

# MACKIE'S ERROR THEORY: A WITTGENSTEINIAN CRITIQUE

## A TEORIA DO ERRO DE MACKIE: UMA CRÍTICA WITTGENSTEINIANA

*Robert Vinten*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** I start by arguing that Mackie's claim that there are no objective values is a nonsensical one. I do this by 'assembling reminders' of the correct use of the term 'values' and by examining the grammar of moral propositions à la Wittgenstein. I also examine Hare's thought experiment which is used to demonstrate "that no real issue can be built around the objectivity or otherwise of moral values" before briefly looking at Mackie's 'argument from queerness'. In the final section I propose that Robert Arrington's 'conceptual relativism', inspired by Wittgenstein, helps to make our use of moral language more perspicuous and avoids the problems faced by Mackie.

**Keywords:** Mackie. Metaethics. Wittgenstein. Values. Objectivity. Nonsense.

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### Introduction

John Mackie has suggested that he has conducted an ontological investigation into moral and aesthetic values and has found that they "are not part of the fabric of the world"<sup>2</sup>. Section I of this paper will examine Mackie's arguments for these claims in some detail. In section II (i) I look at Mackie's claim that he is conducting an ontological investigation and argue that, despite what he says, he is making recommendations about how evaluative concepts should be employed rather than engaging in any kind of ontological investigation. Then in section II (ii) I argue that his claim that there are no objective values is either nonsensical or could perhaps be construed as a reminder of the correct use of the term 'values'. In section III I scrutinise R. M. Hare's argument in objection to Mackie that "no real issue can be built around the objectivity or otherwise of moral values"<sup>3</sup> and claim that Mackie is too quick to dismiss this objection from Hare. Having argued in section II that Mackie's central claim is nonsensical I suggest that the 'queerness' he attributes to claims about moral values is a result of conceptual confusion (section IV). Finally, in sections V and VI, I present a

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<sup>1</sup> PhD's candidate in Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Email: robert\_vinten@yahoo.com.

<sup>2</sup> Mackie, J. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, London: Penguin, 1990, p.15 (originally published by Pelican books, 1977)

<sup>3</sup> Hare, R. M. 'Errors and the Phenomenology of Value' in *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993.

Wittgensteinian alternative to Mackie's account and distinguish it from Jonathan Dancy's particularism. I conclude that although Mackie is right to reject Platonic objectivism his own position involves similar confusions. If we have a clear view of the use of the relevant expressions then we will recognise that both 'there are no objective values' and 'there are objective values' are nonsense.

## **1. Mackie's arguments**

In 1977 John Mackie's book concerning meta-ethics and moral epistemology, *Ethics*, was published. In it he made the controversial claim that there are no objective values. Unlike his similarly controversial predecessors, the logical positivists, Mackie maintained that claims which point to something objectively prescriptive are both meaningful and truth-apt. This suggests that moral knowledge is possible. However, Mackie also argued that any moral claim that purported to pick out something objectively prescriptive was false<sup>4</sup>. Given that one cannot know something that is false there can be no knowledge of facts about what is to be valued and what is to be condemned. So Mackie's position can be described as a kind of moral scepticism (a description that Mackie himself is happy to accept<sup>5</sup>).

This does not mean that we cannot distinguish between kind acts and cruel ones. We can *describe* acts as cruel or kind based on facts about people's behaviour but we cannot make true claims about kindness being good or cruelty being something to be condemned<sup>6</sup>, according to Mackie. Whereas Mackie wants to claim that values, obligations, and moral requirements are not part of the 'fabric of the world'<sup>7</sup>, the *behaviours* which can be described as cruel or kind *are* part of the fabric (or 'furniture') of the world<sup>8</sup>.

Mackie claims that his central thesis, that there are no objective values, is an ontological one and not a linguistic or conceptual one. According to Mackie, his claim is about what exists and not a claim about the meaning of ethical terms. He argues for

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<sup>4</sup> "[...] although most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false" Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.35 Earlier in the book he says that, "...value statements cannot be either true or false", *Ethics*, p.25. So, Mackie's position is that moral judgements are nonsensical, although they also involve implicit claims "to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive" which are false.

<sup>5</sup> Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.16

<sup>6</sup> Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.17

<sup>7</sup> Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.15

<sup>8</sup> Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.16

this by drawing an analogy with perception. He says that just as the question 'what is perception?' cannot be exhaustively answered by giving an account of what 'perceive', 'see', and 'hear' mean, the question 'what is goodness?' (or 'what are values?') cannot be answered by finding out what 'good' means. Even after we've said what 'perceive', 'see', and 'hear' mean we still haven't told people anything about what goes on when someone perceives something. Mackie goes on to suggest that, "[w]hether Boyle and Locke were right about [whether colours are powers of objects to produce sensations in us] cannot be settled by finding out how we use colour words and what we mean in using them"<sup>9</sup>. His conclusion is that answering the question 'what is goodness?' will inevitably involve an ontological investigation and not just a conceptual one.

An objection to Mackie's thesis comes from R. M. Hare. Hare argues, "that no real issue can be built around the objectivity or otherwise of moral values"<sup>10</sup>. He argues for this by using a kind of thought experiment:

Think of one world into whose fabric values are objectively built; and think of another in which those values have been annihilated. And remember that in both worlds the people go on being concerned about the same things – there is no difference in the 'subjective' concern which people have for things, only in their 'objective' value. Now I ask, 'What is the difference between the states of affairs in these two worlds?' Can any answer be given except 'None whatever'?<sup>11</sup>

Mackie takes this objection to be similar to the logical positivist's objection to the distinction between phenomenalist and commonsense realist views of the world. The logical positivists objected that there is no experiential difference between the two cases. We cannot verify that we inhabit one or the other and so the question of which one we inhabit is a pseudoquestion.

Mackie responds to Hare's objection by saying that there would be a difference between the world in which there are objective values and the world in which objective values had been obliterated. In the first case there would be something to back up the subjective concerns that people have. Mackie then presents us with a conditional claim; "[i]f we reject the positivism that would make the dispute between realists and phenomenologists a pseudo-question, we can reject Hare's similarly supported dismissal

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<sup>9</sup> Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.20

<sup>10</sup> Hare, R. M. 'Errors and the Phenomenology of Value' in *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Hare, R. M. cited on p.21 of Mackie's *Ethics*.

of the objectivity of values”<sup>12</sup> and I take it that he thinks that the antecedent of the conditional holds (i.e. that we can reject positivism).

At the end of the first chapter of *Ethics* Mackie presents two arguments<sup>13</sup> in favour of his central thesis; that there are no objective values. In this paper I will focus on the second of his two arguments: the argument from queerness. Mackie suggests that the argument divides into two parts; a metaphysical one and an epistemological one. The ‘metaphysical’ argument is that, “If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe.” The world does not contain entities, qualities or relations that are strange in this way and so there are no objective values. The ‘epistemological’ argument is that, “...if we were aware of them [objective values], it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else” and since we do not have such a faculty we cannot be aware of objective values (and so we don’t have any good reason to think that they exist)<sup>14</sup>.

## **2. Is Mackie engaged in a conceptual investigation?**

### *(i) Wittgenstein and grammar*

Wittgenstein’s conception of grammar from his later philosophy is useful in thinking about Mackie’s claims. When Wittgenstein talks about the *grammar* of a word, what he is talking about is the linguistic rules governing the use of that word. Wittgenstein’s use of the notion of grammar was broader than that typically used by grammarians and Wittgenstein was not particularly concerned with the rules that fill grammar books. A grammatical rule such as “if a verb follows the word *to* in English then it is called an infinitive and it is not the main verb” does not have obvious philosophical applications and Wittgenstein’s concern was with untangling conceptual confusions involved in philosophical problems. One example of a rule of grammar mentioned in Wittgenstein’s *the Blue Book* is “of course I know what I wish”. Wittgenstein thinks this can be interpreted as a rule of grammar partly because what it

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<sup>12</sup> Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.22

<sup>13</sup> ‘The argument from relativity’ and ‘the argument from queerness’, *Ethics*, pp.35-42

<sup>14</sup> Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.38

says cannot be interpreted as a report of what I know. The reason that it cannot be a report of what I know, and the reason that it counts as a rule of grammar is that what it is asserting is that doubt is logically excluded in this case and similar cases. In genuine cases of knowledge doubt has been excluded but the cases are also ones about which it makes sense to express doubt (so doubt is not *logically* excluded). For example, “I know that the Willis Tower in Chicago is taller than the Empire State Building”, is a case of something which somebody might know but which, at another time, they might doubt (or which somebody else might doubt). As Wittgenstein says, “[in the sentence ‘of course I know what I wish’] ‘of course I know’ could here be replaced by ‘Of course there is no doubt’. In this way the answer ‘Of course I know what I wish can be interpreted as a grammatical statement.”<sup>15</sup> Other examples of grammatical rules in *the Blue Book* include “13 x 18 inches won’t go into 3 feet”, “the colours green and blue can’t be in the same place simultaneously”, and “6 foot is 6 inches longer than 5 foot 6”<sup>16</sup>.

Grammar is the description of and clarification of the rules of language<sup>17</sup>. These rules determine what it makes sense to say (and to write and to think). Wittgenstein’s conception of grammar includes rules of grammar that do not usually appear in grammar books and there are sentences that are well constructed according to the rules found in grammar books but which nonetheless do not make sense. Chomsky’s case: “colourless green ideas sleep furiously” is an example of such a sentence. Chomsky described the sentence as nonsensical but grammatical<sup>18</sup>. However, according to Wittgenstein’s use of the term ‘grammar’ the sentence would be both nonsensical and ungrammatical. In fact there would be no nonsensical sentences that were grammatical according to Wittgenstein. Grammar is a description of the rules for making sense. Any sentence that is nonsensical must have violated one of these rules.

When the philosopher G. E. Moore heard Wittgenstein speaking in this way about grammar he thought that Wittgenstein was using the term ‘grammar’ in an odd sense. It is tempting to think that Wittgenstein has expanded the use of the word ‘grammar’ in his later work to include rules that we would not usually think of as grammatical rules (or perhaps not think of as rules at all) and so Wittgenstein’s use is a

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<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein, L. *the Blue Book*, p.30

<sup>16</sup> Wittgenstein, L. *the Blue Book*, p.56

<sup>17</sup> See *Philosophical Investigations*, §496: “Grammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfil its purpose... It only describes, and in no way explains, the use of signs”.

<sup>18</sup> Chomsky, N. *Syntactic Structures*, The Hague/Paris: Mouton, p.15

technical one, or a term-of-art. However, although it is fair to say that examples like those found in *the Blue Book* do not fill grammar books, Wittgenstein himself insisted that his rules were just like those found in grammar books and he was not stretching the use of the word 'grammar':

Grammatical rules are all of the same kind, but it is not the same mistake if a man breaks one as if he breaks another. If he uses 'was' instead of 'were' it causes no confusion; but in the other example the analogy with physical space (c.f. two people in the *same* chair) does cause confusion. When we say we can't think of two colours in the same place we make the mistake of thinking that this is a proposition<sup>19</sup>, though it is not; and we would never try to say it if we were not misled by an analogy. It is misleading to use the word 'can't' because it suggests a wrong analogy. We should say 'It makes no sense to say...'<sup>20</sup>

Grammatical remarks then are remarks that authorise or prohibit a certain way of speaking. In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein warns against confusing grammatical remarks with empirical ones (PI, §251) and suggests that doing so is a source of philosophical confusion<sup>21</sup>. Wittgenstein suggests that, 'our preoccupation with the method of science [i.e. with empirical matters as discussed by the scientist]... is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness... Philosophy really *is* 'purely descriptive'.'<sup>22</sup> I will suggest that Mackie is guilty of just this sort of mistake. He conceives of the claim that 'there are no objective values' as an 'ontological' one, i.e. a claim about what exists. However, an examination of the ordinary and correct use of the term 'values' reveals that this sentence is either nonsense or could perhaps serve as a grammatical reminder that it makes no sense to speak of values as entities or as part of the fabric of the world. That is, it prohibits sentences which speak of values as entities as nonsensical.

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<sup>19</sup> Presumably Wittgenstein's point here is that 'two colours cannot be in the same place', when thought of as philosophically problematic, is a grammatical remark rather than an empirical proposition.

<sup>20</sup> Wittgenstein, L. *Lectures 1930-1932* (Desmond Lee ed.), Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, pp.97-8

<sup>21</sup> For example, in the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein suggests that the philosophical problem he has been discussing concerning the notion of 'thinking', "...was not a scientific [empirical] one; but a [grammatical] muddle felt as a problem." p.6

<sup>22</sup> Wittgenstein, L. *The Blue and Brown Books*, New York: Harper and Row, 1958, p.18

(ii) Mackie and nonsense

On the very first page of the first chapter of *Ethics* Mackie presents his thesis that, “[t]here are no objective values”<sup>23</sup>. Later on in the chapter he offers alternative versions of the thesis. He says that he is asserting that, “there do not exist *entities* or *relations* of a certain kind, objective values or requirements”<sup>24</sup>; that, “if there were objective values they would presumably belong to kinds of *things* or *actions* or *states of affairs*”<sup>25</sup> and then in presenting his argument from queerness he says that, “[i]f there were objective values, then they would be *entities* or *qualities* or *relations* of a very strange sort”<sup>26</sup>.

It is unclear whether values are supposed to be entities, things, actions, states of affairs or things belonging to them, namely qualities or features of things, actions, or states of affairs. But perhaps this lack of clarity does not matter because Mackie wants to claim that values do not fit into any of these categories. According to Mackie, there is nothing in existence that is objectively intrinsically prescriptive – no entity, property, state of affairs, or action.

But it is worth pondering these claims. Is the claim that ‘there are no entities that are values’ true or false or something else? When someone says that two groups of people share common values do they mean that those two groups of people share some entities? It is clear that they do not mean this. Nicky Morgan, British Education Secretary, has said that young children must learn British values<sup>27</sup>. Does she mean that they must learn some entities? No sense can be made of such a claim. So it seems that it is a matter of meaning or a matter of ‘grammar’ that ‘there are no entities that are values’. The point is not that, as a matter of fact, there are not any entities that are values but that *nothing counts* as an entity that is a value. ‘There are entities that are values’ does not make sense and so the denial that there are entities that are values is either nonsense itself or it may serve as a grammatical reminder that we cannot speak about values as entities and make sense. Mackie argues that he is engaged in an ontological investigation rather than a conceptual one but these considerations suggest that, *contra* Mackie, his investigation is in fact a conceptual one.

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<sup>23</sup> Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.13

<sup>24</sup> Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.17 (my italics)

<sup>25</sup> Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.23 (my italics)

<sup>26</sup> Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.38 (my italics)

<sup>27</sup> See Adams, R. ‘Nicky Morgan: toddlers must learn ‘British values’’, *The Guardian*, 08/08/2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/aug/08/nicky-morgan-toddler-must-be-taught-british-values>

I take it that in the preceding paragraph what I was doing was “marshalling recollections” or “assembling reminders” of the correct use of the term ‘values’ in a way suggested by Wittgenstein<sup>28</sup>. By looking at the way that the term ‘values’ is used, ordinarily and correctly, we can see that the way that it is employed by Mackie is abnormal or illegitimate. The use of the term ‘values’ in the claim that ‘there are no entities that are values’ violates our norms concerning the use of the term ‘values’. We do not use the term to refer to entities and cannot make any sense of using the term in that way.

Mackie, however, denies that he is making a conceptual claim. He says that his central thesis – that there are no objective values – “is an ontological thesis, not a linguistic or conceptual one”<sup>29</sup>. Mackie’s claim then must be that as a matter of fact values do not exist. Values are not a part of the fabric of the world. But if it is not a linguistic thesis then presumably Mackie would accept that he can make sense of the idea that values *might* be part of the world and that there *might* be value-entities in it. If all of the dogs in the world were to die then it would make sense to say, “there are no dogs in the world”. In that case one would be making an ‘ontological’ claim – a claim about what exists. Is Mackie’s claim similar? – Is he claiming that ‘there are no objectively prescriptive value-entities in the world now but perhaps at some point there were or that perhaps at some point there *might* be’? – It is difficult to see what sense can be made of this claim and I propose the difficulty is due to the fact that the claim does not make sense.

As we have already seen, Mackie argues that his investigation is an ontological one by comparing the questions, ‘what is goodness?’ and ‘what is perception?’. His suggestion is that neither question could be answered exhaustively by just defining the terms in question (‘goodness’ and ‘perception’). Leaving aside the awkward question of what would constitute an exhaustive answer to a question, Mackie is mistaken in thinking that (i) *an answer which provided a definition of ‘perception’* and (ii) *an answer that provided an account of what goes on when somebody perceives something* would be answers to the same question (which together exhaustively answer it). There

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<sup>28</sup> Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations* (4<sup>th</sup> edition, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte), Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, §127. The new, 4<sup>th</sup>, edition of the *Philosophical Investigations* translates Wittgenstein’s “Die Arbeit des Philosophen ist ein Zusammentragen von Erinnerungen zu einem bestimmen Zweck” as “The work of the philosopher consists in marshalling recollections for a particular purpose”. Anscombe’s translation was “The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (*Philosophical Investigations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).

<sup>29</sup> Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.18



are two questions here, namely 'what does 'perception' mean?' and 'what goes on when somebody perceives something?'. In the case of 'what is 'goodness'?' it is less clear that there are two questions. This question would be most naturally answered by giving some kind of *definition* or *an explanation of meaning* of the term 'goodness' and so it is a conceptual question.

Mackie also argues that the correctness of Boyle and Locke's thesis (that colours are powers of objects to produce sensations in us) cannot be settled by just examining the use of colour words. This is used to argue that his own philosophical claims about goodness and value cannot be settled by examining the terms 'goodness' and 'value'. However, Boyle and Locke's picture can be picked apart by looking at how we employ various concepts (including colour concepts). One point that can be made against them is that they assimilate perceptual experiences and sensations. This is not a factual matter because no empirical investigation could establish that perceptions were a kind of sensation. As Peter Hacker says, it is a matter of grammar that, "objects perceived exist whether perceived or not" but, "...sensations cannot exist *unfelt*"<sup>30</sup>. Boyle and Locke do not object to particular empirical claims about whether some object is red or yellow. Their cases are made up of *a priori* arguments or thought experiments which result in them recommending a complete *reconception* of our talk about perception of colour (and of other 'secondary qualities'). Similarly Mackie is not concerned with rejecting this or that moral judgement on empirical grounds he is claiming that we need to completely *reconceive* our talk about moral states of affairs, properties, actions, and so on<sup>31</sup>.

Mackie acknowledges that the way that we ordinarily speak about values involves a, "claim to objectivity" and we do indeed use words like 'know', 'fact' and 'true' in relation to moral statements. But Mackie argues that this does not demonstrate that there really is moral knowledge or that there are moral facts. Moral language, according to Mackie, is not self-validating. However, as Oswald Hanfling has pointed out, this is not because it is false that moral language is self-validating. Rather it is because no sense can be made of saying that moral language is self-validating. There is

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<sup>30</sup> Bennett, M. and Hacker, P. M. S. *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2003, p. 121

<sup>31</sup> A further reason to think that he is engaged in a conceptual investigation is his methodology, which is 'armchair philosophy'.

no such thing as self-validating moral language and so we cannot conclude on this basis that we are wrong in using such language in relation to moral statements<sup>32</sup>.

### 3. Hare's objection

Mackie brushes off Hare's objection<sup>33</sup> to his position by comparing it to the logical positivist's objection to the distinction between phenomenalist and commonsense realist views of the world. The logical positivist A. J. Ayer argued that whereas there is a procedure for dealing with the question of whether a painting is by Goya or not, there is no similar kind of procedure for deciding whether a painting is real or ideal and so he suggests that the problem is "fictitious" according to his criterion (verifiability)<sup>34</sup>.

Most philosophers have now rejected verificationism and so perhaps Mackie is right to give it short shrift. But even assuming that Mackie can reject the logical positivist's verificationism he still cannot make the argument against Hare's objection so quickly. Mackie claims that, "[i]f we reject the positivism that would make the dispute between realists and phenomenals a pseudo-question, we can reject Hare's similarly supported dismissal of the objectivity of values" but this is not true. For one thing Hare is not himself a positivist. He does not share their non-cognitivist take on ethics. Hare thinks, "both that moral statements can be true or false, and that we can know them to be true or false" and adds that "I get extremely cross when people classify me as a non-cognitivist"<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, Hare cites Wittgenstein approvingly; saying that the words 'right' and 'wrong' have a use and "[i]t is a task for the philosopher to explain, if he can, what this use is."<sup>36</sup>

In order for Mackie's rejection of Hare to be effective Mackie would also need to reject other, non-verificationist, ways of showing that the dispute between realism and phenomenism is not a legitimate one, including Wittgenstein's critique of such

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<sup>32</sup> Hanfling, O. 'Moral Knowledge and Moral Uncertainty', *Philosophical Investigations*, 31:2, April 2008, p.105

<sup>33</sup> "Think of one world into whose fabric values are objectively built; and think of another in which those values have been annihilated. And remember that in both worlds the people go on being concerned about the same things – there is no difference in the 'subjective' concern which people have for things, only in their 'objective' value. Now I ask, 'What is the difference between the states of affairs in these two worlds?' Can any answer be given except 'None whatever?'" Hare, R. M. cited on p.21 of Mackie's *Ethics* (originally from Hare's article 'Nothing Matters')

<sup>34</sup> Ayer, A. J. *Language, Truth, and Logic*

<sup>35</sup> Hare, R. M. 'Objective Prescriptions', *Philosophical Issues*, 4, Naturalism and Normativity, 1993

<sup>36</sup> Hare, R. M. 'Objective Prescriptions', *Philosophical Issues*, 4, 1993, p.17

metaphysical views in his later philosophy<sup>37</sup>. Wittgenstein would agree with Ayer that there is no procedure for deciding whether a painting is real or ideal but he is not a positivist. Wittgenstein famously associated meaning with use in his later philosophy<sup>38</sup>. It remains possible that Hare's rejection of the distinction between a, "world into whose fabric values are objectively built" and a world, "in which those values have been annihilated" could be defended on Wittgensteinian grounds.

Hare argues that values cannot be annihilated "[...] you cannot annihilate values – not values as a whole. As a matter of empirical fact, a man is a valuing creature, and is likely to remain so."<sup>39</sup> This doesn't sound like a particularly Wittgensteinian account of the use of the term 'value' but I think that a Wittgensteinian kind of defence can be given of his thought experiment. Remember that in the thought experiment we are asked to think of one world where values are built into the fabric of the world and another where those values have been annihilated. I have already argued above (in section II (ii)) that if we look at the correct use of the term 'values' it becomes clear that 'there are no objective values' is nonsense (or perhaps, at a stretch, a grammatical reminder). If this is the case then talk of the 'annihilation of values', where what we are imagining is the destruction of entities, is also nonsense. While we can imagine the annihilation of valuable things (I can think of a Ming vase being completely destroyed) and we can imagine the annihilation of creatures that value things we cannot imagine the annihilation of values. This is because nothing counts as the annihilation of values. The claim that we can imagine a world in which values have been annihilated is nonsensical. What is more we cannot make any sense of the claim that '[...] values are part of the fabric of the world'. If this is correct then there is nothing to verify. The claims are not nonsensical because they are unverifiable. Rather they are unverifiable because they are nonsense<sup>40</sup>.

#### **4. The argument from queerness**

We saw in section I that Mackie argues that were values to exist they would have to be, "[...] entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort" and we would

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, pp.48-49 and p.59 of Wittgenstein, L. *the Blue Book*.

<sup>38</sup> "For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*, §43

<sup>39</sup> Hare, R. M. 'Nothing Matters' in *Applications of Moral Philosophy*, London, Macmillan, 1972

<sup>40</sup> I could add that, as nonsense they do not even qualify as claims.

have to have a strange kind of faculty to apprehend them. Given the arguments made in the preceding sections I suggest that the reason that there is a sense of 'queerness' or 'strangeness' surrounding the notion of objective value is that Mackie is conceptually confused. It is not that the 'fabric of the world' does *not* incorporate values but that it *might*; the point is that no sense can be made of the claim that the fabric of the world incorporates values. The claim that 'there are no objectively prescriptive items that are part of the fabric of the world' is a piece of (unobvious) nonsense.

## **5. Some conclusions**

I hope that I have established that some of Mackie's arguments do not hit their target and so have opened up space for an alternative kind of explanation of values and of morality. The kind of explanation that I have in mind is an explanation of the meanings of the relevant terms and the account would provide a synoptic representation or an overview of the conceptual territory. This would involve a close examination of the correct use of the expressions that are causing confusion in Mackie's account of morality. The aim of such an overview would be to dissolve confusion about the notions of 'right', 'wrong', 'goodness', 'obligation', 'morality' and related terms. I have already looked at some reminders of the correct use of the term 'values' but I think that perhaps more needs to be said in order to satisfy someone who talks in the way that Mackie does. If we are reminded of the way that we ordinarily and correctly speak about morality and the way that we ordinarily talk about the truth and falsity of moral claims perhaps we will be less tempted to get vexed about the 'ontology' of values and goodness.

Looking carefully at what we say when it comes to matters of morality and value we will find that Mackie has got things the wrong way around. Whereas Mackie claims that, "[...] although most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false"<sup>41</sup> The argument of section II suggests that claims that 'point to something objectively prescriptive in the world' will turn out to be nonsensical (neither true nor false). Moreover, as Oswald Hanfling has pointed out, we have no good reason to think that people are implicitly committed to such claims in making moral judgements.

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<sup>41</sup> Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.35

Hanfling asks, “[h]ow should we understand the ontological commitments that Mackie ascribes to ordinary users of moral language? He speaks of them... in terms of the ‘fabric of the world’. But how is this to be understood? What is the fabric of the world? One might reply by reference to the materials of which it is made, such as rocks, metal, water, etc.: or at a more analytic level, chemicals and molecules. But the idea that values could find place in this company is bizarre and there is no reason to suppose that this is what people are committed to by their use of moral language, or that ‘linguistic analysis’ would reveal such a commitment”.<sup>42</sup>

Earlier in the book Mackie says that, “[...] value statements [as opposed to the claims implicit in them about objectively prescriptive values] cannot be either true or false”<sup>43</sup>. This claim, as Mackie recognises, conflicts with the way that we ordinarily talk about moral judgements. Given that Mackie’s arguments involve conceptual confusions I suggest that we have no good reason to give up the way that we ordinarily speak about moral judgements. In particular, we have no good reason to give up the claim that moral judgements can be true or false.

My aim in the preceding sections was the Wittgensteinian one of, “pass[ing] from unobvious nonsense to obvious nonsense” (PI, 464). Mackie’s central claim, that ‘there are no objective values (in the fabric of the world)’, is nonsensical but it is not obviously nonsense in the way that a ‘sentence’ like ‘attack fighters conservative with’ is. It appears grammatically well formed according to the school grammarian’s rules. Mackie’s claim looks like sentences which do make sense such as ‘there are no chairs in the room’ or ‘there are no parrots depicted in the fabrics of ancient Egypt’. But, as I have argued, it is nonetheless ungrammatical and nonsensical.

## **6. Synoptic representations**

There is nothing particularly Wittgensteinian about being clear about the correct use of terms such as ‘value’. Most people in their everyday lives generally do use such terms correctly without any problem. The more difficult task, and the one which could with some right be described as Wittgensteinian, is to have a clear view of the interrelationships between moral terms with a view to dissolving philosophical problems such as the one posed by Mackie. In the *Philosophical Investigations*

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<sup>42</sup> Hanfling, O. *Philosophy and Ordinary Language*, Routledge, 2000, p.147

<sup>43</sup> Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.25

Wittgenstein suggested that what we need in order to get clear about an area of discourse, such as moral discourse, is a surveyable representation of the use of words in that area (PI, §122)<sup>44</sup>. Providing a surveyable representation of a significant segment of moral discourse will provide an answer to the question about truth.

There is some controversy amongst Wittgenstein scholars about how to translate the expressions 'übersichtliche Darstellung', 'übersichtlichkeit', and 'übersehen' as they are used in passages, like the one just cited, in Wittgenstein's work. There is also controversy about how to interpret what Wittgenstein is saying in passages such as the one just cited (PI, §122)<sup>45</sup>. This is not an exegetical essay about such matters. I take it that what we need is an overview of the way in which terms in moral discourse are used and of the variety of logically distinct kinds of claims made in that area. A synoptic representation is not theoretical, does not involve making scientific claims, and does not provide us with any new facts. In this case it is an overview of the *grammar* of our moral language and the purpose of providing it is to dissolve philosophical problems surrounding truth, knowledge, and values in morality.

This paper has largely been focussed on the negative task of 'destroying houses of cards' (PI, §118). But Wittgenstein also saw a positive role for philosophy in describing the grammar of our language in order to get clearer about how our language works and how it fits into our lives. I do not intend to provide a positive account that will fill exactly the space left by Mackie's one since I do not think that there is any need or place for a theory of the ontology of morality. What can be provided is a surveyable representation of our moral language and I think that Wittgensteinian philosophers have already provided quite thorough accounts of this<sup>46</sup>.

For example, Robert Arrington, in his book *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism* provides a Wittgensteinian account of the grammar of moral expressions

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<sup>44</sup> "A main source of our failure to understand is that we don't have *an overview* of the use of our words. – Our grammar is deficient in surveyability. A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in 'seeing connections'. Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate links*. The concept of a surveyable representation is of fundamental significance for us. It characterizes the way we represent things, how we look at matters. (Is this a 'Weltanschauung'?)" – Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations (4<sup>th</sup> edition)*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009

<sup>45</sup> An excellent survey of the literature can be found in Nuno Venturinha's 'Wittgenstein and the Natural History of Human Beings' in *Philosophical Anthropology. Wittgenstein's Perspective* (ed. Jesús Padilla Gálvez), Ontos Verlag, Frankfurt a. M., 2010, pp.95-102

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Arrington, R. *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989 and Mounce, H. O. and Phillips, D. Z. *Moral Practices*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.

under the banner of 'conceptual relativism'<sup>47</sup>. Arrington suggests that one of the principal sources of philosophical confusion in the area of morality has been thinking of rules such as 'it is wrong to tell a lie' as substantive moral principles rather than as grammatical rules or principles. There is a temptation to regard such rules as generalizations and as being contingent because it seems as though they have exceptions. The case of someone having to lie in order to save an innocent person's life has been used in objection to Kant's claim that we must be truthful, come what may<sup>48</sup>. Kant's claim really is a substantive moral principle, that we can raise objections to, namely the claim that 'it is always wrong to tell a lie'. However, 'it is always wrong to tell a lie' does not say the same thing as 'it is wrong to tell a lie' and plays a different role. The claim that 'it is always wrong to tell a lie' is weakened, probably falsified, by the example of lying to save an innocent person's life. However, we do not think of 'it is wrong to tell a lie' as being weakened every time another moral principle takes precedence over it<sup>49</sup>. The role of this rule is to carve out a piece of logical space. As Arrington says, it "establishes the presumption that anyone who has lied has acted wrongly"<sup>50</sup>.

If one is still tempted to view 'it is wrong to tell a lie' as a contingent generalization then Arrington has several questions designed to draw us away from the temptation. He says,

If a proposition like 'it is wrong to tell a lie' is contingent it would be appropriate to ask when this was discovered. It would also be appropriate to inquire whether there is any kind of *experimentum crucis* that could be devised to prove it. It would make sense to inquire what evidence we have for the proposition and to ask whether some people merely believe the proposition whereas others know it the latter having adequate evidence for it<sup>51</sup>.

We can see that propositions like 'it is wrong to tell a lie' are not empirical generalisations by looking at how they are in fact used. One thing we notice when we look at how they are used is that they are not used much at all by adults speaking to adults. The paradigmatic case in which they are used is in cases of instruction; to

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<sup>47</sup> Arrington, R. *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989, pp.248-315

<sup>48</sup> "Truthfulness in declarations that one cannot avoid is a human being's duty to everyone, however great the disadvantage to him or to another that may result from it..." Kant, I. *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 8: 426 p.612

<sup>49</sup> See *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism*, p.272

<sup>50</sup> *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism*, p.276

<sup>51</sup> Arrington, R. *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989, p.272

establish the ideas of rightness and wrongness in children. In these cases we do not attempt to prove to the child that it is wrong to tell a lie but to bring them into our (moral) way of life. Propositions such as 'it is wrong to lie' are used to *define* morality<sup>52</sup>.

But we should not take 'it is wrong to tell a lie' to characterize the nature of all of the statements in morality. We have these grammatical rules in order to be able to apply the terms 'wrong', 'lie', 'morality' and similar terms correctly in particular cases. As Arrington makes clear, there is a great variety of different kinds of moral propositions. So, for example, there are contingent claims such as 'you ought to have gone to the cinema with him (because you promised)', contingent principles such as 'one ought to live a simple and frugal life', and principles of moral permissibility such as 'it is permissible to commit suicide'<sup>53</sup>.

Once we recognise the variety of different kinds of moral proposition and their different roles it becomes clearer about how we can account for the truth of particular moral judgements. We do so by applying rules to conduct on a particular occasion. If someone has told a lie on a particular occasion we can apply the rule 'it is wrong to tell a lie' which sets up a presumption that what they have done is wrong. This means that, *contra* Mackie, the word 'lie' is already imbued with moral meaning and we cannot separate out the descriptive element in practice. This does not mean that we have to consult the grammatical rules of morality each time we make a moral judgement any more than we have to consult the grammatical rules of colour expressions when we make judgements about colour. But these rules must nonetheless be operative and are available for consultation if there is confusion about meaning.

The kind of account just outlined sounds superficially like another recent position in moral philosophy, namely the particularism of Jonathan Dancy. We have already seen that moral rules are rarely consulted and this account also suggests that we could get by making judgements without having to have any substantive moral principles. Arrington says that, "[m]ost of us...live our moral lives piecemeal, dealing situation by situation with the moral dimensions that confront us and trying to decide in each case where our duty lies... [W]e resist the simple solution proffered by the universal principle or rule, thinking that it fosters more moral harm than good"<sup>54</sup>. Indeed

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<sup>52</sup> *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism*, p275

<sup>53</sup> See *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism*, pp.302-3 for a more detailed taxonomy.

<sup>54</sup> *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism*, pp.278-9



Arrington could accept the claim made in Dancy's definition of particularism, "the possibility of moral thought and judgement does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles"<sup>55</sup>, as long as 'principles' is taken here to mean 'substantive moral principles' as opposed to grammatical rules. The difference is that Arrington conceives of claims like 'it is wrong to tell a lie' and 'one ought to keep one's promises' as grammatical rules and sees them as central to thinking about truth in morality and as central in thinking about what morality itself is (as constituting it).

## **7. Conclusion**

So I have argued first of all that Mackie is conceptually confused in trying to argue for the claim that there are no objective values. His claim that values are not part of the fabric of the world is nonsensical. However, this negative deconstruction of Mackie's account may leave some unsatisfied and wondering how it is that moral judgements can be true or false, or if they are true or false at all. In section VI we saw that Robert Arrington's Wittgensteinian account of the conceptual territory in moral philosophy can be used to provide at least the beginnings of an answer to that question.

Wittgenstein may well have said that Mackie has not put the question marks deep enough down<sup>56</sup>. Mackie rejects the Platonic view that values are prescriptive and objective<sup>57</sup> but then adopts the mirror image of this view in claiming that values are not part of the fabric of the world. I hope that I have shown that there is a plausible third option here which is to regard both sides of this apparent antinomy as nonsense. As Frank Ramsey said, "[i]t is a heuristic maxim that the truth lies not in one of the two disputed views but in some third possibility which has not yet been thought of, which we can only discover by rejecting something assumed as obvious by both disputants"<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> Dancy, J. *Ethics Without Principles*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004, p.7

<sup>56</sup> Wittgenstein, L. *Culture and Value* 62 – "One doesn't put the question marks *deep* enough down"

<sup>57</sup> "Values themselves have been seen as at once prescriptive and objective. In Plato's theory the Forms, and in particular the Form of the Good, are eternal, extra-mental realities", Mackie, J. L. *Ethics*, p.23

<sup>58</sup> Ramsey, F. *The Foundations of Mathematics*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1931, pp.115-16

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