

ETHICS

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*,¹ 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,² 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).

groups and classes within a complex community' (p. 36). These difficulties are sharply stated and still on the record. Under the names Mackie gave them of *queerness* and *relativity*, they are still at work in philosophy.³

11.2. For the response to queerness, let us look first where Mackie himself looked when he sought to compensate us for that which his chapter 1 seemed to sweep away. In the place of the outlook of moral objectivism, Mackie proposed a form of moral constructivism. In the tradition instituted by Protagoras, the fifth century B.C. sophist, this was to be built up from the idea that morality was a device, 'a system of particular sort of constraints on conduct—ones whose central task is to protect the interests of persons other than the agent and which present themselves to an agent as checks on his natural inclinations or spontaneous tendencies to act' (p. 106). Morality was to be 'a device for counteracting limited sympathies' and alleviating, in ways prefigured by G. J. Warnock,⁴ the inveterate tendency for things to go very badly. It was to be addressed to the standing causes of that tendency.

When Mackie drew closer to the actual business of implementing the construction and looking for ways to offset the narrowness of men's sympathies, rationality, intelligence, and information, he set out with telling and interesting examples various 'prisoner's dilemma' situations. He brought to the constructional task all sorts of insights of Darwin,⁵ Hobbes, and Hume. He was never tempted, though, to

3. Compare, from the other side of the argument, Hilary Putnam in *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003): 'The positions that are still defended by the proponents of a fact/value dichotomy are variants of non-cognitivism and of relativism. But non-cognitivism founders, as we have seen, once we appreciate what I have been calling the entanglement of fact and value; while the relativism derived from contemporary scientism threatens to toss much more than ethical judgements into the bag of truths that are valid only from some local perspective or other' (p. 42). Putnam says that into this bag will go almost everything that ordinary people know how to say.

4. G. J. Warnock, *The Object of Morality* (London: Methuen, 1971).

5. For the case of Darwin, compare Mackie's p. 113 and Darwin's *The Descent of*

try to contrive the whole core of first-order morality from games-theoretical or evolutionary ideas. Remark on the inadequacy of prudence, self-interest, and long-term self-interest to sustain the construction that he had in mind, he said:

there can be no doubt that many real-life situations contain, as at least part of their causally relevant structure, patterns of relationship of which various simple 'games' are an illuminating description. . . . Such simplified analyses . . . show . . . how the combined outcome of several intentional actions, even of well-informed and rational agents, may be something no one of the agents has intended or would intend. But from our point of view the game theory approach merely reinforces the lessons that we have extracted from the arguments of Protagoras, Hobbes, Hume, and Warnock. The main moral [we have already extracted from them] is the practical value of the notion of obligation, of an invisible and indeed fictitious tie or bond, whether this takes the form of a general requirement to keep whatever agreements one makes or of various specific duties like those of military honour or of loyalty to comrades or to an organization. . . .

. . . The real weakness of the Hobbesian solution lies not in anything that the games theory models show but in what, just by being models, they leave out. . . . The Hobbesian solution is . . . like a house of cards . . . and it is inflexible in the same way. A structure is more likely to be able to bend in response to changing forces without collapsing if it is held together by ties of which some are less conditional than those of prudence. (pp. 119–20)

I shall quarrel shortly with the claim of fictitiousness, but the wisdom that is manifest in everything else that is here prefigures the vigilance

Man (1871), p. 166, a position whose reputability is refurbished by Mackie himself in 'The Law of the Jungle', *Philosophy* 53 (1978). See 2.13.

and unerring insight that distinguish Mackie's efforts elsewhere in the book to supply what he calls 'the content of the device' which he has announced that he will take morality to be. Not only (as Mackie says) is self-interest a needlessly narrow resource from which to draw palliatives for prisoner's dilemma predicaments and their variants or for state-of-nature situations. It gradually becomes evident, even though Mackie never quite says so, that there is no real possibility of specifying in advance *the one objective* that the morality device is to encompass. It is true that, at one point (p. 193), Mackie mentions the 'well-being of active intelligent participants in a partly competitive life'; but the occasion for this formulation is Mackie's remarking on its unsatisfactoriness as an overall objective. Nor is he preparing at this point to identify, either inaccurately (by his standard) or else too hopelessly vaguely for most constructive purposes, an even larger or more inclusive objective—the flourishing of human life; for instance, or 'general human well-being'—in relation to which he can propose to us an ethic of consequentialism. Indeed, when it comes to it, Mackie rejects consequentialism.

By what method then does the construction proceed? Mackie's real method is this. As he moves from topic to topic and question to question, he draws constantly upon the reservoir of implicit knowledge that we all have, but make explicit only piecemeal and in given contexts, of what matters in this or that sphere of activity. At need, Mackie draws freely upon this reservoir. From hence, of course, and from his power to interpret the point of what he finds, his rare judgment and good sense.⁶

Mackie might find this a disappointing description. But I should reply that he ought not to complain. For this is the *right* method. The fact that he needs to follow it only mirrors the oft-repeated failure of moral philosophy, well documented by Mackie himself, to settle peacefully for any utilitarian aim or deontological aim or other

6. See, for instance, Mackie's temperate and sensible treatment, which stands out among others offered by authors of an empiricist outlook, of the Principle of Double Effect (pp. 160-8).

specific aim as 'the (overall) aim of morality'. In truth, the inner or enactable aim of morality, the real aim of morality, is inseparable from the everyday meaning of everyday life and its everyday extensions and elaborations. It is something practically apparent but apparent only within the business of life itself. There is everything to be said for starting, as Warnock and Mackie do, with some foundational purpose or purposes (countering the narrowness of human sympathies, say). But there is no question of advancing from these to the specification of an overall end that would be required for purposes of reconceiving morality as a means to that end. It begins to appear that the idea that morality is a *device* (or a means to an end) is either, as literally understood, false—or else, as charitably understood, uncomfortably close to vacuous.⁷

11.3. If something you think you hoped for is lost by your concurring in this last contention, well, something else can be gained by reflection upon this reservoir which Mackie draws upon of practical or implicit knowledge. The thing we gain is a vivid reminder of the possibility of inward ends or purposes or concerns which, in the business of their life at a given place and time, participants in a first-order ethic will steadfastly adhere to as if by second nature, distinguishing readily, however essentially contestably, between these concerns and other concerns that *can* be abandoned and may have to be. Is it not here, in the sphere of the unforsakeable, that we find the true source of the deontological ideas and categorical requirements that Mackie insists upon our retaining in first-order morality? If there is this to be gained, then how can we acquiesce in Mackie's redescribing a categorical requirement as an appeal to an 'invisible and fictitious tie or bond' of obligation or as depending for its force on mysterious 'intrinsically prescriptive entities' which he says that 'ought' and 'must' purport to invoke? What need is there for these mysteries?⁸

7. I expect that something analogous has already been said about analogous proposals to conceive of law as an economic device.

8. Here I make response to a point Mackie notes at p. 27.

This remark leads on to yet another thought Mackie never meant us to have. Is Mackie looking in the right place for truth and objectivity? Aren't truth and objectivity best looked for in the difference between good and bad first-order thinking within the subject matter that Mackie's book reintroduces to us—and that it vindicates for us by displaying it to us as, piece by piece, *not pointless* but more or less indispensable to us? This is a subject matter we need no longer see as littered with the nuts and bolts of the constructivist, but as provided with the purport and density proper to a mode of thinking that is fully fledged and engaged with all sorts of other life-purposes by reference to which it is constantly proved and tested.

First-order morality is very unlike elementary arithmetic. But that does not forbid a comparison under one chosen aspect. Consider here the efforts of a philosopher of arithmetic who seeks to reconcile us to the wondrous ontology of natural numbers by showing how naturally and seemingly inevitably it is cantilevered from the first of the indefinitely many needs that arithmetic is to subservise, namely that of counting the ordinary objects of human experience. Just as we can see the achieved satisfaction of all these needs as sustaining, well enough, the ontology of natural numbers and the corresponding ideology (conceptual apparatus) of their properties, can we not see the inward or lived accumulated aims of ethical thinking as sustaining the proper ontology and ideology of first-order ethics? If so, why should not the distinction that ordinary agents make between good and bad thinking about what to say about such and such an act (or such and such a character, or such and such a situation) instantiate the *general* distinction between true and false? If ethical thinking about such things is in good shape, cannot ethical properties and value properties be as distinctive as you like, provided that it serves an ethical aim for them to be thus or so? On the view I am trying to make visible, an assertion invoking ethical properties will not aspire to a different kind of status from a factual assertion; and there need not be any *dichotomy* between getting it right in

matters of ethics, however distinctive that is, and getting it right in matters of fact.⁹

11.4. Here it seems necessary to explain a little more carefully what there is to mean by such claims as this, as well as to indicate what it would take to justify them. What shall we mean?

By 'ethics' we can mean something we know how to explain co-possibly by examples, examples that are dead centre. 'Matter of fact' will be harder, however. It is instructive to remember in this connection the logical positivists' repeated efforts and repeated failures to say what a factual predicate was.¹⁰ Almost anything we think we can simply assume here will beg the question against some reputable opinion. But let us go by another way.

Look at some of our strongest cases of simple plain truth among judgments, any true judgments that you like. This is my suggestion. Then study what in such cases is to be expected of the property of truth. In this way, excogitate the Fregean marks of the concept *true*.¹¹ Then, with these in mind, look carefully at real-life ethical reasoning or persuasion at its best and most convincing. Discover what judgments it can even endorse as prompted to us by there being (for one who grasps fully the sense and reference of the sentence expressing the judgment) nothing else to think but that so and so. (Not nothing else *for us* or *here* or *now* to think. That is too weak.) Then ask yourself how narrowly to conceive the general idea of there being nothing else to think. Surely it does not need to be confined to the realm of the necessary or confined to that which we reach by deduction. Before you decide about that, listen to Charles Sanders

9. For another account of the non-dichotomy, namely Hilary Putnam's to be found in *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, see Lecture 12, n. 20.

10. The reasons for their failure are vividly illustrated by the remarkable short history of these endeavours which Putnam provides at *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, p. 21.

11. For marks of truth and a continuation of the themes that ensue upon them in moral philosophy, see 12.2, 12.3. See also my *Needs, Values, Truth* (amended 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 115, 147, 152.

Peirce on the subject of thinking and the idea, as he advances it, that thinking is not to be conceived to 'form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link', but as 'a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected'.¹² Finally, when you have made up your mind about all that, spell out your remaining reason for supposing that ethical judgments could never enjoy the properties corresponding to the marks of plain truth. If this reason has to do with their remoteness from perception, well, ask yourself whether, from scratch, you could hope to establish any special status for perception itself without recourse to modes of thinking that only the Peircean conception will certify as genuine argument.

On this kind of approach, there will be no instant answer to the question whether ethical findings are or are not matters of fact. There will be no instant answer, but, *in so far as* first-order ethical thinking seems to muster powers of persuasion and criticism that are rooted in a genuine subject matter, and *in so far as* the cognitivist thinks he can answer Mackie's argument from relativity, how should he characterize the non-dichotomy of fact and value? Like this, I suggest: the concept *factual judgment* or *judgment with a truth-value* and the concept *ethical judgement* will be different concepts—such a distinction is there to be made, just as the concept *mouse* and the concept *mammal* are different concepts (for 'concept', see 12.2, n. 2)—but this distinctness does not preclude a judgment's being both a factual and an ethical judgment. Compare the way in which the distinct concepts *mouse* and *mammal* will each collect any particular mouse you please, Timmy Willy or Johnny Townmouse or whichever, within their extensions. Ethical judgments could be a subset

12. C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, and A. W. Burks (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931–58), vol. I, p. 265. In citing Peirce here, I am not preparing to endorse an anti-realist or pragmatic conception of truth, just the reverse. In an essay in the *Cambridge Companion to C. S. Peirce*, ed. Cheryl Misak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), I argue that the best reconstruction of Peirce will make him an operationalist or pragmatist not about truth but about sense or significance.

of factual judgments even if they were an utterly special and essentially contestable subset. In this way, we can have a clear *difference* between the ethical-as-such and the factual-as-such without any dichotomy between their proper provinces. The hope of making good some claim of this sort is the characteristic hope of ethical objectivism or moral cognitivism.

11.5. Do these explications, dispositions, and proposals complete the response to the argument from queerness? Not quite. We have deprecated Mackie's mockery of certain curious things he claims to find, and which we might refuse to find, within the ontology or ideology of the working portion of our own first-order ethical system. But we have not yet engaged with Mackie's charge that objectivism needs to postulate a curious faculty of intuition by which human beings can detect the presence of valuational and other non-natural properties.

The first point that needs to be made here is that a non-natural property is something less strange than Mackie seems to suppose. A non-natural property is simply a property that does not conform to Moore's first characterization of 'nature' and 'natural'.¹³ I paraphrase and adapt that characterization as follows. A predicate stands for a natural property if it is indispensable to the exposition or development of some natural science (or to some similarly strictly empirical-cum-explanatory mode of investigation). A non-natural property is simply one that is *not* like that. It is a myth and the opposite of the truth that our grasp of properties that are natural in this sense is better than our grasp of the non-natural.

Is there not something queer, though, about the epistemology of the non-natural properties that are value properties? Here I shall refer to Hilary Putnam's recent book, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*:

13. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), p. 41.

