

ON THE PLAUSIBILITY OF MORAL OBJECTIVISM: A RESPONSE TO J. L. MACKIE'S NOTION OF THE SUBJECTIVITY OF VALUES

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Abstract

This paper is a critical response to J. L. Mackie's notion of the subjectivity of moral values as encapsulated in his work, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. In its basic form, the paper grapples with the perennial ethical problem of discovering and elucidating the nature of morality. The objective of this study is to defend the plausibility of moral objectivity in a human society. I argue in this paper that there are real objective moral truths that are independent of individual, subjective interpretations, or rather, subject to personal or group's feeling or disposition. This is to say that the ethically objective judgments on moral issues are themselves transcendently independent of any action that is being examined in any society. In this paper, I refer to these set of values as 'first order values' because of their primacy, such as truth telling, promise keeping and respect for the sanctity of human life. My core thesis is that the formation of human societies is dependent to a great extent on some of these universally recognizable objective values. I posit that they promote common good and that without such values society may not exist let alone survive. I conclude by suggesting a reconciliation of the notions of objectivism and subjectivism with two set of values, namely; 'First order' values and 'second order' values. First order values are fundamentally objective by nature as earlier stated while 'Second order' values are secondary and subjective, such as offering some assistance to someone in need and avoiding inflicting of pain on others.

Keywords: Morality, Objectivity, Subjectivity, Values, Society

Introduction

In the opening page of his book, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, J. L. Mackie boldly and emphatically asserts that "There are no objective values" (1977:15). He proposes, on the contrary, the idea of subjectivity of values. Moral subjectivism, in his opinion, could be a first order, normative view that individuals ought act the way they think they should. This doctrine holds that, for example, 'This action is right' means 'I approve of this action', or more generally that moral judgements are equivalent to reports of the speaker's own feelings or attitudes. However, Mackie's definition of the doctrine carries a negative connotation which holds that 'there do not exist entities or relations of a certain kind, objective values or requirements, which many people have believed to exist' (1977:17). This is what he calls moral skepticism. This paper undertakes a critical appraisal of this position in the light of pertinent questions about the plausibility of objective moral values in a multicultural world.

There is no gainsaying that the possibility, let alone the actuality of an objective morality has intrigued philosophers for well over two millennia. Similarly, the problem of the nature of morality is difficult to clearly conceptualize. To conclude that moral objectivity is a contested concept is, to one's mind, simply to give up the philosophical challenge of assessing the soundness of the concept. It is a known fact that moral objectivists face major difficulties as we can see from Mackie's position. Consequently, I shall, in this paper, critically examine these difficulties, and also suggest that there are strong competitive subjectivist opinions as represented by Mackie's. It is quite germane to state that moral issues is not just a matter of wondering contemplation, nor is it just a matter of keeping things ticking over at a bearable rate. It is, rather, a matter of philosophical analysis and reasonable action intertwined, such that

our evaluations commit us to action, and our performance of action in a moral spirit is an attempt to bring what we regard as worthwhile (Pybus, 1982: 196).

Conceptual Clarification

It is quite germane at this juncture to clearly delineate the meaning of objectivism and subjectivism respectively, in our ethical discourse. Certain words have gained currency in our ordinary usage which, in turn, have brought into discussions that are highly technical. The solution to this problem has to come in the form of clarification and proper analysis so that meanings are not muddled up.

Objectivism and subjectivism come in various forms. To R. Franklin, "an objectivist asserts and a subjectivist denies, that there are at least sometimes ultimately better reasons for one moral view than for alternatives" (1).

I. Moral Objectivism

Objectivism as a term has different meanings and can be applied in different contexts. In each context, its semantic import might be different. This has brought about the ambiguity and confusion that often surrounds its use in the ethical domain. With specific application to our discourse, moral objectivism holds that the truth of what is asserted by some ethical propositions is independent of the person who uses the proposition (Edwards 1972: 2). This is the view that what is morally right or wrong does not depend on what any person thinks or feels is right or wrong but are absolutely dependent on cognitive, objective moral facts. Moral objectivism is contrasted with moral subjectivism which holds that individual feelings are the right ethical criteria for determining morally valid actions or actions that are right or wrong, good or bad. At the heart of moral objectivism is the claim that at least some moral judgements and principles are correct and others incorrect, independent of what people believe, think, or feel (Barcalow 1994:34). Here, truth, right, wrong, good, bad and values are not dependent on personal or group's feeling or disposition. In essence, this doctrine is identifiable with the cognitively clear-sighted notion of judgement. Therefore, the moral value of an action is objective if all rationally informed minds in their proper frame perceive it as such and the goodness of it is completely independent of the perceiving minds (Ozumba 2001:31). Objectivism can also be supported by non-naturalistic arguments, such as the claim that moral truths are not discoverable by scientific methods.

However, in clarifying the concepts on hand, however, caution must be exercised in our use of terms like 'objective' to avoid misleading conclusions. For example, the term 'objective' could be understood as meaning that a person is sure of the truth of a given ethical proposition. But this can in different ways be misleading. For example, if someone says 'I am objectively certain that smoking marijuana is good'. The statement might be mistaken in the real meaning of objectivity. In this circumstance, the speaker might mean this or may have some good reasons for holding such a view, but when we closely analyse this statement, we find that it is far from being 'objective'. The speaker in question may merely be expressing his state of mind as to the rightness of a certain action, in this case marijuana smoking. So, it is necessary to note that objectivity is not synonymous with with personal conviction or disposition. Ethical statements or judgements are objective if their negation will involve a non-contingent falsehood (Ozumba 2001: 31). If a certain act is considered 'objectively' bad, it follows that any viewpoint that asserts the contrary, should be seen as wrong.

Unlike our concepts of a good lecture or a good wine, our concept of a good person does not seem to involve agreement about the objective natural properties referred to in such judgments. Though such references are usually made, it is problematic why different properties are being referred to by

different persons. Furthermore, there are disagreements in 'fundamental moral judgments' that seemingly cannot be reduced to disagreements about matters of fact, and thus, amount to the expression of different attitudes. One classic version of moral objectivism is what is known as the Divine Command theory. This theory holds that in some essential way, there are moral laws instituted by God which are objectively discoverable by reason or revelation. Since they are commanded by God, it is absolutely binding on all humans. Proponents of this view, thus, argue that it provides an objective ground for morality (see Groarke 2011: 406). Philosophers like Plato, Immanuel Kant and William David Ross are moral objectivists.

II. Moral Subjectivism

Moral subjectivism, on its part, has equally generated a lot of controversy in ethics. This stems from the different shades of meanings that have been given to it by different writers. Most of these problems are language related. Here, attempt will be made to address this conceptual problem by presenting it an unambiguous way. Subjectivism, denies all that objectivism affirms. Early relativist, emotive and prescriptive views were subjectivist in nature (Cornett, 1986, 146). The Protagorean relativists of the ancient period held that whatever a society believes is right and wrong is right and wrong for that society. Similarly, moral subjectivists claim that whatever an individual believes is right and wrong is right and wrong for that individual (Barcalow 1994: 49). This theory holds that moral claims can be true only relative to individual perspectives. On this score, there are no objective moral truths or values at all, and objective morality is simply an illusion (Landau 2012:322). The argument against objective morality can be simply stated as follows:

1. There are no objective truths
2. Therefore, there are no objective moral truths

At the first glance, we can note that this is a form of moral scepticism. What the moral sceptics are trying to show is that morality is in some ways 'second rate' in contrast with more precise scientific disciplines such as mathematics and physics (Landau 2012:322).

According to some versions of moral subjectivism, moral principles are based merely on feelings. Since feelings are subjective and non-cognitive, it follows that principles of morality cannot be assessed as correct or incorrect, reasonable or unreasonable. Therefore, no personal views on moral issues is any more correct or reasonable than that of another person's (Barcalow 1994: 49). The corollary of this view is that the individual is the parameter for knowing the right and the wrong. Here, unlike in moral objectivism where the moral agent plays no determining role, it is the agent that is the hub around which all morality revolves. The agent displays his primal importance in such feelings as love, hate, admiration, approval, disapproval or detestation (Ozumba 2001: 34). Unlike non-descriptivists and objectivists, subjectivists claim that moral rightness and wrongness are dependent on the attitudes or inclinations of some set of speakers or agents.

D. H. Monro (Cornett 1986:147) distinguishes between naïve subjectivism, the view that moral judgments state what the speaker feels, and the error theory, the view that "moral judgments refer to always the speaker's subjective feelings or attitudes and hence, that extent, false, since all that the speaker has a right say is that he has a certain feeling or attitude. According Monro, the error theory is the only form in which subjectivism has been seriously defended". He posits that the "naive subjectivist is a "man of straw. As I see it, the central claim

of the error theory is that though, perhaps, moral judgments or statements do not, in a strict sense, refer to subjective attitude of certain individuals, that is all they can be referring to, in a given factual or empirical analysis (Alabi 2000: 77).

Generally speaking, Moral Subjectivism holds that moral judgements are about the feelings of the individual making the moral judgement. The agent does not only follow his feelings about a particular moral issue but equally evokes same feelings in others, thus, urging them to perceive or judge the action in a similar way. For example, if Mr A says that "stealing is bad", what the person is simply doing is to persuade others to accept his negative view about stealing. He is merely evoking the same feeling in others. Another person say Mr B may hold a contrary view that "stealing is good". Each of the agents in this case is subjectively defending his position and persuading others to do the same. In line with the tenets of moral subjectivism, Mr A and Mr B are both stating their feelings about stealing and both have the right to view stealing the way they deem good. The implication is that both of them are right in their different views about stealing. However, the logical law of excluded middle would not validate the argument that the value 'right' can be conferred on the two opposing viewpoints. Ethical theories that can be subsumed under the umbrella of Moral Subjectivism include non-cognitivist theories as emotivism and prescriptivism, and existentialism. Philosophers such as David Hume, Alfred Jules Ayer and Charles L. Stevenson are emotivists, while Soren Kierkegaard and Jean Paul Sartre are notable existentialists. One common feature of these theories possess as subjective ethical theories is the affirmation of the centrality of the individual in making independent moral decisions that affects him/her personally and the freedom to make moral judgements based on what he/she thinks is right or wrong. J. L. Mackie is among the philosophers we classify as moral subjectivists.

III. Moral values

Many moral conflicts arise from our misunderstanding or lack of understanding of the nature of moral values. The word 'value' is used in many different contexts that the task of formulating a definite idea of value and applying it to morality is necessary. The big question here is what do we mean when we say that something is a value? What do we mean when we say that a thing or an act is a moral value? We also need to take a look at the meaning of moral values to be able to address the issue of whether objective morality is possible or not in a multicultural Society. Value is an abstract concept, so vague and loose a term that it has been permissibly employed in a variety of ways. Value is sometimes taken to mean just what is good (thought to be good), desired (thought to be desired). It is also used in a purely descriptive sense such as when the economist uses it to mean the material worth of a thing. In addition to these specific normative and descriptive meanings of the term value, "it may also be taken on a general plane to mean the conglomerate or set of institutional ideals cherished either by an individual or a group of people" (Sogolo 1993: 119). Subsumed under this set of values include, moral values, spiritual values, aesthetic values, cultural values, scientific values and so on. Fichter describes value as an elusive term, but in general what is regarded as good, as desirable, as worthwhile, a cause worthy of pursuit, worth living for and dying for(1993: 323). Kluckhohn defines value as a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable, which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of action (Peil 1977: 15). Elaborately, Lamm defines values as the "Collective conceptions of what is considered good, desirable and proper - or bad, undesirable and improper - in a culture" (1989:33). Value, for him, includes what people in a given culture prefer as well as what they find important and morally right (or wrong). Equality, cleanliness, liberty, kindness, happiness and fidelity are all examples of "values" in the broad sense of the

word. Specifically, there are moral values - a kind of value distinct from economic, scientific or aesthetic values and they are quite crucial to our study here. Moral values are a subset of values in the general sense. Moral values may be defined better in terms of a set of ideals, principles, standards, legitimate expectations and norms which act as the charter for acceptable conduct within a given society. We hold many moral values in our different societies such as truthfulness, fairness, justice, trustworthiness, respect for the sanctity of human life, humility, benevolence, promise keeping and so on (Weston 2001: 49-50). However, there is a raging controversy about the nature of moral values. Some philosophers like Kant and Ross are of the view that moral values are objective moral facts while others like Hume, Ayer, Stevenson and Mackie contend that moral values are psychologically dependent on individuals, and thus, subjective.

J. L. Mackie on the Subjectivity of Values

Mackie submits unequivocally that there are no objective moral values. He adopts a view that he calls a second order "moral scepticism". In his own words "A moral sceptic might be the sort of person who says 'All this talk of morality is tripe', who rejects morality and will take no notice of it" (1977: 16). Such an individual, he opines, may literally reject all moral judgements, make moral judgements of his own, express a positive condemnation of all that conventionally passes for morality; or may confuse these two logically incompatible points of view in the name of rejecting all morality, "while he is in fact rejecting only a particular morality that is current in the society in which he has grown up" (Mackie 1977: 16). According to him, this position is concerned first order moral views which is not his primary concern in the work. By contrast, Mackie, was primarily concerned with a second order view involving "...the status of moral values and the nature of moral valuing, about where and how they fit into the world" (1977:16). He considers the first and second order views as not merely distinct but completely independent of each other. Essentially, one could be classified as a second order moral sceptic (as he calls himself) without necessarily being a first order type and vice versa. In his view, an individual could hold strong moral views that are conventionally grounded, while at the same time believing that such views were simply attitudes and moral policies he/she shares in common. On the other hand, an individual could reject all conventionally established moral values while at the same time accepting their wrongness or badness as an objective moral truth.

Mackie posits that moral scepticism is a negative doctrine which denies the existence of objective values which many people have believed to exist. Another name he used as an alternative to 'moral scepticism' is 'subjectivism'. Mackie takes subjectivism to be the negative thesis that 'objectivism' is false - there are no objective values. By 'objectivism' Mackie refers to a position defined by several theses: First, the semantic thesis that moral judgments are either true or false. Their logic is thus distinguishable from the logic of the expression of merely subjective feelings. Second, the ontological thesis that moral value exists as an object or property: of objects among the entities of the actual world. Given a correspondence theory of truth, moral judgments have truth-value in virtue of moral reality. Third, the epistemological thesis that objective values are the object of moral knowledge. Moral ignorance and false belief can be explained by reference to objective value. Fourth, the motivational thesis that moral Categorical imperatives or prescriptions whose claim on a person's will is not based on any appeal to the desires of that person. The features of 'ought-to-be doneness and ought-to-be pursuedness are constituent features of objective requirements and values (Mackie 1977: 15).

The breadth of positions, both those of philosophers and ordinary folks, that Mackie tries to capture within the single term 'objectivists' tends to make the term unwieldy. It is perhaps easier to find unity, not in what has been accomplished by the several positions he

examines, but in what these positions attempt. The aim is still that of the platonic enterprises even though the platonic solution is only one attempt among others. The aim is that of discovering or devising guides for action which are authoritative (overriding) and non-relative. The subjectivist argues that such guides have as yet neither been constructed nor discovered, and furthermore, that there is no good empirical evidence that they could be. Though this results in a loss of a certain degree of agreement with our pre-theoretical views, it improves the overall simplicity of the naturalist account.

Problems with Mackie's Subjectivism

Mackie claims to be a moral skeptic (in the negative sense) in driving home his idea of the subjectivity of values. There is no gain saying the fact that most people have their doubts about the nature and scope of morality. However, Mackie's skepticism is a different and a peculiar kind of doubt which can undermine all of our confidence in morality. This sort of skepticism is not about the content of morality, in terms of what it requires or permits, but about its status. By this connotation, it is quite different from the tendency of believing that gaining moral knowledge is impossible. The problem here is the denial of objective moral standards and objective moral authority (Landau 2012: 289). Mackie's position contains some elements of 'Error theory' in terms of his insistence that there are no categorical reasons upon which we can build objective morality. He states that, "...my thesis that there are no objective values is specifically the denial that any such categorical imperative element is objectively valid" (1977:29). The objective values which he denies here would be action - directing in the absolute terms and not contingent upon the desires and inclinations of the agent. If this is anything to go by, Mackie's needs to show that buying into morality does not entail a subscription to categorical reasons and commitment to moral objectivity.

The Plausibility of Moral Objectivism

The claim to objectivity is not that moral judgments are descriptive, prescriptive, universalizable, categorical, imperatival, nor action directing or practical. It is rather that moral judgements can be validated as true or false independently of an agent's desires and inclinations; that is, independent in the sense that empirical and formal judgements are independent of an individual's desires. When the subjectivist, like Mackie, denies that the authoritative force of moral action guides, more than the force of an individual overriding desires or feelings, he can be seen as denying that there are objective values or that there is a way of objectively validating such desires. One may ask, does the evidence of an objective method of resolving moral controversies imply the existence of objective values; or, contrapositively, does the non-existence of objective values imply that there is no objective method of resolving moral disputes? Objectivists will answer this question in the affirmative but Mackie would object to it from a 'moral sceptic', subjectivist standpoint.

Somewhere in the procedures, methods, reasoning, logic, exercises, or language of morals a subjective element, having the status of a decision, will be involved, although it will tend to be objectified. Appealing to any normative mode, however general, may not enable one to avoid the problem of subjective acceptance. Such a problem, for Mackie, can only be resolved by the agents involved consulting their desires and finding out what they like. There is a difference between saying that contingencies are involved and saying that the basis of the acceptance is subjective (Alabi 2000: 79). I think that to speak of one's likings is one way of talking about one's nature. To examine the contingencies behind one's nature is to explore causal hypotheses

that explicate one's behaviour, verbal and nonverbal. A complete exploration of the contingencies governing one's situation, may show that, all things considered, one cannot sincerely say that one likes such-and-such. I think I should accept the view that the naturalist becomes a straw-man once the subjective component (talk of likes and dislikes) is divorced from the natural component (talk of contingent features of the empirical world). When we examine the contingencies behind our concepts we may find ourselves faced with choices regarding the management of our conceptual lives.

From all indications, philosophical investigation into the nature of morality attempts to provide us with an explanation of what we are (really) doing when we make moral judgments. One might be tempted to ask what such investigations have to do with what we should do? The answer is, of course, nothing necessarily. It is only if we do value, do have a subjective concern, for descriptive accuracy and empirical truth, only if we do prefer our fundamental principles to be well informed by the empirical facts, that philosophical investigations into the nature of morality will have any effect on our substantive moral positions (Wright 1988: 6-9).

Objective ethical naturalism out of the various forms of objectivism seems to one, to be an implausible alternative. This is because it is hard to find anyone holding it in its most simplistic form. For instance, Cornett says that any such position will have trouble making sense of the motivational aspects of morality, why we attach such importance to more demands. He further states that an objective ethical naturalist would have to hold that values exist in the world in the same way as material objects exist, or as features of such objects exist, or as relations among such objects and features (Cornett 1988: 2). Critics often argue that the idea of objective moral values is only a highly theoretical, intellectual outburst that is implausible. If the existence of objective moral truths is doubtful, as often asked, then, the plausibility of objective values is equally in doubt. A counter position would mean making reference to the plausibility of objective scientific truth of which ethics, as a science, partakes.

Can Objectivity and Subjectivity be Reconciled?

My departure point from earlier views on the subject lies on my submission that the ideas of objective and subjective values can, possibly, be reconciled using first order and second order values. The argument here is that not all values are subjective (I call them First order values) and not all values are objective (I refer to them as Second order values). First order values are fundamentally objective by nature such as truth-telling, trustworthiness, and respect for the sanctity of human life. On the other hand, 'Second order' values are secondary and subjective, such as respect, fairness, offering some assistance to someone in need and avoiding inflicting of pain on others. The objectivity of the 'first order' values lies in their categoricity and otherness; while on the other hand, 'second order' values incline towards subjectivity because of their personalistic interpretations and self-centeredness. In my interpretation, Mackie's moral scepticism and argument for the subjectivity of values dwells on second order values. This is, in way, a justification of my position on the plausibility of moral objectivism. I do not think it is implausible to designate some moral values as being subjective, but I do not believe all values of such nature. Mackie, even, briefly suggests that there may be categorical imperatives which are counsels of prudence (Pybus 1982: 198).

Conclusion

Moral philosophy as a disinterested discipline, should strive to carry its inquiry into the farthest burrow of the ideal. In the empirical sciences, the subject matter any discourse conveniently yields to scientific procedure and hence, is inter-subjectively verifiable. However, in ethics, which is a normative science, value dominates and there seem to be no universal cognitive standard to measure the truth of ethical statements. People differ in their perception

of what is morally right and wrong, good and bad. The task of ethics, as we have done in this paper is to show that moral controversies exist on such grounds but that there is need to evolve objectively perceptible moral standards. I think this will ensure the progress and value of ethics just as we have witnessed in the empirical sciences. As Mackie rightly observed, "the rationalist programme is to show that there are objectively valid necessary principles of action, intrinsically authoritative prescriptions or directives (1980: 22). Those necessary principles represent values that are objectively perceptible and prescriptible.

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