Lecture 4: Other Interpretations of Mackie

I. The Motivational Interpretation of Mackie’s Argument (Recap)

According to the motivational interpretation of Mackie’s argument from queerness, to say that moral obligations are objectively prescriptive is to say that some form of internalism about motives is true.

*truth/motives internalism*: Necessarily, if it is true that agent A is morally obligated to perform some action available to her, then A is (defeasibly) motivated to perform that action.

*belief/motives internalism*: Necessarily, if agent A believes that she is morally obligated to perform some action available to her, then A is (defeasibly) motivated to perform that action.

*knowledge/reasons internalism*: Necessarily, if agent A recognizes (i.e. knows) that she is morally obligated to perform some action available to her, then A is (defeasibly) motivated to perform that action.

II. The Normative Interpretation of the Mackie’s Argument

Richard Garner interprets the argument from queerness as appealing to internalism about reasons instead of internalism about motives. So, according to Garner, to say that moral obligations are objectively prescriptive is to say that moral obligations are objective and necessarily reason-giving.

Several common formulations of internalism about reasons:

*truth/reasons internalism*: Necessarily, if it is true that agent A is morally obligated to perform some action available to her, then A has a reason to perform that action.

*belief/reasons internalism*: Necessarily, if agent A believes that she is morally obligated to perform some action available to her, then A has a reason to perform that action.

*knowledge/reasons internalism*: Necessarily, if agent A recognizes (i.e. knows) that she is morally obligated to perform some action available to her, then A has a reason to perform that action.

The version of internalism about reasons that Garner takes to be entailed by the existence of objectively prescriptive moral obligations seems to be knowledge/reasons internalism. However, many authors also formulate the argument in terms of truth/reasons internalism.

(Since belief/reasons internalism is quite implausible, we do best to avoid interpreting the argument from queerness in terms of it.)

Why Garner thinks moral obligations would be intolerably bizarre if internalism about reasons were true:

“While properties that are intrinsically motivating would indeed be queer, queerness of a different magnitude would belong to any property or fact that by itself *called for* humans to act one way rather than another” (p. 137).

“. . . when we remember that a moral property is not inert, but ‘involves a call for action or for the refraining from action,’ the queerness is compounded . . . How could *any* feature of something outside us make it the case that we are objectively required to do something?” (p. 141).

“Moral facts are not just unusual in the way that facts about quarks and black holes are unusual, they are unusual in an unusual way—they demand. If a moral fact obtains, then we have a duty or a right to do something, which is to say there is a legitimate and justifiable directive that *applies* to us, a directive that we can ignore or disobey, but one from which we cannot escape” (p. 143).
III. Companions in Guilt: An Argument for Epistemic Nihilism?

Garner’s version of Mackie’s argument is open to a very strong “companions in guilt”-style rebuttal.

Insofar as any of the passages quoted above are convincing, they seem just as convincing if everywhere we replace ‘moral’ with ‘epistemic’, ‘action’ with ‘belief’, and ‘act’ [or ‘do’] with ‘believe’.

Thus it looks as if an exactly parallel argument would establish that there is no such thing as something being such that we ought to believe it, or as a belief being justified or reasonable, or as a theory being well-supported by the evidence.

However, it’s one thing to say that we ought to believe that there is nothing we ought to do, but quite another thing to say that we ought to believe that there is nothing we ought to believe.

IV. A Non-Standard Interpretation of Mackie

Mackie clearly believes there are no objective values. On the standard interpretation of him, Mackie also thinks that moral values would have to be objective to exist at all. So on the standard interpretation, Mackie is a moral nihilist.

In recent years I have come to the conclusion that the standard interpretation is wrong. Mackie does not think that moral values would have to be objective to exist at all. He never explicitly says this, and there are good reasons to think he doesn’t hold such a view.

On my (admittedly very controversial) interpretation, Mackie’s real conclusion is not that moral values do not exist, but rather that moral values exist but only as subjective values. So on my interpretation, Mackie is not a moral nihilist.

Five pieces of evidence for my interpretation:

i. Mackie is very careful about only denying the truth of the-claim-to-objectivity-that-is-embedded-in-our-moral-thought-and-language, not denying the truth of every single moral claim we make.

“But the denial of objective values will have to be put forward not as the result of an analytic approach, but as an ‘error theory,’ a theory that although most people in making moral judgments implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims [= the claims to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive] are all false” (p. 35).

“Moral skepticism must, therefore, take the form of an error theory, admitting that a belief in objective values is built into ordinary moral thought and language, but holding that this ingrained belief [= the belief in objective values] is false” (pp. 48–49).

“Considerations of these kinds suggest that it is in the end less paradoxical to reject than to retain the common-sense belief in the objectivity of moral values, provided that we can explain how this belief [= the belief in the objectivity of moral values, not the belief in moral values], if it is false, has become established and is so resistant to criticisms” (p. 42).

ii. Mackie never once says that there are no moral values.

Mackie repeatedly states his main thesis as either the claim that there are no objective values or the claim that there are no objective moral values, but never as the claim that there are no moral values. Most plausible explanation of this fact: he is only objecting to the supposition that moral values are objective, not to the supposition that they exist.

iii. My interpretation makes better sense of why Mackie calls himself a subjectivist.

‘Subjectivism’ is highly misleading as a name for moral nihilism, but not misleading at all as a name for the view that moral values are subjective.
iv. My interpretation makes better sense of what Mackie takes himself to be doing in the rest of his book.

In the second half of *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Mackie goes on to argue for a particular theory in normative (i.e. first-order) ethics. But Mackie would have to be a frothing idiot to think that, although there’s no such thing as morality, we can still theorize about which theory of right and wrong is the correct one.

v. My interpretation fits how Mackie describes his view elsewhere.

Here is a passage from Mackie’s article “The Third Theory of Law”:

> “So what law is, on Professor Dworkin’s view, may crucially depend on what is morally best . . . Now I would argue, though I cannot do so here, that moral judgments of this kind have an irreducibly subjective element. [footnote:] I have argued for this view in Chapter 1 of my *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*” (p. 9).

On my interpretation, the argument from queerness runs as follows:

*Mackie’s argument from queerness (non-standard interpretation):*

1. The assumption that moral values are objective is ingrained in ordinary thought and language.  [*premise*]
2. Objective moral values would have to be objectively prescriptive.  [*premise*]
3. Nothing in the world is objectively prescriptive.  [*premise*]
4. So, the assumption that moral values are objective is false: moral values are subjective, not objective.  [*follows from 1, 2, and 3*]