

Lecture 2: Mackie's Argument from Queerness for Nihilism

I. Introduction to Moral Nihilism

moral nihilism: Just as there is no such thing as phlogiston, there is no such thing as moral goodness, rightness, wrongness, duty, obligation, or any other moral notion.

It is commonly claimed that according to nihilism, all moral sentences are false. This is a mistake.

- *first problem*: Even if nihilism is correct, some moral sentences should come out as true.
 - “Failing one’s students for fun is wrong.”
 - “It is not the case that failing one’s students for fun is wrong.”
 - “Your professor believes that failing one’s students for fun is wrong.”
- *second problem*: On some semantic theories, if there is no such thing as wrongness, then “Failing one’s students for fun is wrong” is neither true nor false.

(For example, according to P. F. Strawson’s theory of definite descriptions, “The present king of France is bald” is neither true nor false. For similar reasons, we might think that “Phlogiston is lighter than air” and “Failing one’s students for fun is wrong” are neither true nor false, if nihilism is correct.)

Nihilists can avoid these problems by taking whatever semantic theory is used to determine the truth-value of phlogiston sentences and also use it to determine the truth-value of moral sentences.

It is also commonly claimed that according to nihilism, everything is permitted. This is also a mistake. According to nihilism, there is no such thing as permissibility.

II. The Standard Interpretation of Mackie

Mackie’s main thesis: there are no objective values (values are not “part of the fabric of the world”).

According to the standard interpretation of Mackie, he holds that certain values would have to be objective to exist at all.

objective values:

- *all moral values*: moral goodness, rightness and wrongness, duty, obligation, an action’s being rotten or contemptible, and so on;
- *some non-moral values*: aesthetic values, beauty, various kinds of artistic merit.

So on this interpretation, Mackie is a moral nihilist.

Two unfortunate labels that Mackie uses for his view: *moral skepticism* and *subjectivism*.

A third label that he uses: *error theory*, since his theory implies that a firmly entrenched assumption built into our moral terminology (namely, that there are objectively prescriptive moral values) is false.

III. Mackie’s Four Arguments

In “The Subjectivity of Values,” Mackie advances (at least) four arguments in favor of moral nihilism:

- i. the argument from relativity (a.k.a. the argument from disagreement) (pp. 36–38);
- ii. the argument from queerness (pp. 38–40);
- iii. an argument appealing to the notion of supervenience (p. 41);
- iv. an argument involving alternate explanations of the genesis of our moral beliefs (pp. 42–46).

IV. The Structure of the Argument from Queerness

An argument against the existence of phlogiston:

1. *Conceptual claim*: If phlogiston existed, it would have to be stored in all flammable bodies and released during combustion.
2. *Substantive claim*: There isn't anything that is stored in all flammable bodies and released during combustion.
3. *Conclusion*: Phlogiston does not exist.

Mackie's argument from queerness (standard interpretation):

1. *Conceptual claim*: If moral values existed, they would have to be objectively prescriptive.
2. *Substantive claim*: Nothing in the world is objectively prescriptive.
3. *Conclusion*: Moral values do not exist.

V. The Conceptual Claim

Mackie insists that a claim to "objective, intrinsic, prescriptivity" has been "incorporated in the basic, conventional, meanings of moral terms" (p. 35).

To say that something is objectively prescriptive is to say that it has to-be-doneness built into it.

On one natural interpretation of Mackie, this is equivalent to the claim that recognition of an objectively prescriptive feature necessarily motivates one to act in the way prescribed by that feature (*internalism about motives*).

VI. The Substantive Claim

Mackie's claim that nothing in the world could be objectively prescriptive has two parts.

a. *metaphysical part*:

"If there were [objectively prescriptive] values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe" (p. 38).

"Plato's Forms give a dramatic picture of what [objectively prescriptive] values would have to be. The Form of the Good is such that knowledge of it provides the knower with both a direction and an overriding motive; something's being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it. An objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it. Similarly, if there were objective principles of right and wrong, any wrong (possible) course of action would have not-to-be-doneness somehow built into it. Or we should have something like [Samuel] Clarke's necessary relations of fitness between situations and actions, so that a situation would have a demand for such-and-such an action somehow built into it" (p. 40).

b. *epistemological part*:

". . . if we were aware of [objectively prescriptive 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" (p. 38).

So, Mackie concludes, we have good reason to doubt that any objective prescriptive features exist.

(Note that Mackie's argument from queerness is *a posteriori*: it depends on our knowledge, via sense experience, of the kinds of things found in the actual world.)