

The Alleged Authority of Objective Moral Values: A Discussion on J. L. Mackie's
Argument from Queerness

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This thesis titled
The Alleged Authority of Objective Moral Values: A Discussion on J. L. Mackie's
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ABSTRACT

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The Alleged Authority of Objective Moral Values: A Discussion on J. L. Mackie's
Argument from Queerness

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In this thesis I reconstruct and evaluate John Mackie's Argument from Queerness presented in his 1977 book, *Inventing Right and Wrong*. Mackie argues that moral values are queer due to their objective prescriptivity and therefore that moral values do not exist. I examine how the concept of the objective prescriptivity of moral values functions in Mackie's argument by analyzing an exchange between David Brink and Richard Garner. Specifically, I consider two objections to the Argument from Queerness advanced by Brink. The first challenges the argument's reliance on motivational internalism. The second focuses on the supervenience of moral properties on physical properties. By contrast, Garner argues that queerness in Mackie's argument ought to be understood in terms of normative authority as opposed to motivational irresistibility and that once queerness is so understood, Mackie's argument survives Brink's critique. I argue that Garner provides an effective response to Brink's criticism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

We will be studying the Argument from Queerness in John L. Mackie's 1977 book, *Inventing Right and Wrong*.¹ In the Argument from Queerness he defends the theory that objective moral values do not exist.² Early on Mackie points out that many moral philosophers throughout history have utilized the idea of objective values in their work. He also contends that ordinary moral judgments involve an affirmation of objectivity. In denying that moral values exist, Mackie is thus making a startling second-order claim about all first-order moral claims. Specifically, he rejects all ordinary moral judgments due to their claim to objectivity.³

Mackie notes how in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the good is identified as that at which "all things aim."⁴ Mackie also references Plato's form of the Good as a "dramatic picture" of what an objective moral value would be like and the motivational power it would possess; namely, "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."⁵ This sort of prescriptivity is a categorical normativity that involves an overriding ought-to in the sense of a correctness standard. As Richard Joyce explains, Mackie "claims that in denying the existence of such prescriptions he is denying that any categorically imperative element is objectively valid. A categorical imperative is

¹ John L. Mackie, "The Subjectivity of Values," in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 38.

² Mackie, 30.

³ Mackie, 35.

⁴ Mackie, 31.

⁵ Mackie, 40.

an imperative that is applied to a subject irrespective of that person's ends."⁶ Mackie's idea is that objective moral facts will authoritatively demand that a person carries something out simply based on the moral fact manifesting that demand. Mackie's example of the Platonic Good leads one to ask what the connection is between our moral judgment of a good and our motivation? This involves "motivational judgment internalism" which "holds that a person cannot sincerely make a moral judgment without being motivated to some degree to abide by her judgment."⁷

Mackie finds that neither naturalist nor noncognitivist theories are able to capture fully the meaning of statements about moral values.⁸ He denies naturalism, the view that moral judgments have a descriptive meaning that reflects what is in our world.⁹ Olson writes in *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence* that "Mackie claims that the ordinary user of moral language means to say something about whatever it is that he characterizes morally [that is not] simply expressive of his, or anyone else's, attitude or relation to it."¹⁰ This quotation illustrates the practical way that people make moral judgments and Mackie's contention that the ordinary moral language user understands their moral judgments to reflect objective moral properties that are not reducible to subjective states. Emphasizing this point Mackie notes,

⁶ Richard Joyce, "Mackie's Arguments for the Moral Error Theory," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2016 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2007, last modified October 25, 2016, accessed January 16, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-anti-realism/moral-error-theory.html>.

⁷ Connie S. Rosati, "Moral Motivation," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2016 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2006, last modified 2016, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/moral-motivation/>.

⁸ Mackie, "Subjectivity of Values," 32.

⁹ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, "Ethical Naturalism," in *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, last modified November 19, 2018, accessed July 9, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethical-naturalism>.

¹⁰ Jonas Olson, *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 80.

On a naturalist analysis, moral judgments can be practical, but their practicality is wholly relative to desires or possible satisfactions of the person or persons whose actions are to be guided; but moral judgments seem to say more than this. This leaves out the categorical quality of moral requirements.¹¹

Mackie also rejects noncognitivism, the view that something is only meaningful if it can be proved verifiable as either true or false. Olson acknowledges that Mackie's denial here is "too swift" but writes that the general idea behind the rejection of noncognitivism is that

The argument is that non-cognitivist accounts do not fit well with how ordinary speakers use, or intend to use, moral terms. The idea is roughly that when using moral vocabulary, ordinary speakers typically intend to make moral assertions, i.e., to attribute moral properties to objects and individuals. If this is right it is also plausible that this is what they believe they are doing.¹²

Mackie concludes that a moral error theory would be most satisfactory for his purposes.¹³ He finds the moral theories of naturalism and noncognitivism fail to account for the purported objective validity and the categorical prescriptivity constituting the peculiar apparent authority in moral values that makes them untenable.

In order to have a proper apprehension of the Argument from Queerness, I need to explain the context and motivation for Mackie's writing on the existence of moral values. Even though he presents the Argument from Queerness to support the basis of a whole moral error theory, it would take a complete survey of replies to support a decisive conclusion one way or the other on this particular understanding of a moral theory, and is much more than this paper has the time or space to do. So, while Mackie's book was

¹¹ Mackie, "Subjectivity of Values," 33.

¹² Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 80.

¹³ Mackie, "Subjectivity of Values," 33.

written on moral skepticism more generally, we will be focusing on the steps taken in his Argument from Queerness and two influential replies it generated in the philosophical arena. These replies are, first, David Brink's 1984 article, "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness."¹⁴ Second, the rejoinder to Brink by Richard T. Garner in his piece, "On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts."¹⁵

Mackie wants to isolate the root of moral value as an ordinary user of moral language really understands it.¹⁶ Mackie says "that ordinary moral judgments include a claim to objectivity, an assumption that there are objective values."¹⁷ He explains that when one is pondering a moral quandary, like whether or not it would be right to help manufacture biological weapons, in their judgment, one is actually asking what the moral value is of the action. Mackie notes that the moral deliberator is not judging where their or anyone else's pro-attitude may lie towards biological weapons, they are not judging their relation to the action, they are not examining whether they desire it, and they are not judging whether they would recommend the action in similar cases. Rather, ordinary moral discourse is conducted under the (problematic, according to Mackie) assumption that we aim at an objective moral truth that consists in the fact that biological weapons manufacturing *is* morally wrong (or permissible, depending on what the moral truth actually is).¹⁸

¹⁴ David Brink, "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness," in *Arguing About Metaethics*, ed. Andrew Fisher and Simon Kirchin (New York: Routledge, 2006), 80-95, previously published in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, (1984): 111-25.

¹⁵ Richard Garner, "On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts," in *Arguing About Metaethics*, ed. Andrew Fisher and Simon Kirchin, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 96-106, previously published in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, (June 1990): 137-46.

¹⁶ Mackie, "Subjectivity of Values," 35.

¹⁷ Mackie, 35.

¹⁸ Mackie, 33.

Still some may find this pointed willingness to deny the moral values behind the moral judgments we make, to ultimately result in nihilism. Yet Mackie finds that this reaction may further prove his point. He writes,

The denial of objective values can carry with it an extreme emotional reaction, a feeling that nothing matters at all, that life has lost its purpose. Of course, this does not follow; the lack of objective values is not a good reason for abandoning subjective concern or for ceasing to want anything. But the abandonment of a belief in objective values can cause, at least temporarily, a decay of subjective concern and sense of purpose. That it does so is evidence that the people in whom this reaction occurs have been tending to objectify their concerns and purposes, have been giving them a fictitious authority. A claim to objectivity has been so strongly associated with their subjective concerns and purposes that the collapse of the former seems to undermine the latter as well.¹⁹

A claim to objectivity is not self-validating.²⁰ Even so, a “tendency to objectify values” is ingrained in our ordinary pattern of thinking, moral or otherwise. As such, Mackie thinks it is not sufficient to merely deny objective moral values; rather, he believes he needs to provide strong support for this denial.²¹ He figures that because a belief in objective values is built into moral language and thought, the argument for moral skepticism results in an error theory due to the metaphysical and epistemological state of moral values (that is, they don't exist and, hence, we cannot attain knowledge of them). Moral skepticism can be defined as the view that doubts the existence of moral values, including their properties and our beliefs about them.²² Mackie makes a point to underline the need for “very solid support” for such an argument against the uses and patterns of our everyday language and thought because it seems like common sense to us.²³

¹⁹ Mackie, 34.

²⁰ Mackie, 35.

²¹ Mackie, 35.

²² Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Moral Skepticism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2019 ed., ed Edward N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019, last modified 2019, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism-moral/>.

²³ Mackie, “Subjectivity of Values,” 35.

All this can result in the tendency to believe that the burden of proof is on the moral skeptic. She must, it seems, provide more evidence than the moral objectivist would need to, in that we have no reason to be doubtful of our everyday patterns of moral thinking to begin with.²⁴ Mackie emphasizes this point by demonstrating assumptions made in classical non-cognitivist and naturalist moral schools of thought to explain the demand for a moral error theory within commonly held beliefs in objective values that are implicit in our everyday moral language.²⁵ He does this by stressing the metaphysical strangeness of idealized moral values and their capacity to be objectively prescriptive with to-be-pursuedness built into them, so they cannot have a naturalistic descriptive meaning in our world. And he denies the view of noncognitivism in that statements about moral values can neither be verified nor falsified.²⁶

The Argument lays out the metaphysical and epistemological implications of our belief that moral values are objective, focusing specifically on how we utilize this belief in the objective property of moral values to make ordinary moral judgments.²⁷ We are to understand that these judgments are made in error due to the problematic foundation on which they are made, namely, our ingrained belief in objective moral values that is used in everyday moral thought and decision-making.²⁸ Moral terms which do not include features of objective prescriptivity are therefore not moral terms—as we know and use them. That is why Mackie concludes that moral skepticism must take the form of an error theory. As he explains, “. . . I do not think it is going too far to say that this assumption

²⁴ Richard Joyce, “Moral Anti-Realism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed Edward N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2007, last modified 2016. accessed May 30, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-anti-realism/>.

²⁵ Mackie, “Subjectivity of Values,” 48-49.

²⁶ Mackie, 49.

²⁷ Joyce, “Moral Anti-Realism.”

²⁸ Mackie, “Subjectivity of Values,” 35.

has been incorporated in the basic, conventional, meanings of moral terms. Any analysis of the meanings of moral terms which omits this claim to objective, intrinsic, prescriptivity is to that extent incomplete.”²⁹

As Michael Ridge summarizes in “Reinventing Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong,” “Ordinary moral judgments, Mackie is taken to argue, commit us to an ontologically ‘queer’ kind of objective value for which a plausible epistemology is problematic.”³⁰ Mackie wants to show that ordinary moral judgments are made in error due to the objective prescriptivity of moral values that would have to exist, in the sense that they are authoritatively action-guiding, because of their necessitated metaphysical and therefore epistemological consequences.

In this paper we will look at objections made against the Argument from Queerness, and their rebuttals. This is grounded in Mackie’s discussion of the metaphysically demanding implications of moral values. In critically evaluating the force of Mackie’s argument, I will rely on the work of both David Brink and Richard Garner. Brink charges Mackie with being able to deny moral properties only because he mistakes their prescriptive features for motivational internalism, a view that holds recognized moral properties to be necessarily motivating or reason providing.³¹ In response, Garner argues that the metaphysical peculiarity of moral properties remains even if one separates their objectivity from motivational internalism. Even without the connection to motivational internalism, Garner alleges, moral properties are still unlike anything else that exists because of their alleged authority (rather than their alleged power) to make

²⁹ Mackie, 35.

³⁰ Michael Ridge, “Reinventing Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong,” *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* 8, no. 4 (2020): 1.

³¹ Brink, “Moral Realism,” 82.

demands of us. In the end, I side with Garner and further support his response by considering and responding to a criticism that might be raised against his argument.

2. JOHN MACKIE'S ARGUMENT FROM QUEERNESS

As noted above, Mackie advances the Argument from Queerness to show that objective moral facts do not exist.³² This argument draws out the objective and categorical assumptions in moral values, or facts or properties, ultimately pointing to their metaphysical and epistemological implausibility. The weight of Mackie's case against moral values rests on the capacity of moral values to, as Jonas Olson phrases it, "make demands from which we cannot escape."³³

From here on out I will refer to the Argument from Queerness as "the Argument." The Argument has two parts, the metaphysical and the epistemological; they are connected to each other. The metaphysical branch holds the most weight in the Argument and will be the main focus in the sections that follow. Mackie states the metaphysical branch as follows: "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."³⁴ This metaphysical strangeness of moral values generates the epistemological branch of the Argument. In presenting the epistemological branch, Mackie notes this connection between the metaphysical and epistemological branches of the Argument when he observes that given the metaphysical queerness of objective values, "if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else."³⁵ Thus there would have

³² Mackie, "Subjectivity of Values," 39. Mackie presents two arguments supporting his conclusion, but we will only be focusing on the latter Argument from Queerness, as it is the one that Mackie dubbed "more important, and certainly more generally more applicable." The other argument is called "The Argument from Relativity."

³³ Jonas Olson, "In Defense of Moral Error Theory," in *New Waves in Metaethics*, ed. Michael Brady, New Waves in Philosophy (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 63.

³⁴ Mackie, "Subjectivity of Values," 38.

³⁵ Mackie, 38.

to be a peculiar faculty that we would be equipped with to be able to perceive moral values. This epistemic faculty would be reserved for understanding specifically moral matters, and nothing else.³⁶ Mackie reasons that this exclusivity follows because of the “authoritatively prescriptive conclusions” that objective moral values would lead to.

In further defense of his theory Mackie denies ethical intuitionism, the view that moral propositions can be known without argument or deduction.³⁷ For our uses in this paper, ethical intuitionism is the idea that moral values exhibit a mode of being known that is immediate to one’s understanding. Given that he rejects intuitionism, in order for moral problems to yield these “authoritatively prescriptive conclusions,” rather than “sitting down and relying on having an ethical intuition,” there must be some sort of chain of reasoning.³⁸ Mackie denies intuitionism, holding that it is nothing more than an ad hoc maneuver in which a mysterious power of direct moral discernment is supposed without evidence; nonetheless, and as he explains below, he understands why advocates of the existence of moral values are driven to this implausible position.

When we ask the awkward question, how can we be aware of this authoritative prescriptivity, of the truth of these distinctively ethical premises or of the cogency of this distinctively ethical pattern of reasoning, none of our ordinary accounts of sensory perception or introspection or the framing and confirming of explanatory hypotheses or inference or logical construction or conceptual analysis or any combination of these, will provide a satisfactory answer; ‘a special sort of intuition’ is a lame answer, but it is the one to which the clear headed objectivist is compelled to resort.³⁹

³⁶ Mackie, 38.

³⁷ Philip Stratton-Lake, "Intuitionism in Ethics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2020 ed., ed Edward N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2014, last modified May 15, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/intuitionism-ethics/>.

³⁸ Mackie, “Subjectivity of Values,” 38.

³⁹ Mackie, 38-39.

Mackie mentions that Richard Price, an influential intuitionist, defends the view that right and wrong are real “characters” of action perceived by understanding and therefore are not constituted in the mind like other simple ideas.⁴⁰ Price defines understanding as “the faculty within us that discerns truth,” which is also said to be capable of forming simple ideas.⁴¹

Mackie notes that Price brings up an important possible counter to the Argument, in asking why moral knowledge would have to be so different from the empiricist ideas of inertia, solidity, diversity, causation, and the infinite extension of time and space which Hume and Locke discuss.⁴² What makes right and wrong, which can seem like real characters of action, different from other empiricist ideas like those just listed? Mackie acknowledges the significance of this counter. He replies that it is indeed possible to construct a foundation of belief and knowledge of these other ideas, like inertia and solidity, in empirical terms. If, on the other hand, one were unable to supply such a foundation for these empiricist ideas, then those too should be treated like Mackie treats moral values and, hence, should have their objective existence denied.⁴³ Therefore, from the epistemological branch in the Argument we can see why Mackie thinks intuitionism cannot be a plausible solution to vindicating ordinary moral judgments.

In defending his theory, Mackie also rejects the view that noncognitivist theories are a plausible way to understand moral values. While a noncognitivist can agree with an error theorist in holding that moral properties do not exist, the noncognitivist would find

⁴⁰ Mackie, 39.

⁴¹ Mackie, 39.

⁴² Mackie, 39.

⁴³ Mackie, 39.

that propositions about moral properties cannot be true or false.⁴⁴ As Mark van Roojen explains,

According to non-cognitivists, when people utter moral sentences they are not typically expressing states of mind which are beliefs or which are cognitive in the way that beliefs are. Rather they are expressing non-cognitive attitudes more similar to desires, approval or disapproval.⁴⁵

Mackie, on the other hand, is a cognitivist because he thinks that the non-cognitivist perspective is not suitable for accurately capturing the idea of objective moral values as they are presupposed in ordinary discourse and language use. Notably he says, “the assertion that there are objective values or intrinsically prescriptive entities or features of some kind, which ordinary moral judgments presuppose, is I hold, not meaningless but false.”⁴⁶ This goes a long way to explain why we will need to demonstrate that other metaethical theories such as noncognitivism or naturalism cannot fully explain the strange apparent authority of moral values and discourse with their aspects of objective validity and categorical imperativeness that we assume so naturally within our moral judgments and everyday patterns of thinking. Our assumptions of objective moral values/properties/facts are implicit presuppositions when making moral judgments. Mackie wants to highlight the aforementioned presumed authority we put into moral values by thinking of them as having objective validity and categorical prescriptivity. This means that there is a demand built into moral values themselves which guides us to choose and perform certain actions rather than others. Mackie describes this by explaining that when we identify something as “good” we think there is an intrinsic

⁴⁴ Mark van Roojen, “Moral Cognitivism Vs. Non-Cognitivism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2018 ed., ed Edward N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2004, last modified June 28, 2018, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-cognitivism/>.

⁴⁵ van Roojen, “Moral Cognitivism.”

⁴⁶ Mackie, “Subjectivity of Values,” 40.

demand to pursue a certain course of action only because of its being “good.” This demand to pursue an action because of its goodness is isolated and separated from any practical agent and deliberator. He thinks it has nothing to do with a person’s desiring that something be the case; rather, something being an objective good is the full and only reason that someone (everyone) ought to pursue it. This also means that something being wrong has a built-in demand to not pursue it, based solely on it being an objective wrong.⁴⁷ This is, Mackie finds, metaphysically very dubious.

This oddness can be brought out in another way if one approaches the epistemic oddness in objective moral values from a Humean perspective of reason. Mackie says that Hume too would utilize the Argument from the epistemological branch in that to understand value-entities we would need a completely different faculty to know them. This is so because Humean reason postulates that understanding can “never be an influencing motive of the will.”⁴⁸ That is, in order to accommodate moral values being different from natural objects in their ability to influence the will, we would need a unique faculty other than reasoning. That there is no such faculty, Mackie points out, is the same theoretical lacuna that the epistemological branch of the Argument has identified.

In reference to naturalism, Mackie finds that it too is inadequate as an account of the meaning of ordinary moral judgments. Naturalism is broadly the theory that only natural laws and forces of the sort studied by the natural sciences act in the universe. With respect to naturalistic accounts of morality (like classic utilitarianism) Mackie asks what is the connection between an objective moral value and its natural features? He

⁴⁷ Mackie, 40.

⁴⁸ Mackie, 40.

brings out the queerness by considering the wrongness of cruelty. When we confront a deliberate act of cruelty (like torturing people or animals) and judge that it is morally wrong because it is deliberately cruel—what exactly do we mean by this “because”?

Mackie thinks it is certainly not a connection of “logical or semantic necessity.” Still, the features of being cruel and being wrong seem to occur together.⁴⁹ This means that the property of moral wrongness somehow “supervenes” or lays on top of the act of deliberate cruelty. But what exactly is signified by this way of talking? Mackie asks how it could be that we can know this deliberate cruelty to be wrong, and not just in the sense that we conventionally condemn it and have “absorbed” this condemnation to such an extent that we have *created* the authority that has somehow become one with an assumed objective moral value. Mackie writes, “How much simpler and more comprehensible the situation would be if we could replace the moral quality with some sort of subjective response which could be causally related to the detection of the natural features on which the supposed quality is said to be consequential?”⁵⁰ And again, how is it that we can discern what is wrong and what is not, according to the naturalist? Moreover, how can we be certain our perception of wrongness is accurate? Mackie thinks that “it is not enough” to postulate a faculty that “sees” the wrongness, but that we have a faculty which simultaneously perceives the natural features of cruelty *and* the normative one of wrongness, *and*, crucially, “the mysterious consequential link between the two.”⁵¹ This is the set of questions that contemporary metaethicists refer to as the problem of “moral supervenience.”

⁴⁹ Mackie, 41.

⁵⁰ Mackie, 41.

⁵¹ Mackie, 41.

Tristram McPherson explains the theory of moral supervenience as holding that “there can be no ethical difference between two possible states of affairs or actions without there being some natural difference between them.”⁵² We will return to this complex proposal of how moral facts can be reconciled with a naturalistic and natural scientific world view below, when evaluating Brink’s and Garner’s contributions. For our current purposes it suffices to stress that Mackie’s moral error theory questions the intelligibility of any supervenience relation between moral and natural properties by drawing our attention to the conceptual entailment of objective prescriptivity and its epistemological credibility.⁵³

In summary, it is Mackie’s goal in the Argument to isolate judgments of moral value in our ordinary patterns of thinking and speech with their embedded appeals to objective, intrinsic authority. He thinks the Argument has uncovered the metaphysical and epistemological strangeness of moral properties and their supposed objective prescriptivity.

In the next two sections, which consider the commentaries of David Brink and Richard Garner respectively, the role played in Mackie’s argument by motivational internalism and moral supervenience will be further analyzed.

⁵² Tristram McPherson, "Supervenience in Ethics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 ed., ed Edward N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2015, last modified 2019, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/supervenience-ethics/>.

⁵³ McPherson, “Supervenience in Ethics.”

3. DAVID BRINK AND MORAL REALISM

As we just went over in the last section the real weight of Mackie's argument is not held in the epistemological branch. Still, the epistemological branch is necessary for presenting a fully formed conception of his denial of moral values to its various opponents in moral theory. Mackie is not only saying that morality is special or queer. He is also saying that it is queer because in order for one to know of a moral property, it must first exist in a metaphysically robust manner. Since Mackie believes ordinary moral judgments involve a commitment to the objectivity of values and he believes the Argument shows that such values do not exist, Mackie believes his reasoning supports a moral error theory according to which all ordinary moral judgments are false. The importance of these metaphysical and epistemological clarifications becomes evident when we consider David Brink's response to the Argument.

In his essay "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness" Brink says we are to take Mackie as supplying an argument which states that there is a "special problem with realism in ethics."⁵⁴ Brink explains the basis of moral realism as a doctrine which states "(i) there are moral facts, AND (ii) that these moral facts are logically independent of our evidence, i.e. those beliefs which are our evidence for them."⁵⁵ Simply put, moral realism asserts that objective moral facts exist and that certain statements about them are objectively true.⁵⁶

Brink finds that Mackie bases his skeptical argument on (motivational) internalism and thus connects moral realism to the claim that moral facts have to be

⁵⁴ Brink, "Moral Realism," 80.

⁵⁵ Brink, 80.

⁵⁶ Brink, 82.

objectively prescriptive in a motivationally robust sense.⁵⁷ Specifically, motivational internalism claims that moral facts necessarily motivate (at least to some degree) or provide reasons for action.⁵⁸ Brink notes that this is an a priori thesis because of the necessary connection between moral facts and motivation/reasons regardless of either the “psychological make-up of the agent” or whatever the “moral facts turn out to be.”⁵⁹ Externalism, on the other hand, denies the central thesis of internalism. And since Brink finds that internalism is a rather implausible view, he thinks that moral facts can be defended on the basis of externalism, by determining the “motivational and reason-giving power of moral facts” to “await specifications of the moral facts and of the desires and interests of the agents.”⁶⁰ He writes that,

Whether the recognition of moral facts motivates certainly depends upon what the moral facts are, and, at least on most plausible moral theories, whether recognition of these facts motivates is a matter of contingent (even if deep) psychological fact about the agent. Whether the recognition of moral facts provides reasons for action depends upon whether the agent has reason to do what morality requires. But this, of course, depends upon what morality requires, i.e. upon what the moral facts are, and, at least on standard theories of reasons for action, whether recognition of these facts provides reason for action will depend upon contingent (even if deep) facts about the agent’s desires or interests. So, internalism is false; it is not something which we can know a priori, i.e. whatever the moral facts turn out to be, that the recognition of moral facts alone either necessarily motivates or necessarily provides reasons for action.⁶¹

This quotation illuminates the externalist’s belief that the connection between moral facts and motivation is dependent on the agent. The externalist finds that this dulls the force of Mackie’s queerness argument by making the objective prescriptivity of moral values

⁵⁷ Brink, 82.

⁵⁸ Brink, 82.

⁵⁹ Brink, 82.

⁶⁰ Brink, 83-84.

⁶¹ Brink, 83.

much less peculiarly authoritative if they are not authoritative upon every agent making a moral judgment. Further, from an externalist perspective, “the content of the judgment is related to the content of the desire so as to rationalize the action”; so, the agent’s having a reason to act in accordance with this rationalization may depend on the content of the moral property.⁶² Brink thinks that there is no reason why a commitment to internalism would be embedded in common sense moral thought, even if one grants that this thought is committed to moral realism. Especially since his externalist outlook claims that moral motivation can be contingent upon one’s psychological states, moral motivation may be a “deep fact” about moral agents, rather than something that flows from the objectivity of moral values with conceptual necessity.

To further his defense of moral realism against Mackie’s critique, Brink lines up a myriad of responses. Brink says that the externalist has two options: one can “claim moral properties are identical with certain physical properties” or one can resort to relationships of supervenience.⁶³ Moral supervenience basically consists in the claim that the moral features of the world “lay on top of,” or supervene on, physical properties. Moreover, these “moral properties and their instances could be realised in non-physical as well as a variety of physical ways.”⁶⁴ Brink finds that it is best to endorse moral supervenience because of the instances of social and economic properties which supervene on physical properties and this is “neither uncommon nor mysterious.”⁶⁵ Brink says that many such properties, such as social and economic facts for example, supervene on physical properties and that many kinds of properties are “different combinations of

⁶² Rosati, “Moral Motivation.”

⁶³ Brink, “Moral Realism,” 87.

⁶⁴ Brink, 87-88.

⁶⁵ Brink, 88.

matter which hang together explanatorily.”⁶⁶ There is nothing metaphysically queer about biological, social, psychological, and moral properties because, ultimately, they are all based upon certain material features of the world and this makes them “basic in the sense that all other properties are nothing over and above physical properties.”⁶⁷ Almost no one finds biological, social, and psychological states of properties to be queer. Brink writes,

Few think that mental states are metaphysically queer (and those that do do not think that supervenience makes them queer). Social facts such as unemployment, inflation, and exploitation supervene upon physical facts, yet no one supposes that social facts are metaphysically queer...Macroscopic material objects such as tables supervene on microscopic physical particles, yet no one supposes that tables are queer entities. In short it’s difficult to see how the realist’s use of supervenience in explaining the relationship between moral and physical properties makes his position queer. Moral properties are not ontologically simple or independent; but then neither are mental states, social facts, biological states, or macroscopic material objects. It is unlikely that moral properties are identical with physical properties; moral properties could have been realized non-materially. But there is every reason to believe that in the actual world moral properties, like other natural properties, are realised materially.⁶⁸

Brink then looks at utilizing a functionalist account of morality to further develop his account of moral supervenience. In a nutshell, he states that from a functionalist perspective, “what is essential to any particular mental state type, is the causal role which that mental state plays in the activities which are characteristic of the organism as a whole.”⁶⁹ Applied to moral realism this means that just as mental states supervene on physical states, so do the moral facts that supervene on activities involving our “well-being and flourishing,” thus providing those flourishing agents with reasons for their actions.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Brink, 88.

⁶⁷ Brink, 88.

⁶⁸ Brink, 88.

⁶⁹ Brink, 89.

⁷⁰ Brink, 90.

Brink's formulation of supervenience avoids Mackie's objections because the "causal role" of these physical properties realize the functional states on which moral properties supervene. Furthermore, all this gives the agent the specific reasons for action *without* having to accept internalism, Brink says, "People, actions, policies, states of affairs, etc. will bear good-making moral properties just insofar as they contribute to the satisfaction of these needs, wants, and capacities."⁷¹

The above is Brink's reply to Mackie's metaphysical branch of the Argument. In terms of Mackie's epistemological worries, Brink views the challenge as that of explaining how one could know when the supervenience of moral properties is realized through physical means. Brink acknowledges that Mackie rejects the use of ethical intuitionism for moral judgments. Brink answers this by pointing out that, since his version of moral realism claims that moral facts supervene on natural facts, "one goes about discovering which natural facts moral facts supervene on by appeal to moral theories."⁷² We can know which moral properties supervene on which physical properties "with respect to" theories of "human flourishing" and "well-being" and by developing such theories as ethical theorists.⁷³ Brink readily acknowledges how difficult this philosophical (and scientific) task may be, but that difficulty does not establish that moral knowledge is hard to come by, let alone especially queer. Brink's essay concludes by stating that he has shown that Mackie has failed to produce decisive arguments, either metaphysically or epistemologically, against his version of moral realism.⁷⁴ Brink thus contends that Mackie has not yet refuted moral realism in either metaphysical or

⁷¹ Brink, 89.

⁷² Brink, 91.

⁷³ Brink, 91.

⁷⁴ Brink, 92.

epistemic cases. Brink thinks, moreover, that the burden of proof is on Mackie to prove the implausibility of moral realism rather than on Brink to give a bullet-proof defense of it.⁷⁵

While Brink's criticism of the motivational internalism deployed by Mackie is quite forceful, Richard Garner points out that there is reason to question whether this commitment is essential to Mackie's argument. Garner contends that Mackie's argument can be stated without loss of force in a form that doesn't require a connection between realism about moral values and motivational internalism. This line of response to Brink's criticism is the subject of the next section.

⁷⁵ Brink, 92.

4. RICHARD GARNER'S RESPONSE TO BRINK

Richard Garner believes that even though Mackie affirms a connection between objective moral values and motivational internalism, such a connection is not essential to the Argument. In fact, Garner alleges that Brink's focus on this connection misses what is the real driving force of the Argument. Garner believes that he can illuminate a clear path around Brink's challenge by emphasizing Mackie's real focus:

Brink makes it clear that the important thing about moral facts and properties is that they are advanced as facts and properties that ought to move us. Morality has authority, and authority demands obedience, even if it doesn't always get it. If Mackie had concentrated more on the alleged authority of morality than on its alleged (motivating) power, he would have fixed on a kind of queerness that remains even when we abandon motivational internalism. Since he did not, he left the way open for Brink to defend moral realism against the argument from queerness by assuming that the only queer thing about moral facts is their intrinsic power.⁷⁶

Garner says that the real queerness of moral properties and facts is not in their "alleged power to motivate, but in their intrinsic imperativeness. It is this action-guiding or action-directing (rather than action-causing) feature that Mackie sometimes, but not always, has in mind when he speaks of objective prescriptivity."⁷⁷ This seems to highlight a fault of both philosophers: Mackie and Brink. Garner points out that Mackie may have allowed in realist responses to the Argument, when he emphasized the alleged motivating power over us of moral properties, more than their alleged normative *authority*. It is really the latter, according to Garner, that constitutes the supposed objective prescriptivity of moral properties. In the aforementioned quotation, Garner put this central point succinctly, when he said that, "morality has authority, and authority demands obedience, even if it doesn't always get it. If Mackie had concentrated more on

⁷⁶ Garner, "Genuine Queerness," 103.

⁷⁷ Garner, 97.

the alleged authority of morality than on its alleged power, he would have fixed on a kind of *queerness that remains even when we abandon motivational internalism*.⁷⁸

By narrowly understanding the metaphysical pull of Mackie's argument, a moral realist like Brink produces replies all of which insufficiently respond to the primary metaphysically contentious aspect in the Argument. Brink does not directly acknowledge the objectively prescriptive meaning of what is created if moral properties supervene on physical properties, in that ordinary moral *judgments* made about moral properties are still metaphysically and epistemologically queer. He draws attention to the fact that we regard moral properties as supervening on physical properties, seeing a supervenient relation as obtaining "between two properties or sets of properties just in case the one property or set of properties is causally realised by the other property or set of properties."⁷⁹

This, however, ignores just exactly what *this* peculiar relation may come to suggest about the conception of moral properties to ordinary moral language users; namely, such properties have a strange objective prescriptiveness. Brink incorrectly attempts to draw an analogy between our moral theories and their methodology with the theories and methodology found in the natural sciences. But these physical properties of the natural world, that a moral realist like Brink may want to link our empirically testable theories to, remain of a qualitatively different sort than those of moral properties. With regard to these less controversial supervenient properties there is not the same use of intuition backing up a correlation of theory to a testable methodology. Contrary to what Brink suggests, the relation of moral obligation and intrinsic values to physical properties

⁷⁸ Garner, 103 (emphasis mine).

⁷⁹ Garner, 103.

is of a different sort than color to light is, for example.⁸⁰ Garner writes, “we have no duty receptors or instruments to detect the presence of trace amounts of intrinsic value”; therefore, Mackie’s critique of moral intuitionists, like Richard Price, seems apt.⁸¹

Garner points out that the specific features of moral facts are their embedded directives to authoritatively and objectively demand something of us. He compares the strangeness of moral properties to that of the strangeness of quarks and black holes in space, *which demand nothing from us*.⁸² Moral facts, as we refer to them in moral discourse, are unique in possessing this feature of demandingness. We can *either* choose to-do *or* no-to-do in accordance with that demand. In other words, we can “ignore or disobey.”⁸³ However, the authority will always be there to make an inescapable demand of this sort, independently of any motivational power to make us actually fulfill this directive. This is something that nothing else in the universe would have the ability to do, i.e., the *authority* over us to make demands upon us.

Garner continues that “the anti-realist says that this demand, however strongly felt, is no more than a projection of demands people make upon one another. The moral realist says that *this* is not enough, that the demands are in some sense independent of our moral feelings and beliefs, and responsible for them.”⁸⁴ The metaphysical strangeness of moral properties is different from the metaphysical strangeness of black holes and quarks then, as “a black hole swallows everything but it demands nothing.”⁸⁵ Garner pointedly concludes that, “it’s the peculiar combination of objectivity and prescriptivity, rather than

⁸⁰ Garner, 100.

⁸¹ Garner, 100.

⁸² Garner, 102.

⁸³ Garner, 102.

⁸⁴ Garner, 102.

⁸⁵ Garner, 102.

any intrinsic motivational power, that makes moral facts and properties queer, and neither Brink nor anyone else can purge *that* from them to protect them from the argument from queerness.”⁸⁶ Brink should therefore be seen as going down the wrong path and as heading towards an incorrect construction of morality.

Garner further draws attention to the built in not-to-be-doneness which Mackie mentions when he asks precisely what is signified in an action being wrong because it is one of deliberate cruelty. Is supervenience a kind of logical entailment, Mackie asked. As we saw above, Mackie clarified that it is not a relationship of consequence because the act being wrong is simultaneous with its occurrence. Garner explains that both Brink and Mackie, being materialists, must claim that “all properties (ultimately) supervene on physical properties.”⁸⁷

With or without the motivational aspect we can now see how making moral properties supervene on physical properties is actually not the issue at hand. If we keep Mackie’s “objectively prescriptive” aspect in mind, then it “instantly” helps distinguish moral properties from any other sort of biological or social property.⁸⁸ Moral properties are not of the same kind as biological, physical, or social supervening properties precisely in that the former demand action from us and the latter do not. Tristram McPherson writes, “Mackie suggests that we think that actions have their ethical properties *because* they have some natural features.”⁸⁹

The prevalent conventional use of these moral/ethical properties is such that these are the only properties which demand from us in the way that we make judgments based

⁸⁶ Garner, 101.

⁸⁷ Garner, 103.

⁸⁸ Garner, 103.

⁸⁹ McPherson, “Supervenience in Ethics.”

on their demands. An action of deliberate cruelty demands of us that we judge that the action not be performed. This specific brand of prescriptive objectivity is not found in any biological, physical, or social supervening property. Inflation, for example, is not metaphysically queer because it has no implicit assumption of alleged authority over us. Inflation does not make demands of us. The judgment that inflation is morally good or bad, on the other hand, does make such a judgment-related demand.

4.1 Extending Garner's Position

One might object that Garner is wrong to claim that quarks and black holes demand nothing of us. In fact, one might allege, they demand that we hold certain, namely correct, beliefs about them but not others. They demand, that is, that we conform our beliefs to their *true* nature. This is an understandable challenge to Garner's response to Brink. However, it overlooks Garner's contention that allegedly objective moral properties possess a combination of objectivity *and* prescriptivity that is found only in moral properties.

Whereas black holes and quarks can prescribe that we hold certain beliefs about them, those beliefs—as we use and understand them—do not require any action on our part. The current objection rests on the idea that certain propositions about black holes are true, as a matter of natural scientific fact (the facts established by astrophysics) while others are false, and that we *should not* hold the latter.

Garner might say that, granted, this *is* a sort of normative constraint on what we ought to believe. Having said that, I would further Garner's argument in emphasizing that a belief in objective moral values remains especially queer because holding that sort of belief demands of us that we act in a particular way.

In addition, one might challenge even the contention that black holes demand that we hold *any* beliefs about them in virtue of their existence. A black hole does not change if we do not believe in it and, furthermore, it does not demand that we hold any beliefs about it in the first place. Rather, it is only in so far as we have certain epistemic interests that the aforementioned facts about black holes put constraints on our beliefs about this subject matter. If we do conform our beliefs to black holes, the demand to do so arises from ourselves as rational inquirers and not from the black holes themselves. But when we encounter moral properties (in the way moral realists conceive of them) then we are subject to an additional layer of normativity that arises on the level of the objective value. Moral propositions are equipped with objective validity in the sense of applying to us unconditionally (i.e., independently of any antecedent interests and attachments that we might have). In contrast to beliefs about natural phenomena, prescriptive beliefs make the demand *that* we hold them—a requirement that we endorse and practice them regardless of whatever practical and theoretical interests, subjective perspectives, or needs that we might have. (I will return to this point briefly below, when revisiting Mackie’s description of Kant.)

Even so, one might reply, there are many unusual things in the world, why is the unique queerness specific to moral properties a special problem? One response to this rejoinder is to note that holding beliefs in other unusual things in the world does not demand that we simultaneously acknowledge some sort of duty or directive from holding them that parallels the sort of duty or directive imposed by judgments about moral properties. A belief in black holes and quarks does not require of us to use that belief for functioning in everyday social situations. It is true that our beliefs in natural occurrences,

like weather patterns, may have their own practicality (like protecting ourselves from their impacts). Still, a thunderstorm does not demand in itself that we respond to it, regardless of how prudent it may be for us that we do. An alleged objective moral value, on the other hand, requires of us that we abide by it in virtue of its sheer existence. Moral propositions get their alleged authority to make these demands from *being* moral propositions with their distinct unconditional demandingness that appears inherent in them, at least according to objectivist ethical theories. Certainly, according to Kant for example, we are subject to the authoritative demands of morality simply because we are capable of rationality. As Mackie writes, “Kant in particular holds that the categorical imperative is not only categorical and imperative but objectively so: though a rational being gives the moral law to himself, the law that he thus makes is determinate and necessary.”⁹⁰

This discussion helps us better understand the specific aspect of objective prescriptivity in moral properties that Mackie wants to highlight in order to deny the existence of objective moral facts altogether. There is a clear distinction to be made between, on the one hand, intrinsic, almost causal, motivation that exerts a compulsory psychological power over us upon perceiving moral facts; and, on the other hand, the phenomenon of objective and inescapable normative requiredness in the form of the

⁹⁰ Mackie, “Subjectivity of Values,” 30. The scholarship on Kant and Kantian metaethics has significantly evolved in the years since Mackie published his book. In particular, Kantian constructivists and constitutivists present interpretations of Kant’s moral theory that might well be immune to Mackie’s criticisms in that they defend an account of moral objectivity without realist commitments. E.g. Onora O’Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Exploration of Kant’s Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Christine M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Christoph Hanisch and Sorin Baiasu, “Constitutivism and Kantian Constructivism in Ethical Theory: Editorial Introduction,” *Philosophia*, 44, no. 4 (2016): 1125-1246.

alleged authority that morality wields over us. A charitable reading of Mackie's argument understands it as dealing with questions of the latter category. When thus understood, it becomes more evident that Brink's response to Mackie leaves untouched the queer categorical prescriptive force of objective moral values.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper I endeavored to show how John Mackie conceptualized and then denied the existence of moral properties in his Argument from Queerness. I have taken a brief survey of the exchange between theorists Brink and Garner on the Argument. We considered Brink's moral realist challenge based on motivational internalism and supervenience to dull Mackie's argument. We also considered Garner's response to Brink. By refocusing on the strangeness of moral properties' alleged authority, as distinct from their alleged motivational power, we can better highlight the exact strangeness of objectively prescriptive moral properties that Mackie wants to deny. When thus considered, according to Garner, the problematic queerness of moral values is not dissipated by Brink's deployment of motivational externalism and supervenience.

Garner emphasized the queerness of moral values to defend the Argument against Brink by pointing to their authoritative ability to be objectively prescriptive in making demands of us.

In the final section, I furthered Garner's defense by replying to a possible objection based in the alleged normativity of natural objects whereby they require certain beliefs. I argued that the demands made by moral properties are dissimilar from possible demands to conform our beliefs to scientific knowledge or practical requirements of natural occurrences due to the unique dual character of moral properties by which they are both objectively true and prescriptive/categorically imperative. I also challenged the claim that the demand to form true beliefs about natural objects arises on the side of the natural objects themselves. I noted that the demand is a constraint imposed on the side of reason and not on the side of the objects themselves.

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