

# ETHICS

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Twelve Lectures on the  
Philosophy of Morality

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resources and all the commitments of the object language. It cannot free the ethical metatheorist from the semantic entanglements of the ethical object language. A theorist who has some specific need to escape these things will contrive better to do so by going back to the level of the object language and explicitly refusing to use the expression that carries a cargo he finds suspect, or by saying from the outset that he finds it suspect (either morally or otherwise). This at least appears to be a true insight into the ethical. There is no other way to point the finger of suspicion at some expression in the object language of ethics than to start out on the process we began to describe in the closing pages of Lecture 1 (from 1.12 onwards).

# 11

## Objectivity in ethics

### *Two difficulties, two responses*

A more heartening fact about the cultures of man  
Is their appalling stubbornness. The sea  
Is always calm ten fathoms down. The gigantic  
anthropological circus riotously  
Holds open all its booths.

William Empson, 'Sonnet'

11.1. In *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*,<sup>1</sup> John Mackie assumed the difficulties he claimed to see in the idea of ethical objectivity under two heads. First there was the metaphysical peculiarity of such things as values or obligations,<sup>2</sup> this peculiarity importing the need to postulate a faculty of moral intuition for the detection of obligations and the value properties G. E. Moore called non-natural properties. Secondly there was the 'variability of some important starting points of moral thinking and their apparent dependence on actual ways of life' (p. 49)—'the well known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the difference in moral beliefs between different

1. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.

2. '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. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from an ordinary way of knowing everything else. These points were recognized by Moore when he spoke of non-natural qualities, and by the intuitionists in their talk about moral intuition' (p. 38).

