Error theory

MACKIE, ETHICS: INVENTING RIGHT AND WRONG, Ch. 1, §9

John Mackie is an unusual kind of moral cognitivist. Cognitivism claims that ethical language expresses ethical beliefs about how the world is. To believe that murder is wrong is to believe that the sentence ‘Murder is wrong’ is true. So ethical language aims to describe the world, and so can be true or false. So Mackie claims that the way we use ethical language is to make objective claims about a moral reality. But, in fact, there is no such moral reality. All moral judgements are false. ‘Murder is wrong’ is false, and ‘Murder is right’ is false, because there are no objective moral properties. Ethical language rests on a mistake.

It is worth taking a moment to consider what Mackie means by ‘objective’. At various points in Ch. 1, Mackie identifies the following features of an objective claim:

1. It can be something we know.
2. It can be true or false.
3. Its truth is independent of what we want or choose.
4. It is about something mind-independent.
5. It is about something that is part of the ‘fabric of the world’.

These claims are not equivalent. Consider the claim ‘that shirt is red’. We may well want to say that it is objective according to the first three criteria, but colours are certainly not mind-independent (colour depends conceptually on vision, which is a mental faculty), and it is hard to know whether we should say that colours are part of the ‘fabric of the world’ or not. This point will become important when we look at responses to Mackie’s argument.

Mackie calls his argument an argument from ‘queerness’. It is the oddity of moral properties that makes it implausible that they exist. The argument has two aspects, metaphysical and epistemological.

Epistemological queerness

If some actions, such as an act of courage, have the property of being objectively right; or again, if some states of affairs, such as being in pain or cowardice, have the property of being objectively bad - how could we know? Intuitionism, Mackie claims, says no more than that we have some special faculty - but this is a terrible answer that doesn’t explain how we have this knowledge at all. If we think of our usual ways of knowing about the world - sense perception, introspection, hypothetical reasoning, even conceptual analysis - none of these can explain knowledge of morality.
The non-naturalist might well reply that it is not only knowledge of morality that faces this objection. We can’t explain our knowledge of mathematics, necessary truths, the existence and nature of substance, space or causation in any of these ways either. Here, the objectivist is appealing to rationalist arguments about the scope of a priori knowledge. If we think we only gain knowledge in the ways empiricism allows, we will have to adopt an error theory for all these claims.

Mackie accepts the point: either empiricism can account for knowledge in these areas, or they all face the objection that they appeal to something ‘non-natural’. To a significant extent, then, Mackie’s argument depends on empiricism, rather than rationalism, being the correct account of our knowledge.

Mackie presses the argument from epistemological queerness by asking, as did Warnock, what the connection between natural properties and moral properties is. For instance, we commonly say things like ‘that’s wrong because it is cruel’. If we take cruel to mean ‘causing pain for fun’, then cruelty is a natural property. It is a psychological fact that something causes pain, and another psychological fact that someone’s motive is taking pleasure in doing this. But what is the relation between these facts and the ‘fact’ that acting in this way is wrong? How can we establish whether it is wrong or not? It isn’t an analytic truth, and we can’t deduce it.

Therefore, it is better to say that there is no objective property of wrongness, and we don’t know that things are wrong or right. Instead, moral judgements are simply our subjective reactions to certain actions and situations. (Mackie isn’t saying that this is what moral judgements mean – that would be non-cognitivism. He is saying that they aim to be objective, but fail.)

Metaphysical queerness
If there were moral properties, Mackie claims, they would have to be very different from anything else in the universe. His argument for this claim rests on the connection between morality and motivation. Moral judgements motivate us – we avoid actions we believe are wrong and try to do actions that are right. But that means, if there were moral properties, simply knowing what is good or bad, right or wrong, would be enough to motivate us to act in certain ways. For this to be true, ‘goodness’, say, would have to have ‘to-be-pursuedness’ built into it.

If this is a confusing idea, that’s Mackie’s point. How could an objective property motivate us in this way? How could there be some direct, immediate relation between some fact of the world and our desires? Just to know something true about the way the world is doesn’t entail being motivated to do anything about it. As we might say, the direction of fit is wrong.

REPLIES TO MACKIE
Mackie’s argument from queerness appeals to two features of objectivity in particular – mind-independence and being part of ‘the fabric of the world’. This last phrase is puzzling. It conjures up the world that science reveals to us – the fabric of the world is space, time, matter and perhaps causal relations between them. Obviously, morality can’t be like this. Physics won’t tell us right from
wrong. But why should we think that all reality is like physical reality? Moral reasons and values, if they exist, aren’t going to be like physical properties.

Are psychological states ‘part of the fabric of the world’? They certainly exist - whether one is happy or in pain is a psychological fact. But, of course, it isn’t a mind-independent fact. So not all objective facts are mind-independent in that sense; some facts are facts about our minds. Whether someone is in pain is a fact about their, particular mind. But there are more general facts about the human mind, e.g. that we can feel pain. Perhaps moral facts are facts about our minds, and not all that ‘queer’ after all.

For example, Kant argues that both our intellect and our wills are rational. Rationality is ‘built into’ the mind. Kant himself doesn’t talk about moral ‘properties’, but we could say this. Whether an action has the property of being wrong depends upon facts about the rational mind, namely whether the agent could universalize the maxim for their action without contradiction. Kant argues that it is objectively true or false whether a maxim can be universalized without contradiction. What makes it true or false is rationality, which is a property of the mind.

Or again, consider utilitarianism as a form of ethical naturalism. Mill argues that our experience does give us evidence of what is good. What is good is what is desirable, and the best evidence for what is desirable is what people generally desire. Once we recognize this, there is no particular epistemological difficulty in discovering moral properties. Furthermore, if we say that goodness is happiness, then there is no metaphysical queerness about goodness either. It is simply another natural property. Finally, given that we desire happiness, we can see how moral judgements are motivating. They are judgements about happiness, and this is something we are already motivated to pursue.

Aristotelian non-naturalism
A non-naturalist response can take inspiration from Aristotle’s virtue ethics. Aristotle argues that eudaimonia, our final end, involves living in accordance with reason. Virtue assists with this, and practical wisdom helps us discern the right reasons in any situation. By thinking more about reasons, perhaps we can answer Mackie’s argument from queerness.

Non-naturalist epistemology
Following the Aristotelian model, we can understand moral judgements in terms of moral reasons. For example, to say that something is wrong is to say that the moral reasons against doing it are stronger than any moral reason in favour of doing it. Now the idea of a ‘reason’ only makes sense in relation to a rational creature - us. Reasons are always reasons for someone. That some natural fact (e.g. the suffering of an animal) is a reason (e.g. for us not to eat meat) is a ‘relational’ property - the fact is only such a reason in relation to us.

Understanding moral properties as reasons for action can be used to argue for objective moral truth. Whether some fact is a moral reason for or against some action is objectively true or false. Compare reasons for other types of belief. If radiometric decay indicates that the dinosaur bones are 65 million years old, this is
a reason to believe that dinosaurs lived on Earth 65 million years ago. It is not proof, but it is a reason. Furthermore, it is an objective fact that it is a reason. The result of radiometric dating of dinosaur bones is a reason to think dinosaurs lived on Earth 65 million years ago, whether you think it is a reason or not.

Facts about reasons are not identical with natural facts. There is no scientific or empirical investigation into what reasons there are. Facts about reasons are normative facts. They are facts about justification and reasoning. These are non-natural facts.

Moral judgements, then, are statements about reasons. So they are statements about normative facts. Because they are statements about (normative) facts, moral judgements can be true or false.

Of course, it can be difficult to establish whether a natural fact constitutes a reason for action, and how strong this reason is. But the truth is often difficult to discover. Developing this knowledge is a matter of practical wisdom.

Queerness again
But isn’t the idea of ‘truths about reasons’ a very strange notion? Not really, the non-naturalist can argue. Reasons aren’t strange, and we need them even to do science. Aristotle claims that certain facts about being human mean that a certain way of living is the best, most flourishing life. We therefore have reason to develop our characters in ways that allow us to live like this. This isn’t strange.

We can object that if reasons are related to us, dependent on us, then surely they must be subjective, not objective. Facts are part of the world. The fact that the dinosaurs roamed the Earth millions of years ago would be true whether anyone had found out about it or not. But whether something is a reason or not depends on us.

This misunderstands the way in which reasons depend on us. There are lots of facts – for example, facts about being in love, or facts about music – that ‘depend’ on human beings and their activities (there would be no love if no one loved anything). But they are still facts, because they are independent of our judgements, and made true by the way the world, in this case the human world, is. You can make mistakes about whether someone is in love or whether a piece of music is baroque or classical.

But are moral reasons dependent on ‘human beings’ in general or on individuals? Take the case of animal suffering: surely this is only a reason for me not to eat meat if I care about animals. Or again, the fact that studying hard will increase my understanding of philosophy is only a reason to study hard if I want to understand philosophy. So what we (individually) have reason to do depends on what we (individually) want. So reasons aren’t objective, they are subjective. Moral judgements are expressions of what we care about, not expressions of objective truth.
Moral motivation
Can non-naturalism explain the fact that moral judgements guide our behaviour? A truth, in and of itself, doesn’t lead to action. For example, the fact that it is raining doesn’t motivate me to pick up my umbrella unless I don’t want to get wet. It seems that I need to care about the truth, and then the motivating force comes from the caring. But surely statements about right and wrong, good and bad are motivating in their own right. But in that case, they are not like beliefs (about truths), they are like desires.

One response that naturalists and non-naturalists can make is to claim that moral judgements are not motivating. There certainly seem to be people - and perhaps all of us at certain times, e.g. when we are depressed - for whom statements about morality are not motivating. They just don’t care about morality. Moral judgements, then, are only motivating to people who care about morality.

A second response is to agree that moral judgements are motivating, and this would be a puzzle if they were judgements about natural facts. But if we argue, as we did above, that moral judgements are about what we have reason to do, it is because we are rational that they motivate us to act. As long as we are rational, reasons will motivate us directly. Of course, that motivation can be interfered with because we are not completely rational, so we will not always do what we have most reason to do.