it as a fiction”.

It may seem churlish to focus on this single piece of textual evidence at length. I have done so in part because it is one of the few pieces of text used to warrant this reading of Mackie, and this is not surprising. There are very few other passages that could be used to support such a reading. In fact, the word ‘fiction’ does not appear anywhere else in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Moreover, when Mackie in another work (*The Miracle of Theism*) characterizes religion as a fiction, he clearly means

that it is a systematically false system of beliefs (Mackie 1982, 224), suggesting that he tends to use this idiom as colourful way of expressing an error theory rather than some fancy form of fictionalism. Indeed, in that work Mackie makes fairly dismissive comments about a form of fictionalism in the religious realm, expressing the worry that would plausibly carry over to the moral case, suggesting that “one could not consistently make a big thing of praising and glorifying a god that one at the same time recognized to exist only in one’s own mind, or even jointly in the minds of many believers like a figure in a widely current myth or legend” (Mackie 1982, 277). One suspects that Mackie would also think it hard to “make a big thing” of moral values one at the same time knows are merely part of a shared myth.

Moreover, there are strong reasons to reject a fictionalist reading. First, it is anachronistic; fictionalist treatments of various forms of discourse was not really “in vogue” when Mackie was writing. There is a risk of reading currently fashionable doctrines back into Mackie’s 1970s context.

Second, Mackie never explicitly says that he favours a fictionalist approach, nor does he argue for one. Given that the fictionalist proposal is a bold and ambitious one, effectively calling for widespread sociocultural engineering, one would have expected Mackie to have been explicit about this and argued for it more explicitly and carefully. It is not as if moral fictionalism is not open to *prima facie* powerful objections, objections Mackie was surely sharp enough to anticipate, yet he does not even canvass those objections much less try to refute them. To that extent, the fictionalist interpretation is uncharitable, attributing a clearly inadequately defended view to Mackie. The fact that he only mentions a “useful fiction” in an offhand way on the very last page of the book, and nowhere else, corroborates just how uncharitable this reading is (cf. Kalf 2019).

Third, the fictionalist interpretation does not fit well with the way in which Mackie characterizes the project of (re-)inventing morality. In particular, Mackie repeatedly suggests that we can

better refashion our moral practices if we do so without any recourse to the idea of objective values, e.g.: “My hope is that concrete moral issues can be argued out without appeal to any mythical objective values or requirements or obligations or transcendental necessities” (Mackie 1977, 199). Mackie makes similar remarks in *Hume’s Moral Theory*:

What, as Hume saw, holds for the duty of allegiance holds also for morality as a whole. We are more likely to get its benefits without its disadvantages if we see through its claim to absolute or objective authority. (Mackie 1980, 156)

If Mackie were a fictionalist, then he would instead explain how we can refashion our moral practices around a self-consciously fictional conception of objective values—in effect, making up new “stories” about these mythical objective values. Whereas what Mackie actually suggests, repeatedly, is that we can better reinvent our moral practices by doing without *any* appeal to objective values, which presumably includes any in a fictional mode.

What, then, about a conservationist reading of Mackie? What evidence is there that Mackie intended for us to continue using a mode of thought and discourse riddled with error? One argument for this reading, offered by Caroline West, is that conservationism is the best explanation of Mackie’s thesis that first-order and second-order questions are completely independent:

Mackie himself seemed to take this “business as usual” view . . . First-order and second-order moral questions, he says, “are not merely distinct, but completely independent”. (West 2010, 184–85)

The idea seems to be that Mackie’s second-order error theory does not *entail* that we ought, all things considered, quit making moral judgments. Since he does, himself, happily go on to advance numerous moral judgments in the second half of the book, the simplest explanation of this presumably is that he thinks we have good reasons to go on making moral judgments even while knowing at some level they are all untrue.

Of course, to do this while accepting the error theory we would have to learn to live with a contradiction. Perhaps this is possible, though. Jonas Olson, who also defends a conservationist reading of Mackie, argues that we can manage to do this through a kind of compartmentalization, effectively believing the error theory “in the seminar room” but making positive moral judgments in other settings (Olson 2014, 190–96). Moreover, whether this sort of compartmentalization is in fact possible, Mackie seems himself, in the discussion of religious belief, to allow that it is (cf. Mackie 1982, 220–21).²

Even if it is psychologically possible (on Mackie’s view) to believe flagrantly contradictory things in this way, it must be admitted that it is epistemologically unhealthy and weird. This alone should create at least a presumptive case against this reading. More to the point, conservationism fits very poorly with Mackie’s characterizing the project of *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* being, in part, one of “conceptual reform”. Mackie first made this observation in his earlier book, *Problems From Locke*, suggesting that we need conceptual reform both in the case of personal identity (his topic there) and ethics:

A fairly plausible suggestion is that we should adopt the revised Lockean account, openly admitting that it is not a correct analysis of our present concept, but proposing it as a conceptual reform and as a factual analysis, an account of all that is true and relevant in this area. [Footnote 27:] A similar conceptual reform, rather than mere analysis of our present concepts is, I believe, needed in ethics. I hope to discuss this topic in another book. (Mackie 1976, 196)

It is pretty clear that this other book was to be *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Moreover, Mackie’s main aim in the second half of *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* was to (re)-invent morality

²A point I owe to an anonymous referee footnoted by Victor Moberger in his discussion (see Moberger 2017, 5 n 12). Mackie’s view here is quite different from the one defended by Bart Streumer, also an error theorist; see Streumer (2017).

(cf. Moberger 2017, 4–5). For Mackie, it is important that we “remake” morality:

[M]orality is not to be discovered but to be made; we cannot brush this aside by adding ‘but it has been made already, long ago’. It may well need to be in part remade. (Mackie 1977, 123)

Remaking morality does not sound much like “business as usual”. The conservationist might reply that Mackie’s aim is to remake morality in terms of its first-order content, and doing that is compatible with “business as usual” in the sense of continuing to use moral language in a way that encodes a false presupposition of objective values. Indeed, in the sentences just following the quotation above, Mackie argues that while the duty of fidelity is worth preserving, the virtue of patriotism may have “outlived its usefulness”.

A much more plausible interpretation is that Mackie is inviting us to reject the error-ridden moral concepts which presuppose objective values and to deploy some other moral concepts. It is with those error-free concepts that we should reinvent morality, developing new first-order moral views which are informed by our rejection of objective value. Just what these error-free moral concepts are, though, is a very good question, a question to which I turn in the next section.

2. Conceptual Pruning and Hybrid Theory: Moberger’s Reading

Given that Mackie is in the business of conceptual reform, what sort of reform does he advocate? On some ways of understanding concepts, they are abstract entities, not capable of change, so talk of conceptual reform is perhaps best not taken literally. It is therefore often associated instead with changing the meanings of terms, so that they come to express new concepts. The most common approach to conceptual reform (or “conceptual engineering”, as it is sometimes called) takes the form of offering a

“reforming definition”.³ Here one takes some vexed philosophical term, like “free will”, and argues that the ordinary concept it expresses is defective in some way. One then offers a new “reforming” definition for the corresponding term, arguing that the new definition allows the discourse to do the job it was in some sense “meant to do” but without the problems associated with its original meaning. A standard worry about such approaches is that they simply change the subject.

Interestingly, this is not the only project worthy of the name “conceptual reform”. Another approach might instead be called “conceptual pruning”. Here one takes some vexed ordinary language term, and argues that for at least a wide (perhaps the predominant) range of meanings, the term is defective in some way. One then argues that the term is, however, ambiguous in some way, and that in some of its ordinary senses, it is not defective. One then argues that we should “prune away” the defective uses, and shift over to using the term more consistently in its error-free way. One advantage of this approach is that the worry that one has simply “changed the subject” does not arise; no new definitions are being proposed “from the armchair”.

It might be useful to consider a more down to earth example. Consider the term “luck”. It is sometimes used to refer to a purported “projectable” property, such that some people are lucky and if they are lucky then they not only have a track record of doing better than average or than you would expect given their abilities, you can also base predictions about their likelihood to do well, win bets, etc., in the future on their luckiness. On this view, luckiness is a robust property whose instantiation increases the odds of success for the lucky person. In this sense of “luck” we should be error theorists about luck. In another, not completely unrelated, sense of “luck”, though, someone is lucky with respect to some domain if and only if they did better

³Cf. Cappelen (2018), Scharp (2013). The phrase “conceptual engineering” stems from Blackburn (1999).

than one should have rationally predicted *ex ante*, taking into account their abilities, etc. In this sense, someone who gets dealt great hands in poker over and over is lucky even if that in no way grounds any predictions about what cards they will be dealt in the future. Here we should *prune away* the error-ridden (first) sense of “lucky” but retain the second, naturalistically acceptable sense of the word.⁴

Although he does not use the label “conceptual pruning”, this is basically the interpretation of Mackie offered by Victor Moberger in a recent paper (Moberger 2017). In this section, I summarize the main lines of his interpretation and his arguments for it.

Moberger argues that Mackie is a “semantic pluralist” about moral discourse. On his reading, Mackie holds that there are “two different strands of moral discourse”, about which two different stories should be told. The first strand presupposes objective values and is therefore error-ridden. This is, for Mackie, by far the most pervasive form of moral discourse. The second strand, though, does not presuppose objective values and is error-free. On this interpretation, it is misleading to call Mackie an error theorist in the modern idiom, since that is usually defined in unqualified, universal terms—as holding that *all* substantive [putting to one side tautologies] moral claims are untrue. On Moberger’s reading, Mackie is an error theorist only in a slightly weaker sense; he holds that *most* forms of ordinary moral discourse are error-ridden. Moberger usefully compares Mackie’s views to the kind of pluralism defended by Gill (2009), according to which ordinary moral discourse is not as semantically uniform as much metaethical theorizing seems to suppose.

How does Moberger argue for this somewhat surprising interpretation? He begins with some textual evidence, pointing out that Mackie very consistently qualifies his claims about ordinary moral discourse by saying only, e.g., that “many” or “

in the main” or that “ordinarily” moral judgments presuppose objectivity, citing these passages [emphasis added]:

[It] can plausibly be maintained at least that *many* moral judgments contain a categorically imperative element . . . (Mackie 1977, 29)

[M]ost people in making moral judgments implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive. (Mackie 1977, 35)

[In] everyday moral judgments . . . 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)

[T]he *main* ethical use [of “good”] does refer to supposed intrinsic requirements. (Mackie 1977, 63)

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

As Moberger points out, it would be very odd for Mackie so consistently to qualify his attribution of error to folk moral discourse if he did not think that at least *some* of our moral judgments do *not* presuppose objective value.

A second piece of evidence Moberger offers for Mackie’s semantic pluralism is the way in which he formulates his ontological claim. Mackie never says there are no moral values, only that there are no *objective* values (and so *ipso facto* no objective *moral* values). Moreover, he sometimes formulates his positive view as “moral subjectivism”, and entitles the first chapter of his book “The Subjectivity of Values”, strongly suggesting that he thinks there are subjective moral values.

A third reason Moberger offers for reading Mackie as a semantic pluralist is that it allows us to read his conceptual reform programme in the second half of the book as a form of what I am calling “conceptual pruning”. Given that at least some of our actual moral discourse is amenable to a subjectivist reading, we can in principle just abandon the objectivist strands of moral

⁴Thanks to Guy Fletcher for suggesting this nice example.

discourse and switch over to more consistently speaking in a subjectivist idiom. This is an advantage of reading Mackie as a semantic pluralist insofar as it can explain why the second half of Mackie's book does not contradict the first half better than rival interpretations.

Fourthly, Moberger argues that reading Mackie as a semantic pluralist helps vindicate his otherwise confusing claims in chapter one about how second-order and first-order claims are entirely independent of one another. On the standard reading of Mackie as an error-theorist, this is an odd claim, since it seems like his second-order view logically contradicts our first-order moral claims, since it asserts that they are all untrue. Whereas on Moberger's reading, independence makes sense; so long as we stick to purely subjective construals of our first-order claims, Mackie's error theory is logically compatible with whatever first-order view one likes.

Actually, this line of argument is complicated by a remark Mackie makes in a paper only published posthumously, in a volume edited by Joan and Penelope Mackie. In "Bootstraps Enterprises", he clarifies his claims about neutrality as follows:

Can what I say here be reconciled with what I say in my book (p. 16) about the complete independence of first and second order views? Yes, because the first-order views referred to there were construed more widely than the views internal to a bootstraps enterprise . . . The first order moral views with which any second order view is compatible are identified simply as approval of and support for certain things and condemnation of others. (Mackie 1985b, 147)

Taken at face value, this passage suggests that Mackie had in mind an *expressivist* reading of moral discourse when allowing for the compatibility of his second-order view with any first-order view one likes. It is only on an expressivist view that moral views are literally *identical with* one's attitudes of approval/support/condemnation, as Mackie suggests here. By contrast, on the hybrid subjectivist view Mackie also thinks applies to ordinary language moral judgments are only partly con-

stituted by such attitudes. They are also partly constituted by representational beliefs about the requirements of contextually specified moral institutions.

I do not think this spoils the overarching case for Moberger's reading. At most, it shows that he cannot appeal to Mackie's remarks about neutrality as evidence for his reading. But there is ample evidence independently of that. My own view is that the evidence for the subjectivist reading is on the whole much stronger than the slender evidence for an expressivist reading supplied by this one sentence in a reply to Dworkin that Mackie didn't himself properly polish/work up for publication and which therefore may not represent his considered view. Further, Mackie's remark here is also compatible with my reading and Moberger's, in that Mackie might have allowed that 'morally good' (etc.) admits of *both* a subjectivist and an expressivist reading in ordinary language already, albeit these uses are very rare compared to the error-infected ones. He could then be read as pruning away the error-theoretic ones but keeping both of these. In fact, this could help with the puzzle about "normativity" I discuss in Section 4 below. However, I am not sure whether to attribute this expressivist view to Mackie to help resolve that problem given how limited the evidence is for that reading. Readers who are more tempted by that reading will find it even easier to resolve the problem discussed in Section 4.

Given that, on the whole, there seems to be a reasonable case for reading Mackie as a semantic pluralist and a conceptual pruner, an obvious question is what sense should be attached to our moral claims in their subjectivist idiom? On Moberger's reading, Mackie takes subjective moral judgments to be about the requirements (etc.) of some contextually specified moral *institution*, where typically the relevant institution is one the speaker occupies. Institutions are, for Mackie, social practices in which participants conform to certain patterns of behaviour and deploy socially enforced sanctions on those who deviate. Mackie offers many examples of non-moral institutions, such as chess, and ar-

gues that morality is an institution which functions to help us counteract our limited sympathy (Mackie 1977, 108).

Mackie distinguishes between speaking about an institution “from the outside”, in the idiom of a sociologist commenting on its requirements, on the one hand, and speaking “within the institution”, on the other. When we speak within a given institution in Mackie’s sense, our claims are not purely descriptive (as in the external mode), but instead are infused with evaluative/prescriptive force. Mackie illustrates this distinction by arguing that Searle’s famous attempt to derive an “ought” from an “is” fails because Searle conflates these two modes of thought/discourse with respect to the institution of promising (Mackie 1977, 66–72).

Moberger reads Mackie as taking what in modern terminology would be a “hybrid” theory of moral claims made *within* the institution. Hybrid theories of moral discourse, in the relevant sense, hold that the relevant moral judgments are constituted not merely by representational beliefs (here, about one’s moral institution, say) but also by associated non-cognitive attitudes—attitudes of endorsement of the behaviour required by the institution, in favour of sanctioning those who deviate from those norms, etc. Moberger offers considerable and in my view convincing textual evidence for this reading. Mackie was in this sense “ahead of his time”, since hybrid theories were not much discussed when he was writing, but have become something of a cottage industry more recently.⁵

Finally, Moberger notes a further subtlety. Mackie does not think ordinary discourse sharply distinguishes the subjective and the objective elements. Rather, he takes typical moral claims to be composites of the subjective (and hybrid theoretical) and the objective. Typical moral claims are made from within a moral institution, both describe and endorse that institution’s demands

⁵For some discussion of the variety of modern hybrid theories, see Fletcher and Ridge (2014). See also Ridge (2014, chap. 3).

and claim (or perhaps presuppose) that those demands *also* have objective validity. Having distinguished adverting to objective requirements and speaking within a moral institution, Mackie adds that these elements “do not normally occur in isolation, and views which single out any one of them as *the* meaning of moral terms are implausible” (Mackie 1977, 72).

So far, so good. Moberger’s interpretation is a huge step forward, and sheds great light on what is going on in the transition from chapter 1 of Mackie’s book to the second half of the book. However, there is more work to be done. First, although Moberger makes a strong case for his reading, the positive case can be made much stronger and more direct, as I explain in the following section. Second, the conceptual pruner/hybrid theory reading of Mackie leads naturally into the question of what sorts of *reasons* Mackie is offering for refashioning morality in one way rather than another. I turn to these remaining tasks in the next two sections.

3. Strengthening the Positive Case: Mackie’s Contextualist Semantics

Moberger’s case for reading Mackie as a semantic pluralist rests primarily on (1) the ways in which Mackie consistently qualifies his attribution of error to ordinary moral thought/discourse and his formulation of the main ontological claim and (2) the explanatory power such a reading provides when it comes to understanding Mackie’s broader project. These arguments are well-taken, but they are also somewhat indirect. As it happens, a much more direct and stronger case can be made for reading Mackie as a semantic pluralist if we also attend to his positive semantic views about evaluative and deontic language more generally. Moreover, attending to these aspects of Mackie’s view reveal that it is a slight oversimplification to speak of “two strands” of moral judgment.

Mackie spends two chapters (chaps. 2 and 3) laying out a se-

antics for “good”, “ought”, and “reason”. In all three cases, the meaning of the term should be understood in terms of some contextually specified requirement(s). To say something is good is to say it is “such as to satisfy requirements (etc.) of the kind in question” (Mackie 1977, 55–56). To say one ought or must do something is (roughly; I gloss over Mackie’s distinction between “ought” and “must”) to say that there is some contextually specified requirement that one do it. To say there is a reason to do something is (roughly) to say that doing it would tend to lead to the satisfaction of some contextually specified requirement. Requirements can be provided by desires or interests, but also by institutions (Mackie 1977, 80–82). Mackie thinks that in moral contexts speakers typically have in mind the elusive idea of requirements that are “just there”, or “part of the fabric of the universe”, but our interest is in uses that avoid those errors.

Mackie’s semantics predicts that claims about what is good, what one ought to do, and what there is reason to do are relative to contextually specified requirements, and these requirements can be provided by institutions. Mackie also very clearly thinks of morality as a kind of institution (Mackie 1977, 72). These commitments together entail that a speaker can felicitously use moral language to make claims about what a contextually specified moral institution requires. Indeed, this is no surprise, since we already saw that Mackie thinks most ordinary moral claims *do* advert to such institutions. However, he also thinks most ordinary claims introduce a presupposition that those requirements also track what is objectively good.

Even if most uses of moral language carry this presupposition of objective value, the semantic theory predicts that it should be at least *possible* for a speaker to use, e.g., “morally ought” to advert to the requirements of a moral institution without introducing any presupposition of objective value. Mackie is quite explicit that nothing *compels us* to add a presupposition of objective validity to our claims about institutional requirements, presumably including moral institutions (indeed, Mackie in the

following passage is discussing our reasons to alleviate the suffering of others, and so has moral reasons in view):

[C]ertainly nothing compels us to reinterpret the requirements of an institution, however well established, however thoroughly enshrined in our ordinary ways of thinking and speaking, as objective, intrinsic, requirements of the nature of things.

(Mackie 1977, 79–80)

That this possibility is already present, if merely latent, in our discourse, would already be enough for the “conceptual pruning” approach to work, since Mackie could be urging us to drop the problematic uses of moral language and start using moral language in ways already available to us, without any need for a “reforming definition”. So, semantic pluralism can be argued for much more directly than the more indirect argument found in Moberger.

Note, moreover, that the kind of systematic context-sensitivity for moral terms found in Mackie’s theory is not well understood in terms of there being simply “two strands” of moral discourse, one objective and one subjective, as Moberger suggests. At least, this oversimplifies dramatically. Claims about what is morally good, e.g., can be relative to the moral institutions of one’s society, some other society, a merely possible society, one’s own personal standards, the institutions implicit in some sacred text, and so on. Any of these moral claims can, in turn, be combined with a presupposition that the relevant institutions track objective value or not. We can in principle make claims about what requirements there are “in the fabric of the universe”, bringing in objective value without any reference to institutions. Finally, Mackie also draws a distinction Mackie between morality in the broad sense, which is a fully general theory of conduct, and morality in the narrow sense, which functions more specifically to help us overcome our limited sympathies.

Of course, the conceptual pruning interpretation would be bolstered if it could be shown that Mackie thought the possibility of purely subjective uses of moral language were not merely

latent in the semantics for moral vocabulary, but that we actually already use moral discourse in this way sometimes. Here the textual evidence mobilized by Moberger is very much to the point. The fact that Mackie so consistently hedges his formulation of the error theory with locutions like “many moral judgments”, what is “ordinarily” claimed, what “most people” mean to claim, and so on, strongly suggests that Mackie thinks that people do sometimes use moral language in a purely subjective way. Indeed, Mackie seems to explicitly endorse this in his discussion of “justice”, which he says in one sense requires only fidelity to the relevant standards, and no queer value entities:

[T]here is an objective distinction which applies in many such fields, and yet would itself be regarded as a peculiarly moral one: the distinction between justice and injustice. *In one important sense of the word*, it is a paradigm case of an injustice if a court declares someone to be guilty of an offence of which it knows him to be innocent. More generally, a finding is unjust if it is at variance with what the relevant law and the facts together require . . . justice or injustice of decisions relative to standards can be a thoroughly objective matter. (Mackie 1977, 26; emphasis added)

When Mackie says this is an objective matter, he does not mean it involves objective value. Rather, he means that the justice or injustice of a decision can be derived in an objectively valid way from the relevant descriptive facts. Here Mackie clearly countenances error-free uses of “justice”.

In fact, there is even more textual evidence than Moberger provides for his proposed reading, some of it arising in the chapters in which Mackie offers his broader semantic theory. For example, in his discussion of the semantics of “good”, Mackie allows that we sometimes use “good” to engage in what he calls “ego-centric commendation”, where this “should, perhaps, be called not purely descriptive, since an essential element in it is the speaker’s implicit endorsing of the requirements . . . which the thing commended is being said to be such as to satisfy. But it is partly descriptive, in that it claims both that the thing has the intrinsic characteristics, whatever they are, and (hence) that

it bears this relation to those requirements” (Mackie 1977, 61). The most straightforward reading of this is that “good” is sometimes used to make descriptive claims about what satisfies certain requirements and at the same time express approval of those requirements and commending the object of evaluation.

We are also told in *Hume’s Moral Theory* that a “mixed account” could provide a more plausible conceptual reform than either pure descriptivism or pure expressivism (Mackie 1980, 71), and Mackie in that passage footnotes his own *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, suggesting this is his own view. Further, Mackie elsewhere endorses such a hybrid view of legal terms and talk of responsibility:

[L]egal terms and terms like ‘responsibility’ contain a prescriptive element, which must be distinguished from their descriptive element, and also if we say that in certain circumstances it is *correct* for a judge to give such-and-such a decision, we are ourselves making or quoting a further, higher-level, prescription: we are prescribing when the judge is to prescribe. (Mackie 1955, 35)

Even more clearly, Mackie explicitly endorses a hybrid theory of *aesthetic* value judgments, and in the same breath indicates that this approach has been “worked out” in the case of ethics:

Perhaps the pure subjectivist theory, and the pure objectivist one, have both gone wrong in the same way. Each of them has assumed that an aesthetic judgment is made *in one move*. But again, we can usefully borrow an account of value judgments which has been worked out and discussed particularly with regards to ethics, the core of which is that a value judgment involves at least two moves . . . in making an evaluative judgment we are at once saying or hinting that the object judged has certain natural characteristics, and commending it, or perhaps condemning it, on that account. . . (Mackie 1969, 64)

In addition to all of this direct textual evidence from other sources, the proposed reading of Mackie fits well with the figures Mackie says most profoundly influenced his views in ethics: From the modern period, Stevenson, Ayer, and Westermarck,

and more historically the “British moralists”, but most especially David Hume, whose moral philosophy Mackie wrote an entire book about (Mackie 1977, 241). Stevenson can plausibly be read as a kind of hybrid theorist, holding that moral claims state that the speaker approves of something and then includes a “do so as well!” element, which expresses the speaker’s approval (cf. Stevenson 1944). Ayer famously emphasizes the use of moral language to express as well as report one’s attitudes.

Furthermore, there are many other passages in which Mackie’s claims about our moral concepts being infected with error are hedged to include only “typical” or “most” uses. For example, in addition to the passages mentioned by Moberger, we find the remark that “*typical* moral statements do not seem to mean what any dispositionally descriptive account . . . says that they mean” (Mackie 1980, 69), where this is because they typically involve a presupposition of objective value. Again, we are told that the error theory goes against assumptions “built into *some* of the ways in which language is used” (Mackie 1977, 35). Mackie also contrasts European ethical concepts with the “ethical concepts of Plato and Aristotle” (Mackie 1977, 45), further corroborating his commitment to semantic pluralism.

One piece of text which might seem to count against Moberger’s reading is Mackie’s seemingly unqualified claim that in moral contexts “good” “is used as if it were the name of a supposed non-natural quality” (Mackie 1977, 32). Even here, though, Mackie qualifies this claim, actually saying only that it “would not be so far wrong” to say that “good” has this meaning in moral contexts. The inclusion of this caveat makes this passage compatible with Moberger’s reading, since the claim could be partly wrong because some moral contexts are not such that “good” is used in this objective sense. Similarly, the suggestion that objectivism “has a basis . . . in the meanings of moral terms” (Mackie 1977, 31) is compatible with some strands of moral discourse not involving this commitment.⁶

⁶Another reading of this passage consistent with the spirit of Moberger’s

One worry about this reading of Mackie is how it squares with his advocacy of “remaking” morality. One tempting reading of Mackie’s talk of “remaking” morality is as calling for *replacing* our existing moral concepts with new ones, where these new ones have a different content—a content suitably informed by our rejection of objective value. Indeed, it seems clear that Mackie’s remaking project essentially involves changing the content of morality in a deliberate way, and it might seem obscure how the content could change if we retain the same concepts. Moberger himself has very little to say about how this remaking should go on his account.

This objection can be found in Wouter Kalf’s critique of Moberger. Kalf offers the following objection:

[Moberger’s] interpretation fails to mention that after latching on to morality in the narrow sense, we should change the content of

reading would be that the commitment to objective value is built into the meanings of moral terms in the form of a conventional implicature à la Grice. Conventional implicatures are part of conventional meaning and cannot be cancelled (unlike their conversational cousins), but they are also not part of the literal content. On this reading, the conceptual pruning would simply be to drop the conventional implicature but keep the strict, literal semantic content. This would be like no longer using ‘but’, but only using ‘and’ as one’s conjunctive connective, e.g., I prefer Moberger’s reading simply because the conventional implicature reading would predict that *all* uses of moral language implicate objective value, whereas Mackie very carefully and repeatedly says only that “typical”, “most”, etc. uses do. It is, though, worth noting that if someone thought we should dismiss those passages for some reason and put more weight on the one or two passages in which Mackie makes claims about what is built into conventional meanings, then a reading very much like Moberger’s, in spirit, would remain available in the form of a conventional implicature approach. Generalized conversational implicature is yet another view one could explore here, though that would predict that only contexts in which the implicature of objective value is explicitly cancelled are exceptions to Mackie’s generalization. I do not think there is adequate textual evidence for that reading, but it is more promising than the conventional implicature approach (cf. Fletcher and Ridge 2014). Both of these readings would have the very surprising upshot that even moral claims which do encode an assumption of objective value need not be untrue, since implicatures are distinct from literal, truth-conditional content.

morality in light of changes in the circumstances of justice, and that we should change morality's content by replacing our concept of the good 'with some other concept of the good' (149). Moberger's interpretation is therefore . . . incomplete in this crucial respect because it fails to do justice to Mackie's remark that after the discovery that we should be error theorists, we should also change the content of our new schmoral discourse. (Kalf 2019, 179)

One strand of Kalf's objection here is textual, citing Mackie's apparent reference to the need to replace our concept of good with some other concept. However, Kalf takes this passage out of context. In the quoted passage (on p. 149), Mackie is clearly talking about the *utilitarian's* concept of "the good" rather than our own concept, and he is floating an *option* he clearly doesn't endorse, namely keeping the consequentialist conception of right action but tweaking the associated value theory. This clearly provides no support for reading Mackie as supporting a reforming definition for our own moral concepts.

Still, the core of Kalf's worry might be independent of this appeal to the text. Clearly, Mackie thinks we need to *change* the foundational content of morality. It might seem obscure how he could do that without providing us with new concepts. Same concepts, same truth-conditions, one might worry. More formally:

- (1) Mackie's proposal is that we change the truth-conditional content of our most basic moral judgments.
- (2) The only way to change the truth-conditional content of our most basic moral judgments is by replacing our existing moral concepts with new ones [same concepts, same basic truth-conditions, since concepts fix truth-conditions].
- (3) Therefore, Mackie's proposal requires that we replace our existing moral concepts with new ones.

The problem with this argument should be apparent once it is stated, so long as we remember the content of the moral judg-

ments which survive Mackie's "pruning". Those moral judgments will characteristically be about the moral *institutions* of the speaker's community. Institutions, though, are human inventions in a broad sense—patterns of behaviour, sanctions. As such, they can *themselves* be reinvented. We can thus change the truth-conditional content of our most basic moral judgment *by changing the relevant institutions*.

For example, Mackie thinks patriotism as a virtue may be past its "sell by" date. Taking his advice, we can change our moral institutions so that they no longer encourage patriotism and make "patriotism is a virtue" (which we may take as a basic moral truth—one not derived from within our institutions from some more basic norm) go from true to false. We can, in this way, change the truth-conditional content of our most basic moral judgments by changing our institutions and without replacing our existing moral concepts with new ones. By way of analogy, we can change the content of 'legally permissible now in Scotland' by changing the law, rather than by changing our concept of the law. Premise (2) in the argument above is thus false.

Although Kalf's objection can be dispatched easily enough, it suggests another challenge for Moberger's interpretation, and this challenge is not so easily met. Moreover, by seeing how to meet this challenge we can fill an important lacuna in the proposed interpretation. I turn to this challenge and how to meet it in the final section.

4. Why Remake Morality? (And in What Sense of 'Morality?')

Mackie's proposal that we remake morality is not presented as an arbitrary suggestion, something we can take or leave as we like. Rather, he presents it as something we have strong *reason* to do. But what sorts of reasons is Mackie offering? Talk of reasons is, for Mackie, always relative to contextually specified requirements. Requirements, in turn, can be derived from institutions,

desires, the law, conventions and other sources. What, then, is the source of the requirements which ground our reasons to remake morality and why do they *matter*?

A plausible constraint on Mackie's argument for remaking morality is that the reasons he offers are ones which in some sense are "normative". Of course, 'normative' is a term of art, open to multiple interpretations, and the turn from morality to the normative in metaethics came decades after Mackie was writing. There is, therefore, a risk of anachronism in formulating the challenge in this way. Indeed, T.M. Scanlon specifically reference's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* when remarking on the shift in metaethics as a field from focusing on morality in particular to the normative:

Contemporary metaethics differs in two important ways from the metaethics of the 1950s and 1960s and even the later 1970s, when John Mackie wrote *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. In that earlier period, discussion in metaethics focused almost entirely on morality . . . Today . . . a significant part of the debate concerns practical reasoning and normativity more generally . . . (Scanlon 2014, 1)

However, this concern about anachronism notwithstanding, it also seems clear that Mackie thought the reasons he offered were not chosen at random. For example, suppose Mackie had offered reasons derived from the requirements of the "Vory v Zakone", or "thieves' code", loosely translated from the Russian—a code of conduct governing Russian organized crime. This would rightly strike us as bizarre and philosophically uninteresting. Given Mackie's semantics for 'reason', though, there will trivially be true claims about what reasons there are relative to the Vory v Zakone. Clearly, Mackie thinks the reasons he offers us to remake morality have more of a "grip" on us in some intuitive sense—that they matter—than the reasons grounded by the requirements of the Vory v Zakone. A plausible constraint on Mackie's project, then, is to explain why the reasons he offers are privileged in some way that, e.g., the reasons grounded by the Vory v Zakone are not.

It is important to see that Mackie's project taken on its own terms requires some specification of the kinds of reasons on offer here; this puts the worry about anachronism in the right light. Crucially, on Mackie's contextualist semantics, any use of 'reason', including his *own* use of 'reason' when claiming we have reason to reinvent morality, is indexed to some contextually specified requirement or set of requirements. So we need some account of which requirements we are meant to have in mind when Mackie tells us we have good reason to remake morality. My suggestion is that whatever requirements we do read Mackie as implicitly having in mind, it would be more plausible, and hence more charitable if those requirements were plausibly seen as normative. That interpretative argument crucially does *not* require that Mackie himself was implicitly thinking in terms of a normative/non-normative distinction. Rather, it requires only that the interpreter be guided in their reading by the idea that the requirement(s) Mackie did have in mind are ones *we* would classify as normative, as that would track with their not seeming, e.g., as arbitrary as the Vory v Zakone requirements. Lest we read Mackie as having in mind some totally arbitrary set of requirements when he tells us we have reason to reform morality, which seems highly implausible, this constraint seems like a good way to ensure that our interpretation is charitable.

Before trying to see what kind of reasons Mackie might be offering for remaking morality, we should be clear about in what sense of "morality", he thinks it needs to be remade. Recall that Mackie distinguishes morality in the broad sense from morality in the narrow sense. A morality in the broad sense "would be a general, all-inclusive theory of conduct", while morality in the narrow sense "is a system...of constraints on conduct . . . whose central task is to protect the interests of persons other than the agent and which presents themselves to an agent as checks on his natural inclinations" (Mackie 1977, 106). Interestingly, morality in the broad sense tends to be person-relative, and the morality to which a person subscribes in this sense "would be whatever

body of principles he allowed ultimately to guide or determine his choices of action" (Mackie 1977, 106). By contrast, morality in the narrow sense is an essentially *social* phenomenon—morality in the narrow sense is clearly an *institution*, constituted by human practices. This is because the whole point of morality in the narrow sense is to help people coordinate with one another peacefully; in this sense a purely private morality would be "worthless":

If a morality is to perform the sort of function described in Chapter 5, it must be adopted socially by a group of people in their dealings with one another . . . Privately imagined rules or principles of action are worthless . . . What counts is rules that are actually recognized by the members of some social circle, large or small, and that thus sets up expectations and claims. (Mackie 1977, 147–48)

The context makes it clear that the "sort of function" Mackie invokes here is the one associated with morality in the narrow sense, and that he therefore thinks morality in the narrow sense must be a social reality.

When Mackie discusses the need to "remake" morality, it is pretty clear that he primarily has in mind morality in the narrow sense. His arguments for remaking morality in one way rather than another tend to appeal to considerations relating the proposed reforms to the function of morality in the narrow sense—helping us get along with one another. Furthermore, he typically characterizes remaking morality as a *shared* project—one we undertake together. This would not make much sense if his aim were morality in the broad sense, which need not be shared. Indeed, Mackie explicitly takes a sort of "to each his own" approach to morality in the broad sense, allowing that here there need not be agreement:

[I]t should be expected that different individuals and different groups should have different ideals and values. Each person's special values will help to determine his morality in the broad sense; his actions will be guided not simply by what he wants but also, to

some extent, by the endeavour to realize in some degree whatever he sees as good. (Mackie 1977, 151).⁷

We should therefore read Mackie's proposal to remake morality as concerning morality in the narrow sense. This does not mean his proposal is entirely independent of morality in the broad sense. If most people's morality in the broad sense prescribed acting in ways counter to the sort of morality in the narrow sense Mackie proposes, then that proposal would be unrealistic and unstable. Mackie therefore appeals to fairly widespread values (e.g., avoiding pain, autonomy) that will inform just about everyone's morality in the broad sense in arguing for his proposed reform to morality in the narrow sense.⁸

What sorts of reasons, then, does Mackie offer for remaking morality [in the narrow sense] in one way rather than another? Typically, he offers prudential reasons. Here, for example, he

⁷It is striking how much this passage seems to anticipate Rawls's views on the extent of "reasonable pluralism" when it comes to what he calls "comprehensive views", though these include more than morality in the broad sense (e.g., theological and metaphysical views; cf. Rawls 1993, Lecture 4). The fact that Mackie seems happy for us to continue making such judgments also undermines Kalf's reading, on which it is only morality in the broad sense which is committed to objective values, and which we should jettison. Mackie actually thinks that both forms of moral thinking (broad and narrow) are amenable to the presupposition of objective value, and that both have purely subjectivist versions that are worth preserving; cf. Kalf (2019, §4).

⁸A further interesting question is what Mackie takes to fix the meaning of moral claims in the broad sense. He seems most likely to have in mind a subjectivist hybrid theory, where the content of those judgments is about one's own norms (or, perhaps, about the content of those norms) but where making the judgment requires actually having the norms and attitudes in question. That would fit well with Mackie's characterization of a person's morality being fixed by the principles which guide his conduct and also with his more general theory of the meanings of evaluative and prescriptive terms. The other reading worth exploring would be an expressivist one, since it is not obvious that Mackie's objections to expressivism earlier in the book would apply as forcefully to morality in the broad sense. On balance, though, a subjectivist hybrid theory seems most likely what Mackie implicitly had intended for discourse about morality in the broad sense.

appeals to each person's "own interest" to explain why we should welcome the existence of morality in the narrow sense *and* to explain why each of us should try to modify it to better "suit" ourselves where it is not in our interest:

Everyone should, in his own interest, welcome the fact that there is, and hope there will continue to be some system of morality, and why, even if the existing system does not suit him, his aim should be to modify it, at least locally, rather than to destroy it.

(Mackie 1977, 190)

Mackie allows that prudence and morality in the narrow sense can in principle come apart, but is cautiously optimistic that it will not do so too often, given that it will tend to be in our interests to cultivate a conscience; those without one tend to be shunned by others, and most amorality are not good at hiding their shamelessness. Having a conscience, in turn, itself partly constitutes one's well-being, for Mackie:

If someone . . . has at least fairly strong moral tendencies, the prudential course, for him, will almost certainly coincide with what he sees as the moral one, simply because he will have to live with his conscience.

(Mackie 1977, 191–92)

Mackie's proposal for how we should remake morality also is heavily informed by the need for realism—where realism here means ensuring that morality dramatically depart from what individual's perceived self-interest (this is part of why he rejects utilitarianism; see Mackie 1977, 132). Still, Mackie allows that for some people, acting morally will sometimes and perhaps often run counter to their interests. He simply suggests that this will be sufficiently rare as to not undermine the tenability of his proposed reforms.

Having some sense of the kinds of reasons Mackie offers for remaking morality, we can now return to the "Vory v Zakone" challenge. What is so special about prudence? Why is showing that we have prudential reasons to remake morality as Mackie recommends any more interesting than we have Vory v Zakone

reasons to remake it in a very different way? One option Mackie explicitly rejects is the idea that prudence is a necessary requirement of rationality:

Even the rationality of prudence—in the sense of equal concern for the interests and welfare at all future times of this same person, oneself—is not quite as self-evident as is commonly supposed. Personal identity is not absolute, as it is believed to be: as I argued in Chapter 3, our concept of personal identity through time itself functions as a sort of institution, aided by a contingent present desire for our own future welfare.

(Mackie 1977, 191)

Interestingly, Mackie here characterizes our concept of personal identity as functioning "as a sort of institution" and refers the reader back to Chapter 3. There he compares the concept of personal identity to "an institution like promising" and suggests that this concept introduces a "requirement for attention to the future well-being of what will be the same human being as the agent in question" (Mackie 1977, 78).

Mackie is here no doubt drawing on his broadly Lockean view of personal identity, one developed in more detail elsewhere (e.g., Mackie 1976, chap. 6). There he defends a "conceptual reform" of our ordinary concept of personal identity which he argues is infected with error, having its identity over time absolutely ("like a Lockean atom"; Mackie 1976, 194), rather than relative to psychological or physical continuity of the subject. On his proposed reforming definition, our concept of personal identity should be understood as a natural kind term and given an externalist semantics. The nominal essence of personal identity is, on this view, "whatever underlies and makes possible the unity of consciousness". The real essence underlying this is, for Mackie, a species of bodily continuity, and he thinks this is at least part of our ordinary concept, but that our ordinary concept also includes dualist strands which he thinks we must jettison.

Interestingly, in this earlier work (*Problems from Locke*), Mackie also suggested that prudence has no special claim to rationality:

[T]hat there is no factual basis for the employment of our present absolute concept . . . has an important bearing on moral philosophy, especially in bringing it about that there is no exclusive rationality in having an equal concern for all of one's future selves.

(Mackie 1976, 199)

One can also here as well see the profound influence Hume has had on Mackie, since these passages also strongly echo Hume's infamous remark that "'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger" (Hume 1739–40, 2.3.3.6). Reason for both Mackie and Hume is always relative to one's present desires.

Putting these pieces of the puzzle together, we can see that Mackie takes the rationality of prudence to depend on the contingent but systematic and widespread fact that each of us, at each moment in time, tends to care deeply about the welfare of future time-slices of the human being which constitutes oneself at that moment in time. In taking part in the pseudo-institution of personal identity, by deploying the concept of prudence, we take up an "internal" perspective on that pseudo-institution. Just as someone who takes an "internal" perspective on the institution of promising thereby endorses the requirement to keep their promises, and so tends to be appropriately motivated, someone who takes an "internal" perspective on personal identity thereby endorses the requirement to care equally about the welfare of future time-slices of the human being which underlies their current unity of consciousness. In both cases, there is no categorical requirement of rationality to care about either (promises or one's future welfare); the rational requirement follows only from an agent's contingent present desire.

This, in turn, gives us a clue as to how Mackie might answer the "Vory v Zakone" challenge. Implicit in the passages in which Mackie discusses the merely conditional rationality of prudence is the view that at least a *sufficient* condition for an agent's being prima facie rationally required to do something is that doing it would promote the satisfaction of one or more of the agent's

present desires. That would explain why the rationality of caring about one's future self depends on one's contingently caring about the welfare of the human being which currently constitutes oneself. This hypothesis is corroborated by passages like the following:

The rationality of morality (in the narrow sense) consists in the fact . . . that men need moral rules and principles and dispositions if they are to live together and flourish in communities . . . The rationality of prudence consists in the fact that a man is more likely to flourish if he has, at any one time, some concern for the welfare of later phases of this same human being . . . Both these contrast with the more basic rationality of the hypothetical imperative, rationality in the sense in which it is rational to do whatever will satisfy one's own present desires. (Mackie 1977, 228–29)

The rationality of doing "whatever will satisfy one's present desires" is taken to be "more basic" than the rationality of morality and prudence. This passage, and connection with those quoted above, strongly suggest the following understanding of how Mackie could meet the "Vory v Zakone" challenge:

- (1) Practical rationality is [at least in part] a matter of doing what will best promote the satisfaction of one's present desires.
- (2) Most people (for evolutionary reasons Mackie also canvasses), throughout most of their lives, care a great deal about the well-being of their future selves (they take an "internal perspective" on the pseudo-institution of prudence).
- (3) For most people, at most times, prudence is, therefore a rational requirement.
- (4) Therefore, establishing that the proposed reforms to morality in the narrow sense (one's socially constructed moral institutions) are such that they would be prudentially good for most people is enough to establish a prima facie rational requirement to support those reforms insofar as individuals can effectively do so.

- (5) Rationality is normative; establishing that the proposed reforms are (generally) rationally required is enough to meet the Vory v Zakone challenge.

The fifth stage of this response to the challenge is the only one I have not yet discussed. Unfortunately, Mackie never much discusses practical rationality and “the normative”. It is, however, commonplace for those working on the normative to characterize genuinely normative reasons as ones that an agent cannot ignore, *on pain of practical irrationality*. Theorists often disagree about which, if either, is more basic—normative reasons or rationality. The idea that the two are intimately linked in some way is, though, widespread, and has been endorsed both by moral realists, Kantian rationalists and expressivists.⁹ To that extent, insofar as Mackie can demonstrate that his proposed reforms are rationally required, that is enough to show that they matter, in some intuitive sense—that they are “normative”.

Moreover, even if this link to the normative can be reasonably contested, rationality is plausibly an essential feature of human nature. To that extent, showing how his proposed reforms are rational is already enough to meet the Vory v Zakone challenge. The Russian thieves’ code (and other such arbitrary conventions) are no essential part of human nature in the way that rationality plausibly is. To the extent that we take the study of human nature to be part of philosophy’s core mission (as Mackie’s historical influences, like David Hume, certainly did), it will be philosophically interesting to show that the proposed reforms are rational in a way that showing, e.g., that they would be supported by the norms of the Vory v Zakone would not.

Of course, the present aim theory of practical rationality, or more modestly (perhaps all that Mackie needs) the thesis that satisfying an agent’s present desire(s) is sufficient in itself to ground a *prima facie* rational requirement, is itself highly con-

⁹See, e.g., Scanlon (2014), Korsgaard (1996), Smith (1994), and Ridge (2014). For further useful discussion, see Dreier (2015).

troversial. But it is also a view with some attractions and interesting philosophical justifications.¹⁰ My main aim here, though, is not to defend Mackie’s overall view, but to offer an interpretation that adequately balances charity and fidelity to the text. The present aim conception of rationality has enough plausibility that attributing that view to Mackie does not seem terribly uncharitable. It also has considerable textual support.

Moreover, this is a broadly Humean conception of practical rationality. Hume thought reason was a real faculty of the mind, but a fairly anaemic one which simply functioned to keep our beliefs and desires consistent. For Hume, reason famously is and ought to be the slave of the passions, and Mackie here takes a similar view. This is no coincidence. Mackie makes it clear both in the footnotes to *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* and in *Hume’s Moral Theory* just how indebted he is to Hume’s approach here. I suspect that if Mackie had discussed practical rationality in more detail that he would have also found traces of the error-ridden notion of “objective value”, and urged us to excise that from our discourse and “prune” our talk of rationality as well, but that is admittedly a speculative hypothesis.

5. Conclusion

Mackie’s *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* has long been misunderstood. Mackie is not an error theorist in the modern sense; he does not think *all* moral discourse is riddled with error. Rather, he thinks *much* and perhaps *most* ordinary moral discourse is riddled with error, but that important pockets of ordinary moral discourse are entirely in good working order. This explains how he can go on, in the second half of the book, to make numerous first-order moral claims, why he emphasizes the neutrality of his second-order position from first-order ethics, etc. As it happens,

¹⁰See Schroeder (2007) for a recent defense of a view in this neighborhood. Derek Parfit (1984) famously discusses the present aim theory.

the pocket of ordinary moral discourse which is error free is subjectivist in its content and amenable to a “hybrid theory” in that the relevant judgments are partly constituted by endorsing some contextually specified set of moral institutions. Mackie thus should be understood as both a hybrid theorist and as a “conceptual pruner”, urging us to do away with those strands of moral thought and discourse which are indefensible.

Moberger made a reasonable initial case for this reading of Mackie, but left out what I consider some of the strongest and most direct evidence in its favour, relying instead too heavily on indirect clues arising from caveats Mackie included in stating the error theory. Most notably, the semantic pluralism needed for this reading can be justified much more directly by attending to Mackie’s semantic theory for terms like “good”, “ought”, “must”, and “reason”. That discussion also further corroborates reading Mackie as a hybrid theorist, given his discussion of using “good” for “egocentric commendation”, as do passages from *Hume’s Moral Theory*. Moreover, there is considerable additional textual evidence for the view, some of it in other sources, and it fits well with Mackie’s own account of the figures who most influenced his thinking (Stevenson, Ayer, and especially Hume).

All of that said, the resulting view does face a challenge: to explain in what sense the reasons we have for “remaking” morality (in the narrow sense) are somehow “special”—why they have a grip on us or “are normative”. I have argued that there is an implicit answer to this in Mackie’s work, albeit a controversial one. The reasons Mackie offers for reforming morality are prudential, but prudence is not itself *essentially* rational. Rather, it is grounded in the rationality of promoting the satisfaction of one’s present desires and the contingent but deeply ingrained and widespread desire most people have for their own future welfare. Why rationality itself counts “as normative”, is of course a further question, but here at least Mackie is in good company, since theorists of many different stripes take the normativity of rationality as a fundamental posit. Moreover, even if rationality

is not in any suitable sense normative, it is plausibly an essential feature of human nature, and so grounding his proposed reforms in rationality should make the project philosophically interesting to that extent.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Jessica Isserow for the suggestion of the title for this article as well as several substantive comments which improved it. Thanks also to Victor Moberger and the participants of a work in progress group at the University of Edinburgh for useful feedback on an earlier draft.

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