

**ON MORAL OBJECTIVITY:  
CAN THERE BE OBJECTIVE MORAL EVALUATION WITHOUT INVOKING  
THE EXISTENCE OF “QUEER” ONTOLOGICAL PROPERTIES?**

by

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## Introduction

Morality is a phenomenon that permeates our human experience; it sits at the very core of human society as an essential contributor to peaceful and productive coexistence. Not only is moral evaluation practical and rational, it also seems to provoke emotional reactions: morality isn't just something we think, it is also something we feel strongly about.

Imagine the following scenario: you are sitting comfortably at home, watching your favorite show, or deeply engrossed in reading a book when the doorbell rings. You begrudgingly go to the door and open it, only to be confronted with a young woman who is clearly suffering greatly; she is clutching her side and blood is gushing out. You look around to see if anyone else is around, but it seems that none of your neighbors are home. The girl doesn't say anything; she just looks at you desperately. What is to stop you from shutting the door, locking it and going back to your book or show? Why is it that the circumstance seems a call to responsibility, seems to oblige you to take an action that goes against your own personal interests? The woman is a complete stranger. There is no civil law that obliges you to do anything about it and you were not the agent responsible for her present unfortunate circumstance. Why is it that most of us are naturally disgusted, indeed abhorred at the thought that anyone in such a scenario, would even consider shutting the door and going back to their pastime? Where does the moral claim that you "*ought*" to help that woman come from? Can it be found embedded somewhere as part of the facts of circumstances, or perhaps in a relation that obtains between you and the circumstances? Is

it part of the education that we have received? Have we been indoctrinated even though it wouldn't actually be wrong to turn around and shut the door? It seems that all human interaction is tainted by ethical evaluation. We don't just affirm the facts, but are bombarded by this persistent evaluating mechanism that cannot refrain from asking what "ought" or "ought not" to be.

Our human experience of moral evaluation is the starting point and the inspiration for the enquiry that ensues. The truth is that human society is pervaded by moral evaluation. Modernity has reached a point probably unprecedented in which a universal moral code has been established and assented to by the global community. It was on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December of 1948, in the aftermath of a gruesome world war, that the general assembly of the United Nations adopted "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights", which reached its resolution on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 1948. Only 8 nations abstained from the vote and none of them dissented from the declaration. How is it possible that the diversity of the international community could come to consensus on anything at all, let alone ethical issues? Just what is the meaning of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights"? Does it make a claim to be objective truth? Were "human rights" somehow embedded in nature waiting for us to discover them just like laws of physics? Or are they in fact rather arbitrary, invented by human society because morality and the protection of human rights are things that are beneficial to human flourishing? How were those 18 members of the commission on human rights able to gain knowledge of these rights? Do we humans have a special faculty that enables us to identify moral goodness, so that by

applying this faculty we are able to discern good from bad? Or have some people in high places invented morality to have greater control over the masses?

Many ethical theories have been developed to account for the human experience of moral evaluation and to provide guidelines or principles for moral evaluation. This piece is not concerned with the question of what is right or wrong, it is concerned with asking if a moral evaluation can be true or false. In other words, with whether or not moral claims can be objective. To illustrate the applied nature of the issue at stake I would translate the question into: Can we say that the claim that Nazi concentration camps were bad, indeed evil, is true? The diversity of moral beliefs can be clearly observed among the people of different nations, and recognizing this fact makes us tend to think that moral evaluation must be relative, or a result of education and environment. Yet we do not shrink from making categorical claims such as, "Genocide is wrong;" on an international level. I believe that modernity finds itself in a moral dilemma: on one hand secularism wants to deny that moral principles have been prescribed by a Supreme Being, and on the other hand the "modern" wants to make the claim that there exist things such as "human rights" that must be respected, so that to discriminate against anyone because of gender race or ethnicity is wrong. The dilemma is that there is no reason for saying that things such as discrimination are wrong other than to say that they are not beneficial to the "common good." So in the case that someone were to come along and demonstrate that in fact, for the benefit of human flourishing, science has discovered that certain genetic make-ups are better than others, and these should be granted more rights or better opportunities, one would be forced to oblige. So maybe Nazi concentration camps weren't so evil after all?

There have been philosophers who have seen this dilemma and have attempted to respond to it with unorthodox approaches to morality. Among these philosophers, the contributions of Australian J.L. Mackie stand out as particularly confrontational. Mackie is a moral error-theorist, and although he believes that when we make moral judgments we mean to make a statement that is true in the objective sense, he argues that in reality moral values do not exist. To claim the existence of objective moral values would imply asserting the existence of some natural or non-natural moral qualities or properties that would be of a very strange, indeed a queer nature. He concludes that objective moral values must therefore not exist.

In what follows, I intend to explore J.L. Mackie's arguments in defense of the moral error-theory, the contributions of his colleagues who defend the theory, as well those of the objectors to his theory in search of an adequate explanation for the phenomenon of moral evaluation so characteristic of human interaction. I shall open with an analysis of Hume's moral theory since it offers the backdrop for Mackie's moral error-theory. The interpretation of Hume's moral theory that I detail in this dissertation is not to be taken as indisputable, in fact I am aware that many philosophers would disagree with the way Hume's thought is represented. My intention however is to provide an account of Mackie's moral error-theory, and for this reason, what I outline below is Hume's thought on morality according to Mackie. At this point, it is probably convenient to add that that the terminology employed throughout this work is also "Mackian", so that terms such as

“categorical imperative” are to be understood from within this “Mackian context” and not from a Kantian perspective.

The exposition on Hume shall be followed by an outline of J.L. Mackie’s argument in support of the moral error-theory. I shall then give tribute to the contributions of other moral error-theorists who have nuanced his argument granting it greater strength in the wake of the surge of objections. In a fourth chapter, the opposition to the moral error-theory is outlined along with a representation of a variety of realist approaches to human morality. I then suggest opening the door to a third option, a morality that is objective but does not involve “objects” of the sort that the realists are forced to involve in their understanding of objective truth. This third option incorporates *Ethics without Ontology* authored by Hilary Putnam, as well as a contribution from Emmanuel Levinas’s “ethics of presence.”

The conclusion shall consist of an analysis of the explanatory power of the three approaches to morality that have been discussed throughout this piece. With the results of said analysis, I hope to be able to provide an insightful response to the moral dilemma that haunts our modern era. I also hope to be able to offer a better explanation of the human moral experience that redeems objective moral evaluation from the Mackian accusation of being “queer.”

“It is a hard fact that cruel actions differ from kind ones, and hence that we can learn as in fact we all do, to distinguish them fairly well in practice, and to use the words ‘cruel’ and ‘kind’ with fairly clear descriptive meanings; but is it an equally hard fact that actions which are cruel in such a descriptive sense are to be condemned?”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin books, 1990, 15

## Chapter 1

### The Humean background of the moral dilemma

British empiricist, David Hume, dedicates Book III of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, to the topic of morality. In the previous Books, he has defined reason as the discovery of truth or falsehood: agreement or disagreement either to real relations of ideas or to real existence and matters of fact. Truth, according to Hume, is the correspondence of statements to states of affairs;  $p$  is true just in case  $p$  is the case. He argues that reason has no influence upon actions and affections; it has no motivating power as it is exclusively dedicated to the discovery of truth or falsity. Since morality involves teaching duty and “begetting correspondent habits,”<sup>2</sup> it cannot be a product of reason; morality therefore must be the result of moral sentiment. Hume provides several arguments to demonstrate his claim that moral judgment is the fruit of the reaction of our moral sentiments rather than the product of rational activity.

These arguments are relevant to our topic of investigation since they have come to form part of the foundation for the moral error theory that shall be discussed in greater depth in the following chapter. Hume argues that if reason could perform moral evaluation, then the characters of virtue and vice would have to lie either in some relation or in some matter of fact that could be identified. He acknowledges that there are many

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<sup>2</sup> *David Hume, Enquiry concerning the principles of morals*,  
The Project Gutenberg EBook of An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of  
Morals, by David Hume, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4320/pg4320.txt>

philosophers who would contend that morality does lie in a relation and is hence discoverable by reason. If this were the case, however, argues Hume, the relation would have to be one found not only in rational beings but also in irrational beings and even in inanimate objects, because such is the character of relations. Hume identifies four types of relations: resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality and proportion, all of which belong just as much to our actions and passions as they do to matter. To re-enforce his argument, he points out that if a man were to murder his parent, all would react declaring the event to be horrific and morally evil. In contrast, when a sapling grows to destroy the oak from which it sprung, nobody is horrified by the evilness of the event. The same occurs when we speak of incest; we are disgusted by the practice of incest among humans but when it comes to animals nobody even raises an eyebrow. “Here then the same relations have different causes; but still the relations are the same: And as their discovery is not in both cases attended with a notion of immorality, it follows, that that notion does not arise from such a discovery.”<sup>3</sup> With these examples, Hume intends to demonstrate that morality cannot lie in a relation because we apply moral evaluations exclusively to humans and not to animals or inanimate objects.<sup>4</sup> Hence, not only is Hume indicating that morality cannot be a relation, he also seems to be pointing out that morality is something specifically

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<sup>3</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Gutenberg Project, Book III, Part I, Sect I, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4705/pg4705.txt>, accessed 03/24/2014

<sup>4</sup> One could object that moral evaluation can involve inanimate objects in the case of natural disaster or disease for example. Although the convention of attributing moral evaluation to certain natural events might be common practice, we do however traditionally say that only the free agent can act morally since only such agents can choose their actions. Morality seems to be accompanied by retribution for good actions or for virtue and punishment for evil actions.



characteristic of human beings who have it in their nature to react with either approval or disapproval to events or states of affairs.

Hume goes on to consider the option of asserting that morality is a property or quality that exists as a matter of fact, as a real existent recognized by reason as virtue or vice. He argues, however, that no one has been able to discover real existence that corresponds to those characteristics, and Hume is of the opinion that no matter how technology advances, we shall never discover one.

“But can there be any difficulty in proving, that vice and virtue are not matters of fact, whose existence we can infer by reason? Take any action allowed to be vicious: Willful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but it is the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object.”<sup>5</sup>

There is of course the option of claiming, as does G.E. Moore, that morality, or rather, that “good” is a non-natural property that we can know by intuition. Hume however rejects the possibility of any sort of non-natural property; he thinks that when we examine our moral experience, all we find are sentiments of approbation or disapprobation and believes that morality is not a function of human reason.

Hume is intrigued and fascinated by the peculiar prescriptive characteristic of moral evaluation. It is the obligation to action entailed by moral assessments that Hume considers to be overwhelming proof for his claim that moral evaluation cannot be a product of reason.

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<sup>5</sup> Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Gutenberg Project, Book III, Part I, Sect I

“Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be derived from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already proved, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.”<sup>6</sup>

A part of Hume’s *Treatise* is aimed at demonstrating that reason is inert, reason cannot move to action. If moral judgment by nature prescribes action, how then are we to explain that the rightness or wrongness of an action is discovered by reason if reason is inert?

“In order, therefore, to prove, that the measures of right and wrong are eternal laws, obligatory on every rational mind, it is not sufficient to shew the relations upon which they are founded: We must also point out the connexion betwixt the relation and the will; and must prove that this connexion is so necessary, that in every well-disposed mind, it must take place and have its influence; though the difference betwixt these minds be in other respects immense and infinite.”<sup>7</sup>

Hume asserts that there is no causal relation between understanding and the will and that no rational discovery can ever single-handedly produce an action. Furthermore, if a causal relationship between reason and the will were to exist, it would have to be a relationship so necessary that any well-disposed mind would have to fall under its influence even if the difference between minds were immense, or even infinite if we were to include the mind of God.

Basing his view on logic’s principle of conservation, Hume goes on to declare that an “ought” can never be derived from an “is”, that there is no standing relation between “is” and “ought” that permits a jump from one to the other without offering an explanation

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<sup>6</sup> Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Gutenberg Project, Book III, Part I, Sect I

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

of how one got the “ought” from the “is”.<sup>8</sup> Hume confronts moral philosophers who defend cognitivism with the challenge of either proving this argument false, or providing a plausible explanation for how an “ought” can be deduced from an “is”. J.L. Mackie, acclaims the strength of this claim in his book *Hume’s Moral Theory*, declaring that:

“The thesis that remains unshaken is that an ought-statement which expresses a categorical imperative cannot be validly derived by ordinary, general, logic – by deductively valid reasoning- from any set of premises, each of which is either a logical or mathematical truth or an ordinary empirical (including causal) statement: the apparent exceptions rely on clusters of linguistic rules which, as clusters, implicitly incorporate categorical imperatives.”<sup>9</sup>

Hilary Putnam, on the other hand, in *The collapse of the fact/value dichotomy*, rejects Hume’s argument:

“The logical positivist fact/value dichotomy was defended on the basis of a narrowly scientific picture of what a ‘fact’ might be, just as the Humean ancestor of that distinction was defended on the basis of a narrow empiricist psychology of “ideas” and “impressions”. The realization that so much of our descriptive language is a living counterexample to *both* (classical empiricist and logical positivist) pictures of the realm of “fact” ought to shake the confidence of anyone who supposes that there is a notion of *fact* that contrasts neatly and absolutely with the notion of “value” supposedly invoked in talk of the nature of all “value judgments”<sup>10</sup>.

There has been much dispute over Hume’s claim that one cannot derive an “ought” from an “is” and although many have rejected the force of the argument, it has served to underscore that peculiar characteristic of human morality: the fact that moral evaluation is accompanied by an obligation towards a certain kind of behavior.

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<sup>8</sup> Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, BIII, part 1, sect 1

<sup>9</sup> J.L. Mackie, *Hume’s Moral Theory* Routledge, Florence, KY, USA, 1980, 61

<sup>10</sup> Hilary Putnam. *Collapse of the fact/value dichotomy* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 26

In *An Enquiry concerning the principles of morals*, Hume continues to unravel the threads of his discourse on morality with the aim of discovering its true foundation. The method employed is that of empirical investigation, founded on fact and on observation. He proceeds to explore the virtues of benevolence and justice as they are lived and evaluated by human society. As he develops his argument, he willingly acknowledges that utility is the primary source of praiseworthiness:

“In all determinations of morality, this circumstance of public utility is ever principally in view; and wherever disputes arise, either in philosophy or common life, concerning the bounds of duty, the question cannot, by any means, be decided with greater certainty, than by ascertaining, on any side, the true interests of mankind.”<sup>11</sup>

It is the principle of usefulness that has the power to endow any particular type of behavior with the title of meritorious. Hume however points out that although usefulness is generally agreeable and inspires approbation, the approbation that we experience extends farther than our own interest. He claims that a tendency to public good, and to the promotion of peace, harmony and social order, are present in our human sentiment. Principles of humanity and sympathy are deeply rooted in us, and exert a powerful influence, able to excite either strong censure or applause of certain actions. He argues that although these virtues may be useful, their merit is not derived from their usefulness, but rather from the immediate pleasure that they “communicate to the person possessed of them”.<sup>12</sup> We develop sentiments of approbation for these virtues or qualities independently of their usefulness. The force of moral sentiment is what fuels the sense of obligation that

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<sup>11</sup>Hume, *Enquiry concerning the principles of morals*, Sect II. part II

<sup>12</sup> David Hume, *Enquiry concerning the principles of morals*, Sect V.

accompanies moral judgments. The sentiments of approval and of aversion motivate to act in a particular way whether or not the action itself is advantageous to the individual. This line of argumentation amounts to a refutation of utilitarianism as an all-encompassing moral system. Furthermore, it would seem that Hume also rejects cognitivism since he repeatedly argues that moral judgment cannot be the result of human reason since reason alone cannot motivate to action, and moral properties are unidentifiable. Having ascertained that the two aforementioned moral theories fail to explain the human experience of moral judgment, Hume suggests that the peculiar prescriptive nature of moral judgments is best explained by viewing morality as a product of moral sentiment.

Hume's discourse on the foundation of morality underlines the controversial aspects that prevail to this day in philosophical disputes about moral theory. Mackie, like many other philosophers, takes inspiration in Hume's arguments to develop and expand on his own account of human morality. Together with Hume, he thinks that a moral theory needs to account for i) the fact that moral statements are regularly treated, both syntactically and conversationally, as being capable of being simply true or false – and true or false through and through, even in their distinctively moral aspect, not just with regard to a pre-moral core – (ii) the way in which these statements are taken to be intrinsically, not only contingently, action-guiding (statements that involve categorical imperatives). Nevertheless, Mackie suggests that the thesis, for which Hume has argued forcefully: that the essential fact of the matter that underlies moral judgments as well as aesthetic judgments, is that people have various sentiments or rather that there are interpersonal systems of sentiments of morality, leaves us with significant questions that need to be

considered and explained.<sup>13</sup> According to Mackie, although it is a matter of fact that human beings do experience moral sentiments, and that these sentiments are incorporated into an accepted social framework such that we think that certain actions or characteristics do possess intrinsic moral features, these features are actually fictitious. This is what Mackie refers to as the objectification theory. He believes that morality is an instance of the human mind's propensity to spread itself on external objects, and that virtue is in fact an artificial human construct that serves a purpose: that of resolving conflict in the human situation.<sup>14</sup>

From this analysis of Hume's approach to the problem of the foundation of human morality, we can draw the conclusion that the most intriguing aspects of Hume's arguments are: his claim that we cannot find any relation between reason and objects that we could identify as the moral relation; that there are no matters of fact or real existences that we have discovered with our reason and have been able to identify as virtue or vice; and finally that moral judgments appear to be intrinsically and necessarily motivational. They "beget actions", yet, by laws of logic, it is impossible to derive an "ought" from an "is", and for this reason they cannot lie in some matter of fact. These are the arguments that J.L. Mackie draws on to defend and propose his moral error theory, which I examine in the following chapter.

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<sup>13</sup> Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory*, 70

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 155

## Chapter 2

### J.L. Mackie's Moral Error Theory

The moral error theory was first developed by J.L. Mackie who expounded his theory in a book called "*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*" originally published in 1977. In his book, Mackie defines and defends moral skepticism on a meta-ethical level; he also proposes his own views on practical morality calling his approach a rule-right-duty-disposition utilitarianism.

To begin, Mackie makes a distinction between first and second order moral statements. First order ethical judgments are about the content of morality, while second order ethical statements are about the status of ethics. The first part of the book is dedicated to an analysis of second order moral statements - to the status of ethics or to what some would call meta-ethics. "The present issue is with regard to the objectivity specifically of value, not with regard to the objectivity of those natural, factual, differences on the basis of which differing values are assigned."<sup>15</sup> What Mackie intends to argue is that moral value does not exist, but he frames his argument on the meta-ethical level, maintaining that since there can be moral objectivity on the level of first order moral statements; human beings make the erroneous assumption that there is something called objective moral value on the meta-ethical level. His theory has therefore been dubbed the moral-error theory since it is a version of moral skepticism that acknowledges the possibility of objective morality on one level while maintaining that there are no

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<sup>15</sup> Mackie, *Ethics Inventing Right and Wrong*, 17

corresponding objective moral values on the meta-ethical level. Although Mackie is convinced of the erroneous nature of moral evaluation, he asserts that the illusion of objective morality is beneficial to the proper functioning of human society.

For the purpose of clarifying terms, it is important to begin by taking a look at what Mackie means when he speaks of objectivity. According to Mackie, to say that there are objective moral values is not the same as to say that there are certain moral principles that are universally agreed upon. An evaluative statement endorsed by the general public is authorized by public opinion and nothing beyond; in other words, inter-subjectivity is not objectivity. The universalizability of a statement, such that it is considered to hold true for all relevant similar cases, does not qualify as an occurrence of objectivity either. He specifies that objective values do produce statements that are universalizable, but the contrary is not true; universalizable statements do not amount to objective moral values. There is also a distinction to be made between objectivism and descriptivism. Mackie defines descriptivism as a doctrine about the meanings of ethical terms or statements according to which ethical terms are devoid of prescriptivity. The descriptivist does not acknowledge the commendatory nature of moral valuing, and hence denies the prescriptive nature of moral statements. The ontological doctrine of objectivism must therefore be distinguished from descriptivism or a theory about meaning.<sup>16</sup> Mackie points out that Plato, Kant, Sidgwick all agreed that moral values are characterized not only by evaluative statements, but also by prescriptivity. Since philosophers like Plato or Kant were willing to admit to the difficulty of claiming that values are objective because of their prescriptive

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 24



nature, in Mackie's view there is a strong reason for thinking that they are not so.<sup>17</sup>

The issue at stake, according to Mackie, is not just the objectivity of what ought to be or of what is rational, but the specific objectivity of goodness. He does not deny that there can be objectivity with respect to a set of established standards. Given certain standards of performance, a dance routine for example, can be evaluated with objectivity. The standards are not arbitrarily chosen; they are established with reference to the aim or the purpose. This does not, in Mackie's opinion pose a threat to the denial of the objectivity of values: "Something may be called good simply in so far as it satisfies or is as to satisfy a certain desire; but the objectivity of such relations of satisfaction does not constitute in our sense an objective value"<sup>18</sup> Using Kantian terminology, what Mackie means to deny is that any categorical imperative is objectively valid. He is denying the existence of values that are "action-directing absolutely, not contingently (in the sense that it depends on the purpose desires or aims of the subject) upon the agent's desires and inclinations."<sup>19</sup> Kirchin and Joyce explain in the introduction to *A World Without Values*, that: "what Mackie thinks is distinctive about morality is not its content but rather the unusual nature of its norms: an authoritative normativity that purports to bind agents "from the outside," irrespective of their desires, projects, or interests."<sup>20</sup> It is this peculiar nature of morality that Mackie finds strange and it is this claim that differentiates Mackie's theory

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 25

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 29

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 31

<sup>20</sup> R. Joyce, S. Kirchin (eds.), *A World Without Values*, Philosophical Studies Series 114, intro, xiv, DOI 10.1007/978-90-481-3339-0\_8, C \_ Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2010

from a non-cognitivist, or a subjectivist one. Mackie sees a claim to objectivity “ingrained in our language and thought”<sup>21</sup> that is not self-validating. This assumption of objectivity needs to be questioned, and the denial of the real existence of these objective values must be presented as an “error theory.” We can therefore understand Mackie’s claim to be that he wants to deny that there are objective moral values, which means that he is denying that there is any case in which an occasion of a claim to a categorical imperative is valid. In other words, what Mackie means when he speaks of objectivity, is that moral judgments are prescriptive in an absolute way, and it is the existence of this type of objectivity that he wants to deny. Since claims to such objective moral values are embedded in ordinary language and in the natural thought of human beings, he is proposing an “error theory” with which he does not deny the common sense claim to moral objectivity but holds that this claim is false.

“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 descriptive, these claims are all false. It is this that makes the name ‘moral scepticism’ appropriate.”<sup>22</sup>

There are two arguments that Mackie presents to support his thesis: the argument from relativity; and the argument from queerness. The first premise of the argument from relativity is the divergence in moral codes and principles from culture to culture. Mackie specifies however that the divergence that we observe of moral codes is not just about a disagreement. Many other fields of study, even fields of scientific investigation, are ridden

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<sup>21</sup> Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, 38

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 38

with disagreement and argumentation. Moral disagreement is distinct because the discord reaches greater depth due to the fact that it has an impact on lifestyle. People agree with the moral codes that characterize their lifestyles, so that we for example, approve of monogamy because we are accustomed to living in a monogamous society, and it is not the other way around, it is not that we choose a monogamous society because we approve of monogamy. Mackie does however acknowledge that moral judgments are not merely conventional since it is true that in human history there have been moral “reformers”. However, these reforms, according to Mackie, are to be attributed to the lack of coherence or of consistency in a particular moral system. Diversity in moral codes is not simply the result of different ways of reasoning about how to apply some general universal principle, argues Mackie, rather it is “moral sense” or “intuition” that leads to radically irresolvable differences in responding to certain actions. His argument from relativity has force because he claims that the diversity of moral claims is better explained by the moral error theory than by the theory of moral realism. “In short, the argument from relativity has some force simply because the actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life, than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted of objective values.”<sup>23</sup>

Mackie’s second argument, the argument from queerness is his most important argument. This argument has two parts to it, a metaphysical part and an epistemological one. The metaphysical argument expressed in Mackie’s own words, goes like this: “If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 37

sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe.”<sup>24</sup> It is not hard to recognize the similarity between this argument and the one discussed in the previous chapter presented by David Hume. If objective value existed, it would have to be identifiable by human understanding as some sort of relation between, or quality of things in the universe. The metaphysical implications of asserting the existence of objective moral values are indeed strange. Mackie’s referring to objective moral values as “queer” is not simply justified by the fact that ethical statements are “unverifiable”, there is much more to Mackie’s claim. Mackie doesn’t only hold that ethical statements are meaningless as the positivists claim; he holds that the claim that there are objective values or intrinsically prescriptive entities is false altogether.<sup>25</sup> Someone who asserts the existence of objective moral values would have to assert some form of Platonism, would have to consider the existence of some sort of form of the Good that the intellect not only knows, but is also obliged to pursue due to the built in “has to-be-pursuedness” that moral values possess.<sup>26</sup> The only option would be to consider something similar to what first Samuel Clarke proposed, namely, that there are something like the necessary relations of fitness between situations and actions. Mackie however considers this option to be too complicated to be taken seriously. Mackie’s argument from queerness is of course rooted in Hume’s assertion that “reason” alone cannot move to action; that reason has no influence over the will. To claim that knowledge of values is different from knowledge of any other sort because their prescriptive quality

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 39

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 44

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 44

implies the postulation of “value-entities or value-features of quite a different order from anything else with which we are acquainted.”<sup>27</sup>

Mackie goes on to argue that if objective moral values existed, then there would have to be a link between the objective moral quality and its natural features. To support his argument he provides the example of the common claim that causing pain to another person just for fun is considered cruelty. But what is the link between this action and the moral fact that it is wrong? There is no semantic or logical necessity that links the action to the conclusion that it is wrong. One would have to assert that there is some sort of natural feature that constitutes cruelty. It could be said that the action is wrong because it is deliberate cruelty, but what does the “because” refer to? Mackie acknowledges the possibility of arguing that there is a higher order property that belongs to certain natural properties. Such claims however become very complicated, “what is this belonging of properties to other properties?”<sup>28</sup> It would be much easier to simply say, “There is a subjective response that is causally related to the detection of the natural features on which the supposed quality is said to be consequential.”<sup>29</sup> In the same way, Mackie is skeptical of the suggestion that moral judgments could be derived from the perception of some sort of (real) relation between actions or situations because these in turn would require some sort of “demand for such-and-such and action” built into them. Once again, Mackie argues that relations with inbuilt prescriptivity are too queer to consider their possible existence.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 46

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 46

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 46

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 45

Mackie's argument from queerness leans heavily on the assertion that moral judgments are intrinsically action guiding or motivational and that it would go against the principle of simplicity (or Occam's razor) to maintain that such "queer" properties or qualities actually exist.

The second part of his argument from queerness is epistemological and makes the claim that if objective moral values existed, not only would we have to affirm the existence of some queer properties, we would also have to postulate a special faculty capable of knowing these properties. In his own words, "Correspondingly, 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."<sup>31</sup> Intuitionists claim that there is a 'faculty of moral intuition,' but Mackie however argues that none of our usual ways of coming to know correspond to the requirements of such a faculty:

"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."<sup>32</sup>

He further declares that the suggestion that moral judgments are made by sitting down and simply paying attention to our moral intuition completely misrepresents the process of moral evaluation.

In his article, "Beyond the Error Theory," Michael Smith underlines the force of Mackie's arguments by pointing out that if Mackie's argument is true, the result would be

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 43

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 44

that since the “concept of an objective and prescriptive feature” is simply not instantiated, not only is it the case that nothing has moral value, but also that nothing could have such a value.<sup>33</sup> There are, according to Mackie, no possible worlds in which objects have objectively prescriptive features; it follows logically therefore that objective moral values are non-existent.

In an article called “Mackie’s Realism: Queer Pigs and the web of Belief” Jamie Drier provides another version of Mackie’s argument from queerness:

“Q1 Moral goodness would have to be a property, G, such that judging that something is G entails having an overriding motivation to pursue it.

Q2 But for no property P does judging that something is P entail having a motivation to pursue it. (What a queer sort of property that would be!)

Therefore:

Q3 There is no such property as moral goodness”<sup>34</sup>

Here Drier argues that Mackie subscribes to a realist style of explanation of the internalist feature of moral judgment because of the necessary connection that he affirms between the moral judgment and the motivation to act accordingly. Drier thinks that there is a mistake in this argument, and that it should be the belief that is queer according to internalism, rather than the property, so he suggests a better formulation of the argument:

E1 Judging that something is morally good entails having an overriding motivation to pursue the thing.

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<sup>33</sup> R. Joyce, S. Kirchin (eds.), *A World Without Values*, *Philosophical Studies Series* 114, 119, DOI 10.1007/978-90-481-3339-0\_8, C \_ Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2010

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 82

E2 But there is no belief the having of which entails having any motivation. (What a queer belief that would be!)

Therefore:

E3 Judging that something is morally good is not a belief.<sup>35</sup>

Drier thinks that this nuanced version of Mackie's argument is a better defense of the moral-error theory since it claims that it is the act of judging that is linked to the motivation rather than contact or knowledge of the facts being judged. However, Mackie does not argue in this way, so Drier qualifies him as a realist since he, like G.E. Moore, looks for the explanation of the queer prescriptive nature of moral judgments in the subject matter and not in the judgment itself. Drier is right to recognize that Mackie's argument from queerness is set up to refute realism, on realism's terms, and that he does locate the queerness of moral judgments in the facts themselves rather than in the judgment.

In his book, Mackie declares that he is not rejecting common sense belief in the objectivity of moral values, but is arguing is that this belief is a false one. To complete his argument, Mackie feels that he needs to explain how or why it is the case that although objective moral values don't exist, objective moral value-claims are an unchallenged component of our ordinary language, and have come to form part of our common sense knowledge. When we say that something is right or wrong – for example when we say that it is wrong to torture another person just for the fun of it - we don't mean to say that it is wrong according to the conventions of our society, we mean to say that it is wrong objectively speaking, that the action has in itself something about it that makes it

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<sup>35</sup> Joyce, Kirchin (eds.). *A World Without Values*, 82



recognizably wrong. Mackie offers an explanation from practical necessity in a theory that he calls “objectification theory”. According to this theory, moral values are socially established or constructed because they contribute to the flourishing of human society. For moral value to have any authoritative force in society, one must make the claim that they are objective:

“We need morality to regulate interpersonal relations, to control some of the ways in which people behave towards one another, often in opposition to contrary inclinations. We therefore want our moral judgements to be authoritative for other agents as well as for ourselves: objective validity would give them the authority required.”<sup>36</sup>

So we reverse the order of dependence, making the desire for something depend on its goodness, instead of its goodness proceeding from our desire for it. In this way we can claim that moral values are intrinsically good and can hence enforce them universally.

“Another way of explaining the objectification of moral values is to say that ethics is a system of law from which the legislator has been removed.”<sup>37</sup> Even those who claim some sort of divine command ethic often make the claim that moral values are objectively good independent of the fact that God commands them; hence, what God commands is in itself good, otherwise God himself could not be called good. God himself is conceptually also subject to the moral code, so God could not act in discordance with the code without contradicting himself.

“The apparent objectivity of moral value is a widespread phenomenon which has more than once source: the persistence of a belief in something like divine law when the belief in the divine legislator has faded out is only one factor among others.

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<sup>36</sup> Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, 43

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 45

There are several different patterns of objectification, all of which have left characteristic traces in our actual moral concepts and moral language.”<sup>38</sup>

Kai Nielsen, who argues for the theory of reflective equilibrium, holds that religious belief or reference to a divine law does not really grant objectivity to moral claims; in fact, morality precedes religious belief. In other words, according to Nielsen, God’s willing something is not what makes it good, the action is good and God might also will it. In order to make the claim that “God is good” we are obliged to depend on our own criterion of goodness. For these reasons, Nielsen claims that moral understanding comes prior to religious belief. “But God or no God, religion or no religion, it is still wrong to inflict pain on helpless infants when so inflicting pain on them is without any rational point.”<sup>39</sup> Moral judgment seems to depend on a deliberation about what we consider to be conducive to human flourishing. Moral values, according to Nielsen, don’t really exist, however, when we make moral claims, we treat them as though they were objective; so objective that even God must answer to them. “What is good is determined by what answers to human interests, what satisfies human needs, and what furthers human self-realization.”<sup>40</sup>

Moral skepticism is about the denial of objective moral values on a meta-ethical level (not on the first order or descriptive level). Since common sense or ordinary moral thought usually makes reference to some sort of objectivity of values, moral skepticism must take on the form of an error theory. There are arguments to defend moral skepticism: relativity; the metaphysical queerness of such values if they were to exist; the problem of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 82

<sup>39</sup> Kai Nielsen, *Ethics without God*, Prometheus Books, Buffalo New York, revised edition, 1990, 82

<sup>40</sup> Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, 206

the supervenience of these upon natural features; the need for a corresponding epistemology to account for our knowledge of value entities and their links to features upon which they are consequential; and the explanation of the objective moral values view by way of patterns of objectification. So Mackie concludes that:

“Morality is not to be discovered but to be made: we have to decide what moral views to adopt, what moral stands to take. No doubt the conclusions we reach will reflect and reveal our sense of justice, our moral consciousness – that is, our moral consciousness as it is at the end of the discussion, not necessarily as it was at the beginning, but that is not the object of the exercise: the object is rather to decide what to do, what to support and what to condemn, what principles of conduct to accept and foster as guiding or controlling our own choices and perhaps those of the other people as well.”<sup>41</sup>

Objective morals do not exist, but we need morality for human society to flourish, therefore, the moral-error theory postulates the invention of moral values along with a false belief in their objectivity for the benefit of humanity.

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<sup>41</sup> Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, 106

## Chapter 3

### Other defenders of the moral-error theory

Mackie's version of the moral error theory isn't the only one around, so it is worth taking a look at how other moral anti-realists argue for the moral-error theory. In the introduction to *A World Without Values*, Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin explain the strategy that lies behind any argument for the moral error theory. Moral error theory arguments typically have two parts: a conceptual one and an ontological one. The conceptual part of the argument involves establishing that moral discourse necessarily implies some particular thesis X, such that to deny X is to shut oneself off from what qualifies as moral discourse.

“Imagine a phlogiston theorist who, upon hearing of the success of oxygen theory, claims that his theory has been vindicated; he asserts that he has been talking about oxygen all along but just by a different name.”<sup>42</sup>

In this case there has been a transgression of the boundaries for what qualifies as discourse about oxygen. The moral error theorist needs to establish the relevant boundaries for moral discourse.

The ontological segment of the argument is to establish by means of *a priori* or of *a posteriori* reasoning that X, whatever X was defined to be, is false. “Sometimes the moral

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<sup>42</sup>Richard Joyce, *A World Without Values; Essays on John Mackie's Moral Error Theory*, edited by Richard Joyce & Simon Kirchin, Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg London New York Library of Congress, Control Number: 2009939617© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2010, xvi

error theorist will hold that there is something impossible or incoherent about moral properties, such that the error theory is necessarily true. But it suffices for being an error theorist to hold that the non-instantiation of moral properties is a merely contingent affair.”<sup>43</sup>

Joyce develops his version of a moral error theory in *Myth of Morality*. Like Mackie, Joyce thinks that moral discourse is typically used in “an assertoric manner” but that the assertions made fail to state truths.<sup>44</sup> Since Joyce does regard moral discourse as assertoric, despite his claim that the assertions made fail to express truth, he cannot be considered to be a non-cognitivist about moral discourse.<sup>45</sup> Joyce claims that Mackie’s argument for the moral error theory is “too blunt” and he proposes an adaptation to improve the strength of the argument for the theory they both defend. He begins by discussing various interpretations of “objective prescriptivity” and proposing an interpretation that he thinks strengthens the argument for the moral error theory considerably.

According to Joyce, Mackie argues that non-moral uses of “good” are subjectively prescriptive (in virtue of our desires, intentions and beliefs etc.); on the other hand, moral uses of the word “good” are objectively prescriptive. The universe, however, does not provide for such prescriptions, hence “objective prescriptions” are never true. “Thus judgments of the form “ $\phi$  is morally good” are never true (when  $\phi$  takes an actual

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<sup>43</sup> Joyce, *A World Without Values*, xvi-xvii

<sup>44</sup> Richard Joyce, *Myth of Morality*, Cambridge University Press, Port Chester, NY, USA, 03/2002, 9

<sup>45</sup> Joyce, *Myth of Morality*, 9

value).”<sup>46</sup> The question is: but what is meant by “objectively prescriptive”? There are many possible interpretations of these terms, and Joyce examines several options. He begins by presenting the claim that internalism about motivation is thought (i) to be a non-negotiable commitment of moral discourse, and (ii) to be false. Joyce construes the argument for the falsity of motivation internalism<sup>47</sup> as follows:

M1: It is necessary and *a priori* that any agent who judges that one of his available actions is morally obligatory will have some (defeasible) motivation to perform that action.<sup>48</sup>

M1, according to Joyce, is a non-negotiable aspect of our moral discourse, and at the same time holds that assertions of the form “ $\phi$  is morally good” are untrue. Joyce argues that the counter example of the possibility of an evil agent demonstrates that M1 is in fact false. Nevertheless, Joyce thinks that it is not incoherent to be committed to M1 because of its strong appeal to intuition and for M1 to be false. M1, in Joyce’s view, is a modal thesis, meaning that if it is false, then it is false at every possible world. If the truth of M1 is a precondition for the truth of a basic moral sentence – say, “ $\phi$  is obligatory” – then the predicate “... is obligatory” will have an empty extension not just in the actual world, but across all possible worlds. This argument, made from the falsity of motivation internalism, is not Joyce’s main argument; he feels that this argument is incomplete since it is based on

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 16

<sup>47</sup> Internalism about motivation holds that “a necessary connection exists between sincere moral judgment and either justifying reasons or motives: necessarily, if an individual sincerely judges that she ought to  $\phi$ , then she has a reason or motive to  $\phi$ .” Rosati, Connie S., "Moral Motivation", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/moral-motivation/>>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 18

the claim that moral judgments are intrinsically motivating, and this is obviously not the case. The fact that something is obligatory does not imply automatic motivation to act accordingly. Joyce is of the opinion that the queerness of moral judgment does not lie in its motivational power, but along with Garner, he believes that the argument from queerness has much more force when “objective prescriptivity” is understood as *moral inescapability*.<sup>49</sup> Joyce rightly points out that “Morality is not just a list of *Dos* and *Don'ts* enforced by punishment for wrongdoing. We think that a person is bound by those rules whether he accepts them or not – that the rules are, in some sense, his rules whether he accepts them or not.”<sup>50</sup> These rules are inescapable, whether the agent wants them or not, whether they satisfy her desires or not. The agent may chose to reject or ignore such rules, but this does not change the fact that they continue to demand. Here Joyce is referring specifically to the categorical imperative, and not the hypothetical imperative. He questions what that “extra ingredient” might be that characterizes the *strong* categorical imperative.

Joyce argues that - predicate uses of the word “ought” put aside - what we mean by “ought” is “has a reason” to.<sup>51</sup> This claim is more clearly stated in what Joyce calls “Mackie’s Platitude”: “It is necessary and *a priori* for any agent *x*, if *x* ought to  $\phi$ , then *x* has a reason to  $\phi$ .”<sup>52</sup> In other words he sees moral inescapability to be necessarily linked to the objective prescriptivity that characterizes moral discourse. When we use the term

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 31

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 34

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 38

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 38

“ought”, there is a “has a reason for doing so” implied in the statement. He further argues that predicative “oughts” don’t have reason-giving qualities, but “oughts” that involve the actions of agents are imperatives and do at least conceptually have reason-giving qualities. Joyce makes a distinction between those “oughts” that are spoken from “within” a normative system and those that are spoken from “outside” of it.

In his book, after considering the position of Smith and of non-humean instrumentalism, he proceeds to present a final version of his argument that goes like this:

1. If  $x$  morally ought to  $\phi$ , then  $x$  ought to  $\phi$  regardless of what his desires and interests are.
2. If  $x$  morally ought to  $\phi$ , then  $x$  has a reason for  $\phi$ ing
3. Therefore, if  $x$  morally ought to  $\phi$ , then  $x$  can have a reason for  $\phi$ ing regardless of what his desires and interests are.
4. But there is no sense to be made of such reasons.
5. Therefore,  $x$  is never under a moral obligation.<sup>53</sup>

He claims that premise (1) has already been defended with his argument from moral discourse, namely, the claim that we use categorical imperatives constantly. When we, for example, condemn a criminal, we do not first ascertain what his desires were and ask if in order to achieve these desires he performed the act that he ought to have performed, thus making the action morally acceptable.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 77-78



Premise (2) makes reference to Mackie's platitude. "So when premise (2) links 'having a reason' with a moral "ought" it is intended to be something other than an institutional reason; it is what I have been calling up until now (rather deplorably) a 'real' reason. The most precise understanding we have thus far gained of 'real' reasons is that they are reasons that cannot be legitimately ignored."<sup>54</sup> Premise 2 refers to non-institutional reasons, to the strong version of the categorical imperative. In moral discourse, it appears that these reasons exist, reasons that transcend the agent's own interests and desires.

With premise 3, what Joyce means is that practical reasoning on an institutional level implies that when we say that  $X$  ought to do something, it is because there are reasons for which  $X$  ought to perform that action. So an "ought" implies reasons for  $\phi$ ing in a relativistic sense: in order to achieve  $Y$ ,  $X$  ought to  $\phi$ , but if  $X$  were to want to achieve  $Z$ , then  $X$  ought not to  $\phi$ . The reasons are relative to the purpose or desire of  $X$ . However, according to Joyce and according to Mackie, the claim that is made in moral discourse is that  $X$  ought to  $\phi$  independent of any desires or purposes. Hence moral judgments are imperatives for no reasons, (although conceptually the "ought" implies there are reasons for  $\phi$ ing, none can be detected), and this does not make any sense. Hence moral requirements cannot be rational requirements. Joyce thinks that his arguments show that moral obligation that goes beyond the agent's desires and interests cannot be true, and this defeats

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 44

non-instrumental practical rationality so that an appeal to practical rationality does not function as an explanation for moral inescapability.<sup>55</sup>

In another article that Joyce wrote to defend his theory from Finlay's critique; Joyce provides the following explanation of his argument:

“(J1) Morality conceptually involves non-institutional categorical imperatives.

I then ask what sense can be made of such imperatives, and whether they might be defensible. As a hypothesis, one might entertain:

(H) Moral non-institutional categorical imperatives are rational requirements.

I then develop an account of practical rationality, following closely but critically in Michael Smith's footsteps, coming to the conclusion:

i) Rational requirements are relativistic (in a certain way)

I then argue:

ii) But moral requirements are non-relativistic (in that way), hence

iii) Moral requirements cannot be rational requirements

At this point I reject hypothesis (H), and in the absence of any other plausible candidate for defending non-institutional categorical imperatives, feel justified in declaring

(J2) In fact, non-institutional categorical imperatives are indefensible

Therefore, the moral error theory is established.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Joyce, *Myth of Morality*, 133

<sup>56</sup> Richard Joyce, “The Error in ‘The Error in the Error Theory’”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 89, No. 3, pp. 519–534; September 2011,

According to this view, morality would not be problematic if we could restrict moral claims to the institutional level (hypothetical imperatives); however, in real life this is not the case: “We invest the moral judgment with an extra authority, and it is this fugitive thought that we must try to nail down”<sup>57</sup> Joyce argues that conceptually, moral judgments are categorical imperatives, but such imperatives cannot be true since there is never a reason for an “ought” to hold true that transcends whether or not  $\phi$ ing serves one’s desires or interests. Nonetheless, a system of morality based exclusively on hypothetical imperatives is in Joyce’s opinion unacceptable because when we make a moral judgment, we do make the claim that “ $X$  ought to  $\phi$  independently of  $X$ ’s desires or interests.”

“Bear in mind that the crucial question is not the substantive one – of whether there are any categorical imperatives, of whether morality does bind everyone regardless of their ends – but the conceptual one – of whether it is part of our moral conceptual framework that everyone is so bound. And I am confident that the answer to the latter is “Yes”<sup>58</sup>

Having established that objective moral claims are not true, Joyce still maintains that practical rationality cannot be rejected altogether, since by definition practical reasons are indispensable as guides for our actions. “The observation that practical rationality is not available for legitimate questioning is of central importance to our project”<sup>59</sup> The question is do we ever have “real” reasons for the “oughts” that we proclaim, that is to say, is there ever a reason for an ought that holds firm whether or not  $\phi$ ing serves one’s desires or interests?

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<sup>57</sup> Joyce, *Myth of Morality*, 45

<sup>58</sup> Joyce, *Myth of Morality*, 62

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 51

“Moral judgments are untrue not just because they sometimes ascribe reasons for (say) honesty to people who have no such reasons. They are untrue even when they ascribe reasons for honesty to people who do have reasons for being honest, in that they imply that those reasons would remain in place across counterfactual situations when in fact they would not. The distinctive authoritativeness which characterizes our moral discourse turns out to be well-entrenched bluff.”<sup>60</sup>

So how does Joyce resolve the conflict between what we mean when we make moral claims and the fact that there are no objective moral values to sustain these claims? He proposes to approach morality from the fictionalist perspective. He rightfully points out that if we eliminate the categorical imperative from moral discourse, any system of ethics and values would lack the authority that we expect of morality, that is to say, moral discourse would be deprived of its ability to convince agents to act accordingly. “Ought” statements would all depend on a cost/benefit analysis, something that would make it difficult for any society to sustain a moral code. Aware of the benefits of moral discourse for a society, Joyce offers the fictionalist fix for the problem. Once we have realized that moral discourse is erroneous, we can adopt the fictionalist attitude towards it since we acknowledge that although false, moral discourse is beneficial to human society. To make fiction of a thesis *T* means to be disposed to assent to *T* in certain circumstances without believing *T*. According to Joyce’s version of fictionalism, moral discourse ceases to be assertoric. To say  $\phi$  is morally good” would therefore be interpreted not as an expression of a belief but an expression of a thought. “Far from encouraging shabby or deleterious doxastic habits, fictionalism grows naturally from a particular sensitivity to, and abhorrence

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 134

of false beliefs.”<sup>61</sup> Morality, according to Joyce, is a useful thing, but its usefulness does not depend upon its being believed.

“Certain authors have presented an account of self-deception which stops short of describing the agent as believing p and believing not-p; instead the subject of self-deception believes that not-p but “thinks” and acts as if p. This is similar to the account of the fictive judgment that I favor.”<sup>62</sup>

Another defender of the moral error theory, Richard T Garner, argues that moral discourse displays yet another source of queerness. According to Garner, the queerness of morality hinges on two characteristics that all moral judgments demonstrate: “It is the peculiar combination of objectivity and prescriptivity rather than any intrinsic motivational power, that makes moral facts and properties queer.”<sup>63</sup> Garner draws Mackie’s argument from queerness away from the motivating power of moral judgments and focuses more on their “demanding” nature. “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.”<sup>64</sup> Garner claims that Mackie made a mistake when he focused on the motivational power of morality; he should have stressed the queerness of moral authority. In this way he would have established the queerness of morality even in the case of the abandonment of motivational internalism. Garner argues that no matter how we look at it, even in the case of postulating moral properties that supervene on natural properties in the same way that we

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 205

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 196

<sup>63</sup> Richard T. Garner, “On the genuine queerness of moral properties and facts”, The Ohio State University, Published online: 02 Jun 2006, Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 68:2, 137-146, DOI: [10.1080/00048409012344161](https://doi.org/10.1080/00048409012344161), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048409012344161>, 138

<sup>64</sup> Garner, “On the genuine queerness of moral properties and facts”, 143

say that psychological or social properties supervene, the alleged moral properties would still be queer. “Projected or not, redness is inert, but wrongness forbids”<sup>65</sup>

Garner’s arguments are formulated as a response to ethical naturalism’s claim that moral properties are natural and hence not queer. If moral properties can be identified with natural properties, the naturalist argues, then there will be no queerness, since natural properties are (by definition) not queer. Garner argues that by identifying moral properties with natural properties, the naturalist is forced either to embrace natural facts with intrinsic prescriptivity, or moral facts without it. But natural facts with intrinsic prescriptivity are at least as queer as moral facts with intrinsic prescriptivity, and for the same reason. On the other hand moral facts without intrinsic prescriptivity are just as queer since they cannot explain the motivational character of moral judgment.

“The question is not whether there are intrinsically motivating moral facts, it is whether there are objectively obligating ones. When we separate obligation from motivation, and focus on the genuine queerness of moral facts and properties, then externalist moral realism looks no more plausible than internalist moral realism.”<sup>66</sup>

Both Garner and Joyce make similar contributions to the argument from queerness by re-interpreting Mackie’s understanding of “objective prescriptivity” as a reference to the commanding nature of moral judgments rather than intrinsic motivation. This change of focus places the argument for the moral error theory in a different ball -park since it applies to both intrinsic as well as external motivation. Both Garner and Joyce put emphasis on the claim that moral discourse does necessarily entail obligation on a conceptual level, in other words, non-institutional moral judgments are conceptually categorical imperatives. Both

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 145

<sup>66</sup> Garner, “On the genuine queerness of moral properties and facts”, 146

of them maintain that the authority that moral facts seem to possess, the bindingness of moral discourse, is a queer thing, so queer that indeed we must acknowledge that moral facts cannot be true. There is nothing in the fabric of this world that has the property of prescriptivity; we must therefore conclude that moral discourse is erroneous.

## Chapter 4

### Moral Realism and Other Responses to the Moral Error Theory

Having explored the arguments of those who defend the moral error theory, it seems appropriate to represent objections to the theory. What follows is not an exhaustive account of those who oppose moral antirealism. I have focused my attention on arguments developed by moral realists, who stand directly opposed to the theory developed by Mackie and his fellow antirealists.

The position that stands in greatest contrast to Mackie's is that of G.E. Moore who relates his theory in his book, *Principia Ethica*. Moore concerns himself with the definition of the word "Good". He, like Mackie, makes a distinction between "good" understood as a means to an end, and "Good" understood as an intrinsic value; and he is concerned with the latter term since he considers ethics to be about intrinsic value and not about descriptive normativity. After much consideration, G.E. Moore comes to the conclusion that "Good" is a simple notion, one that cannot be further analyzed. He compares "Good" to "yellow", claiming that just like "yellow", it is impossible to define "good" to someone who does not already know it by experience. "Good" like "yellow", is not composed of any parts that one could describe in order to define the term, hence in Moore's own words, "Good... denotes a simple and indefinable quality".<sup>67</sup> Moore supports this claim by applying his open

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<sup>67</sup> G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge at the University Press, 1968, 10



question test to the way the word “good” is used in ordinary language. He argues that no matter what definition one might give to the word “good”, it always makes sense to ask if that very thing that is supposed to mean “good” is itself good. For example, one could define “good” as “pleasure”, but then it still makes sense to ask if “pleasure” is good thus implying that “good” is something other than pleasure. This test, according to Moore, proves that “good” is an undefinable property of things and must, therefore, also be a non-natural property somewhat similar to the platonic forms. This non-natural property of things called good, can be known intuitively: “it is by adhering to our intuition then that morality gets off the ground- that we know its nature and become moral people.”<sup>68</sup>

Moore’s belief that actions and things have a non-natural property of value that human intuition is capable of knowing makes him a realist about morality. Mackie’s argument from queerness targets this kind of realism - the kind that asserts the existence of “queer” ontological properties with built in “to-be-pursuedness.” As far as Mackie is concerned, prescriptive properties are not and could not be “part of the furniture of this world.”<sup>69</sup> To be fair, it must, however, be noted that to argue that prescriptive non-natural properties are “queer” things does not necessarily imply that they do not exist. Mackie’s argument from “queerness” is an inductive and not a deductive one.

Moral antirealists, however, are not the only ones to oppose the realist’s claim that “Good” is an ontologically relevant property of actions or perhaps people. R.M. Hare

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<sup>68</sup> The Fact/Value Problem: Metaethics in the Twentieth Century, in *Ethical Theory*, edited by Louis P. Pojman and James Fieser, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, 2011, Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, Australia, Brazil, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Singapore, Spain, United Kingdom, United States., 561

<sup>69</sup> Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, 15

argues in his book *Language of Morals* that the descriptive meaning of the word “good” is secondary to the evaluative meaning, and the evaluative meaning is based on a set of principles or standards that are being taken into account.<sup>70</sup> The term “good” therefore is a term of commendation, of evaluation and at most only secondarily describes some property. Value-judgments, according to Hare, are action-guiding and therefore entail imperatives. The rule of logic, however, states that no imperative conclusion can be drawn from a set of premises that does not include at least one imperative; therefore no moral judgment can be the conclusion of pure indicative statements. Since moral judgments have the function of regulating conduct, and hence must be considered to have imperative or prescriptive force, they cannot be considered to be loose statements of fact. With this argument from the peculiar prescriptivity of moral judgments, Hare establishes that naturalism must be false. Moore’s non-natural property of “good” has a kind of “magnetism”, an intimate connection to motivation.<sup>71</sup> It is a peculiar kind of fact, a non-natural one that does have motivational power and since it is non-natural, it is not subject to Hare’s critique of naturalism. Mackie, however, insists that it is not very plausible that such odd and mysterious properties exist; they certainly have not yet been discovered through scientific enquiry.

Robert Audi defends moral realism in the form of intuitionism. His claim is that we possess intuitive knowledge of what is intrinsically good and this is what guides our desires. Audi makes a distinction between intrinsic good and instrumental good. Intrinsic

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<sup>70</sup> R.M. Hare, *Language of Morals*, Oxford at the Clarendon press 1961, 118

<sup>71</sup> Ridge, Michael, "Moral Non-Naturalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/moral-non-naturalism/>.

good is good in and for itself; instrumental good is desirable because it brings about something else.<sup>72</sup> Instrumental good is relative, it is only good insofar as it serves as a means to an end, and does not necessarily provide us with a reason for pursuing it outside of obtaining the intended end. Intrinsic good, on the other hand is valued in itself, and therefore, provides us with a reason to pursue it for its own sake.<sup>73</sup> Audi makes a further distinction between “valuable” and “valuing.” “Valuing” is psychological, it is descriptive and not prescriptive. “Valuable” (intrinsically), belongs to ethics, it is normative and prescriptive since it provides standards according to which moral codes are established.<sup>74</sup> Audi suggests that valuing is to intrinsic value what believing is to truth. He argues that our human experience leads us to discover intrinsic values. We discover what is of “organic value” (what is really good or bad) through the rational indications that we receive from our experience of pleasure and pain. Moral values are pleasurable not just because they are desirable, sadistic pleasure for example is not good because it is not an “overall good,” fulfilling a promise however, even if it is not desirable, is morally pleasurable, it is the “overall good” and thus an “organic value.” Audi admits that value as a property is inaccessible to ordinary scientific investigation.<sup>75</sup> Morality is not quantifiable like science is, but he argues that quantification is not necessary for objectivity (social sciences

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<sup>72</sup> Robert Audi, *Moral Value and Human Diversity*, Print publication date: 2007, Print ISBN-13: 9780195312942, Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: October 2011, DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195312942.001.000, 36

<sup>73</sup> Audi, *Moral Value and Human Diversity*, 37

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 38

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 52

demonstrate this, even pure logic which is considered to be objective is not quantitative, it is formal but not quantitative)<sup>76</sup> Moral value is grounded in what is perceived or in “objective” facts. The act of “promising,” for example, is observable and makes an action morally good in virtue of being the fulfillment of a promise. “A deed is morally obligatory in virtue of being, say, the fulfillment of a promise, where an act of *promising* is observable in a quite ordinary sense that makes ‘promise’ a term appropriate for descriptive social science.”<sup>77</sup> Values, nonetheless, are not reducible to a fact or property of the natural world. Audi argues that there is no such thing as a “fact value gap,” there are simply different kinds of facts.<sup>78</sup> Intrinsic moral values are facts that are action-guiding; and in this they differ from facts of the natural world. This argument however, does not demonstrate that “action-guiding” facts are not “queer” mysterious entities. The moral-error theorist would dispute the claim that facts can ever be “action-guiding,” there is no evidence for the existence of a fact that has “to be pursuedness” built into it. We come to an impasse between the moral-realist intuitionist and the moral-error theorist. The crux of the disagreement clearly involves the peculiar prescriptive nature of morality.

Ethical naturalist, Peter Railton, admits in his article “Moral Realism” that the fact/value gap presents a challenge for anyone who wants to defend moral naturalism. He acknowledges that Hume considered morality to be essentially practical. Hume argued that if moral facts existed, they would necessarily provide a reason (although perhaps not an

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 41

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 53

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 53

overriding one) for moral action for all agents regardless of their particular desires. According to Hume, the existence of logical and scientific facts is compatible with the instrumental character of reason, whereas the existence of moral facts is not since they have categorical force. Railton thinks that Hume is right in claiming that there must be an “intrinsic connection between valuing something and having some sort of positive attitude toward it that provides one with an instrumental reason for action.”<sup>79</sup> He, however, denies Hume’s thesis of the practicality of moral judgments, hence removing the contrast between facts and values. This does not imply denying that morality has an action-guiding character. Reason, according to Railton, does not “compel us to adopt particular beliefs or practices apart from our contingent, and variable, ends,”<sup>80</sup> Although instrumental rationality is relative, epistemology is at liberty to warrant an individual’s belief since epistemic warrant can be tied to an external criterion (just like reliabilist theories of knowledge suggest).

Railton believes that this line of argumentation forces the defender of the fact/value distinction to shift to ontological ground to defend her stance. He admits nonetheless that: “Still the idea of reliable causal mechanisms for moral learning, and of moral facts “in the world” upon which they operate, is arguably so bizarre that I may have done no more than

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<sup>79</sup> Peter Railton, “Moral Realism”, *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 95, No. 2 (Apr., 1986), pp. 163-207, Duke University Press on behalf of Philosophical Review, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2185589>, 168

<sup>80</sup> Peter Railton, “Moral Realism”, 170

increase my difficulties”<sup>81</sup> This, of course, is precisely what Mackie means when he argues that objective moral values are “queer.”

The strategy of Railton’s argument for moral realism is to establish that moral facts have an explanatory function: they explain a part of human experience. Railton thinks that this strategy only works if the reality postulated (the moral facts) have the characteristic of being mind-independent, and if they provide feedback such that there can be a relevant sort of interaction with these facts that influences and controls our perceptions, thought, and action. If the moral realist can establish that moral facts have these characteristics then the only way to explain our experience of them is to posit their real objective existence in the natural world.

The argument that Railton develops is to show that there are certain interests that we have that are essential or intrinsically good (he first speaks in non-moral terms). “X is *intrinsically non-morally good* for A just in case X is in A’s objective interest without reference to any other objective interest of A.”<sup>82</sup> An agent will adapt her desires to her belief with respect to whether or not X is actually good for her. Railton claims that this adjustment of the desire to belief is psychological, and he bases his naturalistic theory on this phenomenon. Railton hence argues that there is an objective intrinsic interest that accounts for any other objective interests. Railton thinks that objective interests play an explanatory role in the evolution of one’s desires; there is a *wants/interests* mechanism that

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 171

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 178

permits agents to learn about their objective interests through experience (trial and error).

He argues that humans are primarily motivated by their desires rather than their instincts.

“If such creatures were unable through experience to conform their wants at all closely to their essential interests – perhaps because they were no more likely to experience positive internal states when their essential interests are met than when they are not – we could not expect long or fruitful futures for them”<sup>83</sup>

He believes that this *want/interest* mechanism is not at all infallible as its success is exclusively functional, allowing human agents to advance modestly in an inhospitable world. Railton goes on to argue that if this *wants/interest* mechanism can be postulated for discerning non-moral good, one can postulate the same mechanism pertaining to value judgments. He defends a relational rather than an absolute notion of goodness, nevertheless the “relevant facts about humans and their world are objective in the same sense that such non-relational entities as stones are: they do not depend for their existence or nature merely upon our conception of them.”<sup>84</sup> Intrinsic value, like intrinsic good is discovered through the human experience of the wants/interest mechanism. The relational notion of goodness allows for the evolution of moral codes. Nevertheless, it’s limitation is that it does not account for categorical imperatives: “Yet the present account is limited in another way, which may be of greater concern from the standpoint of contemporary moral theory: it does not yield moral imperatives that are categorical in the sense of providing a reason for action to all rational agents regardless of their contingent desires.”<sup>85</sup> It is commonly held that morality can only maintain its authority in face of agents with “knaveish desires” if it has a

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 181

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 183

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 201

categorical force. Railton disagrees and argues that if we give up the idea of the applicability of morality to the individual and assume the view that moral conduct is rational from an impartial point of view, morality maintains its authoritative voice. Hence, Railton thinks that although his argument is limited by the fact that it does not allow for categorical imperatives, morality does, according to his account, continue to maintain its authority. Categorical imperatives, according to Railton, would be very strange if they existed, for, “how many among us can convince ourselves that reason is other than hypothetical?”<sup>86</sup> The moral error theorist would agree emphatically, differing from Railton in that they maintain that categorical imperatives are in fact very much a part of our ordinary moral discourse, and indeed if it were not so, morality in general would lose its authority.

Having explored a few general positions that stand in opposition to moral antirealism, I would like to discuss some of the arguments that address particular aspects of the argument for the moral error theory. I begin with arguments that have been brought forth in rebuttal of the argument from relativity.

Stephen Finlay argues in his article “The Error in the Error Theory” that the real error in the error theory is the assumption of the absolute authority of moral value, evidence for which can only be found in disagreement between people with transparently different moral standards, ends or concerns. Finlay argues that even in the case that we were to accept that absolute authority is ubiquitous in moral thought this would only result in the

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<sup>86</sup> Peter Railton, “Moral Realism”, 203



systematic falsity of moral claims if it were to contaminate their semantic content, which it does not do.<sup>87</sup>

Against the argument from relativity, Finlay also claims that most moral discourse takes place between people with similar fundamental moral values. It isn't common to get into a discourse about morality with someone like Charles Manson or a neo-Nazi.<sup>88</sup> People usually engage in moral discourse with the belief that the other person holds the same moral values at some level. So it can't be said that any moral discourse involves fundamental disagreement. Thirdly, even if a fundamental moral discourse did occur between two persons who diverge radically on their value systems, this would not be enough evidence to demonstrate that morality assumes absolutely authoritative value properties. Supposing that it is the case that some moral discourse involves making a claim of greater authoritative force, this does not necessarily mean that the semantics of the moral claim involve absolute authoritativeness. Finlay claims that evaluative speech uses claims of absolutism as a rhetorical device to oblige others to conform to them: "By asserting evaluative judgments that are relational and non-contradictory as if they were non-relational and contradictory, we use moral language as (in Anscombe's phrase) a 'mere word of mesmeric force'"<sup>89</sup> This, according to Finlay, serves to demonstrate that moral language, when used with authoritative force does not exercise absolute authority as the moral error theorists have claimed. Finlay concludes that we should entertain doubt about

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<sup>87</sup> Stephen Finlay, "The Error in the Error Theory", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 86, No. 3, pp. 347–369; September 2008, 351

<sup>88</sup> Finlay, "The Error in the Error Theory", 356

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 357-358

Joyce's claim that moral discourse necessarily implies categorical imperatives. In response to these objections brought forth by Finlay, Joyce clarifies what he thinks Finlay is misconstruing about his claim that moral discourse implies non-institutional categorical imperatives. He argues that when Mackie claims that morality presupposes "objective values" and "objective prescriptions", he is not claiming that morality presupposes "absolute values" and "absolute prescriptions". When Mackie says that the objective values that he is denying would be action-directing *absolutely*, he should be interpreted as saying that morality has an authority similar to that of a monarch, that of making demands that are non-negotiable and incontestable.<sup>90</sup> With this clarification, Joyce is talking about semantics; he is arguing that when there is a moral dispute among people with fundamentally different values, their moral claims are claims that, though not absolutist; are non-relativistic, they are non-institutional claims. Hence the argument that such moral disputes are not resolvable.

Robert Ehman joins Finlay in opposing the argument from relativity in his article, "Moral Objectivity." Ehman claims that moral disagreement is due to error, ignorance or prejudice, and that it can be resolved by way of inquiry and further discussion. He claims that there is legitimate reason to doubt that the conditions necessary to establish genuine conflict in moral experience are ever fulfilled. He makes a distinction between disagreement in moral evaluation and disagreement in practice and aim.<sup>91</sup> Both Mackie and

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<sup>90</sup> Richard Joyce, "The Error in "The Error in the Error Theory", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 89, No. 3, pp. 519–534; September 2011, 520

<sup>91</sup> Robert Ehman, Moral objectivity, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Dec., 1967), pp. 175-187, Published by: International Phenomenological Society

Joyce would most likely be glad to grant this distinction. The disagreements in practice and aim might actually arise from common ground on which both parties share fundamental values, they just do not see eye to eye about how to put those values into practice. Ehman however seems to deny that there is discord when it comes to moral evaluation or the principle values that guide aims and practices. Hence, since moral realism according to Ehman is true, discord in moral discourse is due to a mistaken perception of moral obligation and through discussion, further analysis etc., this discord can be resolved. Mackie would respond that Ehman does not appear to acknowledge cases of moral dispute in which those involved are in total opposition to each other, the agent who claims that he or she has a right to enslave others, or the agent who claims that he or she has the duty to take his or her own life in the case of having suffered disgrace in opposition to those who hold that suicide is always intrinsically evil. Whenever the moral discord is on the categorical level, (non-institutional) there does not seem to be much ground for meaningful discussion nor hope that the dispute shall ever be resolved.

The anti-realist argument from relativity considers moral dispute to be evidence that objective moral evaluations do not exist. The position of the moral-error theorist is that there can be objective evaluation on the hypothetical level: one can objectively evaluate an action according to a specific moral code established by an institution, for example enslaving other human beings is objectively wrong because it goes against the charter of human rights. A dispute about matters involving hypothetical or institutional moral claims

can therefore be resolved. However, non-institutional moral judgments have no referent (there are no objective moral facts out there to make them true or false); they therefore cannot be objective and cannot be true or false. This, according to Mackie explains why moral disputes that involve non-institutional moral claims can never be resolved. The argument from relativity is not particularly strong since there is in fact quite widespread international agreement on certain moral principles as is evidenced by the signing of the “International Charter of Human Rights.”

Although far from being exhaustive, the opposition to the argument from relativity has, I think, been represented. The argument from relativity is based on the assumption that that moral discourse involves categorical imperatives, and many of those who oppose his argument do so by denying that moral discourse involves categorical imperatives. Objections to the argument from queerness also focus on accounting for the imperative nature of morality to defend the objectivity of moral evaluations.

David Copp argues that although Mackie is correct to think that moral facts would be normative, he is mistaken in thinking that normative facts would be “intrinsically prescriptive.”<sup>92</sup> According to Copp’s analysis of Mackie’s argument from queerness, Mackie makes three errors. The first error is his claim that moral facts would be intrinsically normative if they existed. Copp points out that even if there were such a fact that torturing is wrong, for example, it does not follow that the normativity of this fact is

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<sup>92</sup> David Copp, “Normativity, Deliberation and Queerness”, in *A World Without Values; Essays on John Mackie’s Moral Error Theory*, Editors: Richard Joyce & Simon Kirchin, Dordrecht Heidelberg London New York: Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2010, 146

intrinsic to it. Copp argues that Mackie is also wrong to think that normative facts would be “prescriptive” if by this he means that a fact  $p$  is prescriptive just in case any person who believed that  $p$  would necessarily be suitably motivated. Mackie confuses the motivational import of a basic moral belief with the normativity of a moral fact. The third mistake that Mackie makes is to suppose that ordinary moral judgments entail facts that would motivate anyone who was aware of them (prescriptivity). Copp argues that instead, it is plausible for an agent who is deliberating *rationally* to take into account any relevant normative fact of which she was aware, normativity thus, would be tied to the motivation of rational agents.<sup>93</sup> Mackie however doesn’t concede such a scenario, instead he thinks that normativity can be reduced to facts about actual motivation. Copp thinks that Mackie’s account of normativity is implausible, so he provides an alternative “genuine normativity thesis”: “A reason to do something is “authoritative” or “genuinely normative” just in case a person who believed she had this reason would be irrational not to take it appropriately into account in deciding what to do.”<sup>94</sup>

After analyzing types of reasons and their impact on decision-making, Copp declares that moral reasons are “morally authoritative” but that they do not qualify as “genuinely” normative. If this is the case then the normativity of moral reasons is not problematic since there is no excessively rationalistic claim that it would be “irrational” to ignore them in decision-making. Joyce would agree to some extent with Copp’s critique of Mackie’s argument from queerness. Copp also indulges in a critique of Joyce’s defense

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<sup>93</sup> Copp, “Normativity, Deliberation and Queerness”, 146

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 147

of the moral error theory. Copp interprets Joyce to be arguing that if there is moral obligation, there must be reasons that are both non-instrumental and authoritative, but that there are only instrumental reasons and these are authoritative.<sup>95</sup> Copp objects by arguing that the authoritative reasons are implausible when combined with an instrumental theory of practical reason. He is also inclined to believe that the authoritative reasons proposal is false altogether. Copp proposes an optimal moral code according to which any agent who accepts this code has reason to act morally. He assumes that facts about moral reasons are facts about the choices that are called for by the optimal moral system. Copp argues that this moral code provides moral reasons for action even if the agent is unaware of these reasons:

“But she might not realize that the fact that the optimal moral code calls for her to  $\phi$  is the fact that there is a moral reason for her to  $\phi$  ... On the society-centered theory, her failure would be due to a failure to understand the key point that, necessarily, if the optimal moral code calls for her to  $\phi$  then she has a reason to  $\phi$ ”  
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On this theory, the content of the world of moral reasons is determined by the optimal moral code. The agent, however, is only rational if she *believes* that she has a moral reason to act in a particular way and she takes this moral reason into account in her practical deliberation. By redefining moral authoritativeness in this way, authoritative reasons are compatible with moral realism.<sup>97</sup> Copp thus accounts for moral motivation while rejecting Mackie’s claim that objective morality has an inbuilt “to-be-pursuedness.” His argument

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 159

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 161

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 162

however does not seem to offer a satisfactory response to the problem of categorical imperatives that are in opposition to the reasonable personal interests of the agent in question. I think that Joyce would still insist that moral judgments in real practice are authoritative beyond a simple “taking into account moral reasons derived from a code,” and that such authoritative reasons do not exist. When one agent declares that abortion is wrong, she means that it is wrong with an authority that appeals to a moral code that is non-institutional. And when another agent declares that every woman has the right to abort, she also means that this right corresponds to an optimal moral code. Which of the moral codes is the optimal and can we rationally deduce the optimal moral code? What reasons does the agent have for complying with any moral code whatsoever? Furthermore, and more importantly, how do ‘reasons’ become imperatives?

Lee Shepski, in “The vanishing argument from queerness” also argues that Mackie is mistaken in presenting moral values as objectively prescriptive in the motivating sense. He clarifies that Mackie’s argument is against the existence of ‘objective moral values’, and that values are to be understood as ‘entities, properties, relations, and facts’. Mackie, according to Shepski, asserts that the defining characteristic of objective values is intrinsic, objective prescriptivity.<sup>98</sup> He thinks that for Mackie, something qualifies as non-queer only if it is susceptible to empirical investigation, and since moral facts are not empirically available, it can be concluded that they do not exist. Shepski argues that there are many other elements of human life that are not susceptible to empirical investigation and yet we

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<sup>98</sup> Lee Shepski, “The vanishing argument from queerness”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 86:3, 371-387: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048400802000568>, 372

do not doubt of their existence. Certain phenomena characteristic of human life are mysterious to us and do not appear to have empirical explanations, but this does not mean that they do not exist or that they will not be explained in the future as new discoveries are being made: “In some cases we must come to accept mystery. If we do, the argument from queerness may lose much of its intuitive appeal – as indeed it should, if my analysis of it is correct”<sup>99</sup> In other words, just because something appears to be ‘queer’ to us now, we cannot conclude that it doesn’t exist. It could be that in the future evidence is found to support the existence of objective moral facts.

David Brink argues in his article called “Moral Realism and the Skeptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness” that Mackie’s arguments from disagreement and from queerness do not pose a real threat to moral objectivity. He points out that part of the force of Mackie’s argument is derived from the fact that he supposes that moral realism implies a belief in internalism. Brink is a defender of moral realism but rejects internalism claiming that, “determination of the motivational and reason-giving power of moral facts will have to await specifications of the moral facts and of the desires and interests of agents.”<sup>100</sup> He supports a functionalist account of morality, which implies that moral facts will “*as a matter of fact at least typically* provide agents with reasons to do the morally correct thing.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Shepski, “The vanishing argument from queerness”, 386

<sup>100</sup> David O. Brink, “Moral realism and the sceptical arguments from disagreement and queerness”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 62:2, 111-125, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048408412341311>, 115

<sup>101</sup> Brink, “Moral realism and the sceptical arguments from disagreement and queerness”, 115



According to Brink, the moral realist is not committed necessarily to ontological pluralism. Defending a materialist account of the world, Brink claims that moral properties supervene upon other natural properties, and that these properties although not identical with physical properties, are realized materially. He declares that Mackie fails to provide good reason for disbelieving moral realism: “The moral realist has various resources with which to account for moral disputes, and neither his account of the supervenience of moral facts nor his account of the theory-dependence of moral knowledge is queer or uncommon.”<sup>102</sup> In Brink’s view, moral facts are facts about human well-being and flourishing (functionalism).

Robert Ehman also offers objections to the argument from queerness in his article, “Moral Objectivity.” Ehman claims that it is an error to identify objective moral judgments necessarily with the motivation to act according to those judgments: “Morality is a final end only for a man who makes it his end. This is free, not logically necessary. The relation of morality to an agent depends on his attitude or will.”<sup>103</sup> According to Ehman this defeats the anti-realist claim that objective moral values are strange, since they imply a motivation necessarily attached to a rational judgment.

In Jonathan Harrison’s critique of Mackie’s error theory he argues that Mackie is inconsistent in claiming that all moral judgments are false, since later on he asserts certain moral judgments. He compares hypothetical “oughts” to categorical “oughts” and argues that according to Mackie, the hypothetical “ought” can be objectively right or wrong - yet

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 125

<sup>103</sup> Ehman, Moral objectivity, 186

we cannot find anything out there in the world that can be identified as wrongness or rightness. Does not the same apply to categorical imperatives?

Harrison further argues that if Mackie thinks that when we say that something is objectively wrong, we are attributing to it an objective property of wrongness (Harrison agrees that this is in fact the case), and if Mackie also maintains that no actions can possess such objective properties, then he must for consistency's sake argue that all such attributions of objective properties are false. Mackie should therefore be arguing that whenever we state that an action is wrong, that statement is false on both the hypothetical and categorical level: "In any case, it ought to be Mackie's view that moral *judgments* are erroneous, not that moral *sentences* are meaningless, and so do not express moral judgments at all."<sup>104</sup> Harrison also thinks that Mackie is inconsistent in another way: Mackie claims that all moral judgments are false but at the same time makes the claim in his book that capital punishment is wrong. He describes Mackie's position to be that moral judgments are no more than a delusive projection of human sentiment. For Mackie, this is a good thing since it allows us to, "describe as right (or wrong) anything we like, and among the things to which we attribute being right (or wrong) there will be some things which no one has regarded as being right (or wrong) before."<sup>105</sup> Harrison argues that moral sceptic

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<sup>104</sup> Jonathan Harrison, *A Critique of Mackie's Error Theory*, in *Ethical Theory*, edited by Louis P. Pojman and James Fieser, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, 2011, Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, Australia, Brazil, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Singapore, Spain, United Kingdom, United States, 561

<sup>105</sup> Harrison, *A Critique of Mackie's Error Theory*, 564

'ought' not to assess something as 'good' since doing so amounts to self-contradiction and he is no doubt correct in isolating inconsistencies in Mackie's argumentation.

Harrison's most relevant objection to Mackie's moral-error theory is his claim that if Mackie asserts that moral properties don't exist, it is inconsistent for him to assert that hypothetical imperatives can be true or false while maintaining that categorical imperatives are simply not true because there is nothing out there to make them true or false. The objection does seem to place the theory in dilemma. Joyce and Garner, however, argue that the "prescriptivity" that characterizes the objectivity moral judgments actually means that X has reason to O. On the institutional level, the agent can objectively evaluate actions based on her desires or interests. Categorical imperatives, on the other hand, make demands that do not take into account the interests and desires of the agent; there are no reasons for taking them into account. Hence, categorical imperatives cannot be true, because there is never a reason for action outside of the interests or desires of the agent. This argument avoids the problem of the moral error theory being dependent on the truth of internalism, and avoids the problem of the contradiction that Harrison has identified in Mackie's version of the moral-error theory. For, institutional moral judgments involve reasons for acting in a certain way, compelling reasons relevant to the interests or desires of the agent. Categorical or non-institutional imperatives, on the other hand, make judgments that transcend the interest of the agent. Though categorical imperatives appear to appeal conceptually to some sort of reason for complying, no sense can be made out of those

reasons; or in other words, such reasons do not exist. We can therefore conclude that an error is committed, and non-institutional moral judgments are simply not valid.

Having explored the positions that oppose the moral-error theory, I believe it can be concluded that most of the objections focus on the imperative nature of morality. Some argue that moral facts are prescriptive by their very nature, and that there is nothing queer about such facts. Others argue that moral prescriptivity is part of practical rationality, and that in virtue of the desires of interests of the agent in question, ethical valuations endorse or disapprove of the action in question. Moral realists who do not uphold ontological plurality, however, are forced to deny the categorical imperative. Mackie, Joyce, Garner, and Harrison all agree that categorical moral judgments are a part of ordinary moral discourse. Moral claims are ordinarily asserted on the assumption that they are true independent of the desires and interests of the agent. The categorical authority of moral judgment is essential to the functionality of human society. Without the categorical imperative of “you ‘ought’ to keep your promises,” for example, the framework of our society collapses. The categorical imperative does indeed appear to be a “queer” thing, since it is authoritative and commands from outside of the interests and desires of the agent. Nevertheless, categorical imperatives are undeniably part of ordinary moral discourse. It would seem that one is either obliged to assert the existence of “queer” moral properties that have a commanding nature, or to accept the moral error theory. Is there a way out of this dilemma? Can one plausibly defend the objectivity and prescriptivity of moral evaluations without “queer” properties?

## Chapter 5

### **Objectivity without objects: Hilary Putnam's ethics without ontology and Levinas' imperative of the "face of the other"**

The previous chapter ended with a question that I would like to address in the following lines. For clarity's sake, I shall explore possible responses in two parts. One part deals with the theme of objectivity, in which I shall present the position of Hilary Putnam who introduces the notion of "objectivity without objects". The second part takes a look at the prescriptive nature of moral judgments through the eyes of Emmanuel Levinas, and his ethics of "presence." I shall then attempt to demonstrate how the two elements discussed can be brought together to offer a more complete explanation for the phenomenon of moral evaluation. Deliberation about how one "ought" to act takes place in what Thomas Nagel refers to as the "subtle but profound gap between desire and action;"<sup>106</sup> a space where objective practical reasoning about morality is exercised in the presence of the "other."

There are many ways of interpreting the term "objectivity," which of course makes it difficult to present an argument about whether or not something is objective. Wiggins defines objectivity as: "a subject matter is objective or relates to an objective reality if and only if there are questions about it that admit of answers that are substantially true."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, 109

<sup>107</sup> David Wiggins, *Ethics: Twelve Lectures on the Philosophy of Morality*, Harvard University Press, 2006, 359

Pojman identifies naturalists, nonnaturalists and supernaturalists as moral realists<sup>108</sup> and describes the moral realist as one who believes that there are moral facts that “exist independently of whether we believe them.”<sup>109</sup> Moral objectivity for the realist is the belief that moral evaluations possess truth-value because there is a reality existing independently of the mind that makes them true or false.<sup>110</sup>

Hilary Putnam opposes this understanding of objectivity, presenting the notion of “objectivity without objects.” In the introduction of his book *“Ethics Without Ontology”*, Putnam explains that he conceives of ethics to be similar to a table with many legs, representing the many aspects that come into play in ethical evaluations; although such a table may wobble a lot when set on an uneven floor, it is very difficult to overturn. Ethics for Putnam, is concerned with the solution of practical problems, guided by many mutually supporting but not fully reconcilable principles. He argues that despite this plurality of elements that come into play, ethical valuing can be objective. Ethical evaluations can be objectively true or false and, contra Mackie; their objectivity does not imply the existence of “queer” properties. Putnam would agree with Wiggins that objectivity means that the subject matter is truth-apt but that this does not mean that there are mind-independent properties that make the evaluation true or false. Instead he argues that there is a

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<sup>108</sup> *Ethical Theory*, edited by Louis P. Pojman and James Fieser, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, 2011, Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, Australia, Brazil, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Singapore, Spain, United Kingdom, United States, 546

<sup>109</sup> Ibid

<sup>110</sup> There are moral naturalists that Pojman identifies as realists but also as subjectivists because for them moral evaluation is subject to the beliefs of the society.

conceptual framework according to which an ethical evaluation can qualify as either true or false.

In defense of “objectivity without objects”, Putnam proposes a theory of conceptual relativity, employing as part of his argument a comparison between the number of ontological entities that would exist in the world according to Carnap and the number of entities in the world according to Lezniewski. Carnap leaves mereological sums out of his world and Lezniewski includes them, resulting in an apparent contradiction between the two worlds. Carnap’s world and Lezniewski’s world differ in numbers of ontological entities. Putnam declares, however, that the contradiction is only apparent since what makes them incompatible is simply conventional; each one has chosen to use a different ‘optional language’. They “... *are not in fact contradictory*, if we understand each of them as belonging to a different optional language, and recognize that the two optional languages involve choices of incompatible conventions. What are incompatible are not the statements themselves, which cannot simply be conjoined, but the conventions.”<sup>111</sup> Putnam goes on to show that the same occurs with identity statements as with existence statements. Some identity statements have ambiguous meaning, allowing several choices as to how the meaning could be fixed. The meaning that is chosen depends on convention, so that according to one convention  $X=Y$  where  $X$  refers to a certain point in space and  $Y$  to a set of regions. However, if a different convention is adopted  $X=Y$  would not be true. In other words, what Putnam is trying to show is that there are different extensions of our notions of

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<sup>111</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 2004, 46

*object* and *existence*, and if this is true, we need to do some serious revision of our ontological assertions.<sup>112</sup> Putnam suggests that both *conceptual relativity* and *conceptual plurality* pose serious problems for ontologists; furthermore, there is the problem that ontology implies that every “instance of objectivity must be supported by *objects*”<sup>113</sup>

The point that Putnam wants to make is that instances of objectivity do not necessarily need to be supported by corresponding objects. There are two traditional philosophical ideas that he is up against in making this assertion; the first is the claim that if an idea is objectively true, then “there have to be *objects* to which the claim “corresponds” – an idea which is built into the very etymology of the word ‘objective.’”<sup>114</sup> The second traditional philosophical idea that Putnam wants to put into question is the “corollary idea that if there are no obvious natural objects whose properties would make the claim true, then there must be some *non-natural* objects to play the role of “truth-maker”.<sup>115</sup> There is a third idea that follows from these two premises: “if a claim is true, then the claim is a *description* of whatever objects and properties make it true.”<sup>116</sup> When Mackie argues that if non-institutional moral judgments were true, they would imply the existence of queer ontological properties, he is assuming these three correlated notions in his understanding of objectivity, and Putnam would agree with him that if this were the case, then indeed objective moral facts would be very queer entities. But what if the above-mentioned

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<sup>112</sup> Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, 49

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 51

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 52

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 52

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 52



traditional philosophical assumptions were not true? What if there were another way of accounting for the objective truth or falsity of a proposition or statement?

Putnam argues that there are in fact many instances in which we assert that a statement is un-controversially true even though it does not function as a description of an object. Logical connections exemplify such assertions very well. For example:

“If all platypuses are egg-laying mammals, then *it follows* that anything that is not an egg-laying mammal is not a platypus”<sup>117</sup>

Of course, if one wanted to one could argue that this is a description, it is a description of the logical connection between the two statements. Putnam however maintains that the idea of the existence of a realm of invisible objects that makes a statement true or false is absurd. Putnam argues that logic is not a description of the natural world, since we know that the above-mentioned statement about platypuses is true whether or not such egg-laying platypuses exist<sup>118</sup>. Hence, according to Putnam, “Logic is neither a description of non-natural relations between transcendent “objects” nor a description of ordinary empirical properties of empirical objects.”<sup>119</sup> If this assertion of Putnam’s is “true”, then what is it that makes a tautology true? How can we be so absolutely certain that statements such as “All bachelors are unmarried men” are true statements, whether or not there is a fact out there in the mind-independent world that makes them true?

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<sup>117</sup> Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, 56

<sup>118</sup> Putnam clearly rejects Quine’s repudiation of the analytic-synthetic distinction but the purpose of presenting Putnam’s arguments in this dissertation is however only to demonstrate that there could be a way of conceiving objectivity within a conceptual framework which would allow for an account of objectivity without “queer” ontological properties. It is not my intent to awaken a discussion of the analytic-synthetic distinction.

<sup>119</sup> Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, 59

Putnam's concept of conceptual truth asserts that: "What makes a truth a conceptual truth, as I am using the term, is that it is impossible to make (relevant) sense of the *assertion* of its negation."<sup>120</sup> He believes that we are constrained to abide within the boundaries of an accepted body of beliefs and concepts and conceptual connections.

There are however instances when this boundary is overstepped or redefined. A scientific revolution can lead us to recognize that something that previously made no sense could actually be true. The discovery of non-Euclidean geometry presents an example of such a scenario, whereby the proposition that "the sum of the angles in *any* triangle is always *greater* than two right angles"<sup>121</sup> is true. Putnam maintains that his understanding of conceptual truth incorporates an interpenetration of conceptual relations and facts, and that it grants the possibility of the corrigibility of knowledge of conceptual truth. *Logical justification* is not something that is simply recognized by intuition, "...one learns what logical truth *is* by learning the procedures and standards of logic. But nothing in those procedures and standards involves comparing the statements that one is trying to evaluate for logical truth (or logical consistency, or implication etc.) with non-natural entities... to see whether they do or do not *describe* this mysterious part of reality."<sup>122</sup> Having argued his case for conceptual truth in the realm of logic, Putnam proceeds to apply the same deliberation to the realm of mathematics. *Mathematical truths*, according to Putnam are *methodological value-judgments*. Putnam rightly points out that, "So much about the identity relations between different *categories* of mathematical objects is conventional, that

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 61

<sup>121</sup> Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, 62

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 65

the picture of ourselves as describing a bunch of objects that are there “anyway” is in trouble from the start.”<sup>123</sup> He argues that statements about the “existence” of mathematical entities don’t assert the actual existence of mathematical objects; instead they assert *mathematical possibility* of certain structures.<sup>124</sup> Contemporary science is completely dependent on mathematics, and the success of mathematics counts as evidence to warrant the claim that mathematical theorems are objective truths, but offers no support for the fruitless claim that mathematical theorems are “descriptions of a special realm of “abstract entities.”<sup>125</sup> Thus Putnam makes his point clear that when we say that mathematical theorems are true, we are not making a statement about the existence of mathematical objects but about the objectivity of mathematics.<sup>126</sup>

Putnam goes on to assert that the notion of conceptual truth that he has used to explain the objectivity of logic and mathematics can also be applied to non-moral value judgments. Value judgments are not only made in the realm of morality, we make value judgments when we assess scientific hypotheses. We compare two hypotheses and assess which one is more plausible based on certain criteria that we have for such evaluations. When we make these evaluations, we are not describing some non-natural property that each of the hypotheses has. When, during the Olympics, the judges evaluate a figure skating routine, it is not that they perceive non-natural properties of goodness or badness that define the objective value of the routine. In the same way, Putnam argues that when

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 66

<sup>124</sup> Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, 67

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 67

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 67

we say that a particular scientific theory is simple or coherent, what we are doing is evaluating, not describing some non-natural property that the theory supposedly possesses. The evaluations made are of course fallible, but good scientists learn through experience with the exercise of reason, to reach a considerable degree of accuracy in making these evaluations. In the same way the judges of Olympic figure skating, in an effort to avoid bias, evaluate according to certain conventional criteria enabling them to be considerably objective in their evaluations. The ‘platonic’ approach, on the other hand, would imply falling into the temptation of asserting that there are some mysterious entities that guarantee or stand behind “correct judgments of the reasonable and the unreasonable”<sup>127</sup> By applying the same reasoning to moral judgments, it can be said that they can be objective, in the sense that they can be the result of good reasoning without being descriptions of any sort of non-natural properties. Since ethical statements are equally forms of cognitive activity, they are subject to norms of truth and validity. This understanding of objectivity also allows for improvement and correction when it comes to moral assessments, so that what was once considered to be morally acceptable, can now be evaluated as unacceptable, and vice versa. Ethical statements are, however, not equivalent to logical statements in all senses. Putnam refers to ethical statements as *valuings* of two different kinds. There are statements that are descriptive such as, “anyone who tortures children is cruel”; and others that are not such as: “it is wrong to torture children”. Mackie of course, would agree with Putnam that descriptive moral statements can be true or false. Putnam, however, also argues that non-descriptive ethical statements, including categorical imperatives, can be

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<sup>127</sup> Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, 70

objective since, just like mathematical and logical claims, they are the result of proper reasoning. Putnam argues that “To recognize that there can be “objectivity without objects” and that a *bona fide* statement is not necessarily a *description* is essential to clear thinking about these issues.”<sup>128</sup>

There is of course the objection that if moral judgments can be objective, then why is there so much disagreement with respect to ethical issues? - otherwise known as Mackie’s argument from relativity. To this objection, Putnam responds that the fact that there are disagreements does not imply that there cannot be objectivity in ethical reasoning. There are ethical issues about which people who stand within the ethical life all do agree. Disagreement arises because real ethical questions are practical, “real ethical questions are a species of practical question, and practical questions don’t only involve valuing, they involve a complex mixture of philosophical beliefs, religious beliefs and factual beliefs.”<sup>129</sup>

According to Putnam, therefore, it can be argued that ethical judgments, despite their complexity, are objective. An ethical evaluation is true or false as a descriptive statement, or in the case of it not being a descriptive statement, it is conceptually either true or false. One can therefore assert moral objectivity without making reference to any sort of non-natural or otherwise natural property. But, how do we know if we have made a correct moral evaluation? By taking Putnam’s approach, one could say that we come to know it through experience, by applying human reasoning within a body of previously accepted beliefs. Descriptive ethical statements can be verified through experience; they are

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 77-78

<sup>129</sup> Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, 75

empirically verifiable. Statements that are not descriptive, on the other hand, according to Putnam, are true or false in the same way that we say that a logical connection is true or a mathematical equation is true. They can be true or false independent of the desire or interest of the agent. By approaching moral objectivity from this perspective of conceptual truth, it is possible to assert that “slavery is wrong” with objectivity, despite the fact that it could actually be convenient for a particular society to enslave a certain group of their society. We can also say that we know now that slavery is wrong, even though a few centuries back some societies considered it to be permissible; indeed a God-given right. We can say that it was just as wrong then as it is now, even if the people of the given society were not aware that it was wrong. I believe that these arguments brought forth by Putnam make it plausible to assert that it is not only wrong because of the negative consequences, it is wrong because it is unreasonable to think that certain people are superior to other people, and that they thus have the right to impose forced labor on the supposedly inferior group. To say that one has the right to enslave other human beings is logically incoherent, inconsistent with one’s understanding of who one is as a human person: by recognizing oneself as a person with rights, it would be inconsistent to deny that the other person does not have the same rights. This deliberation is a purely rational one and it demonstrates that when there is dispute about moral judgments, human logic is the main tool employed to support or argue for the truth of a particular assessment.

Although Putnam’s account might appear to be convincing, as well as appealing as it avoids the problem of “queer ontological properties”, it must be acknowledged that there is still a characteristic of moral judgment that has not been addressed. Mackie claimed that

part of the “queerness” of non-institutional moral judgments is their commanding nature, in other words, the imperative.<sup>130</sup> Simon Kirchin, in his article, “A Tension in the Moral Error Theory”, asserts that Mackie’s notion of an objective prescription linked to moral evaluation is strange and challenging for anyone who would want to oppose his theory: “How could there be demands without a demander? How can the idea of a reason be something that exists response-independently? How can we account for the existence of values (which might generate or ground reasons) whilst ignoring humans, the valuing creatures?”<sup>131</sup> Objectivity and prescriptivity are, according to Kirchin, crucial issues in the debate surrounding the moral-error theory. Putnam, however, does not address the problem of prescriptivity. The question, hence, remains unresolved: how does it happen that the rational evaluation of an action or an event however objective it might be, is accompanied by an imperative? Hume’s critique seems to come back to haunt us because we are forced to acknowledge that an “ought” cannot be derived from a purely rational statement unless the statement is accompanied by a desire or interest. In the case of hypothetical imperatives, or institutional moral judgments, personal interest does provide a motivation, and even then the force of the “imperative” and its “rationality” would be a matter for

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<sup>130</sup> J.L Mackie argues: “In this way the justice or injustice of decisions relative to standards can be a thoroughly objective matter, though there may still be a subjective element of interpretation or application of standards. But the statement that a certain decision is thus just or unjust will not be objectively prescriptive: in so far as it can be simply true it leaves open the question whether there is any objective requirement to do what is just and to refrain from what is unjust and equally leaves open the practical decision to act in either way” Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, 28

<sup>131</sup> Simon Kirchin, “A Tension in the Moral Error Theory”, in *A World Without Values; Essays on John Mackie’s Moral Error Theory*, Editors: Richard Joyce & Simon Kirchin, Dordrecht Heidelberg London New York: Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2010, 176

dispute. How do we explain that moral judgments that go against our desires or interests have a commanding nature? Where does the imperative come from? I think that a plausible response to this question can be found in the writing of Emmanuel Levinas. In the words of Richard A. Cohen, for Levinas, “The appearance of the alterity of the other is not an appearance at all, but the enigma of a command that bursts through all appearance: “Thou shalt not murder.” The other “is” unique, not a function of a context, just as the moral self, responsible for this other, “is” also unique.<sup>132</sup> For Levinas (contra Heidegger), ethics precedes ontology; it precedes being and is therefore also the first philosophy. The presence of the “other” precedes being itself so that selfhood is altered radically by the alterity of the other. It is the strangeness of the “Other” who cannot be reduced to the “I” that calls into question my spontaneity.<sup>133</sup>

Emmanuel Levinas grapples with the notion of “beyond being,” referring to that which precedes ontology. Levinas’s insight is, I think fascinating, since he approaches ethics from an original perspective. Like Putnam, and like Heidegger, Levinas rejects traditional philosophical metaphysics, which Heidegger dubbed onto-theo-logy, arguing that it is an “ontic’ theology in the guise of ontology.<sup>134</sup> According to Cohen, Levinas “discerns that with the critique of the philosophy of presence we can now recognize that all along ontology, whether onto-theo-logical or not, has been the wrong standard for ethics, that it is an *inferior* standard. Ethics not only survives the so-called “end of metaphysics,”

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<sup>132</sup> Richard A. Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, 149

<sup>133</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and infinity, an Essay on Exteriority*, Translated by Alphonso Lingis, The Hague/Boston/London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979, 43

<sup>134</sup> Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*, 123



it finally (and perhaps first) comes into its own with that end.”<sup>135</sup> With metaphysics out of the picture, the true precedence of ethics is revealed. Ethics precedes ontology and philosophy begins with ethics. Levinas argues that the question of “What is ethics?” is the wrong question to ask because it distorts ethics, forcing it into the corset of the “what is” of ontology. Ethics is the question “What ought to be?” Ethics, according to Levinas, doesn’t have an essence, instead it “unsettles essences.”<sup>136</sup> The question of “to be or not to be” is preceded by the question of one’s “right to be,” for if one does not have the right to be, then there is no possibility of being at all. “Here the question is not a reflective one, in one’s own being or in the being of beings, but rather a matter of being put-into-question by the other person.”<sup>137</sup> This is perhaps an over-simplified interpretation of what Levinas means when he speaks ethically; it is however not my purpose to provide a thorough analysis of his thought. What I would like to focus on is the notion of the “Other”. For Levinas, ethics is the naked “face” of the other intruding, disturbing and commanding, a “face” that “pierces the face that can be objectified”, a “face” that one cannot kill, or rather “whose *meaning* consists in saying ‘thou shalt not kill’.”<sup>138</sup> This does not mean that it is impossible to kill the “other.” “Ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity”,<sup>139</sup> but is an imperative that renders killing evil. The presence of the “Other” amounts to a command; it is a call to responsibility that disturbs our egoistical assessment of that which is in our own interest.

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<sup>135</sup> Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*, 127

<sup>136</sup> Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*, 136

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, 136

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 137

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, 137

The imperative proceeds from the presence of the “Other;” it is a presence that utters a command and not a fact that is accompanied by an “ought”.

Although the ethical imperative that Levinas defends could be considered to be “objective” in the sense that it commands independently of the interests or desires of the subject, Levinas would not qualify as a realist in the way that the realist position has been defined in previous chapters. In fact, I think he would agree with Mackie that objective moral facts do not exist, because for Levinas, ethics precedes “being”, and precedes ontology. There are no facts that make ethical evaluations true or false. It is the presence of the “face” of the other that disrupts the reasoning of the self, and that commands, that calls for a response; that calls for responsibility. According to Levinas, signs and language only have meaning in the presence of the “Other”; I alienate myself from them as I employ them to designate a thing to the other. Language makes objectivity possible through the thematization of objects in relation to the “other”, in other words, things become objective through communication.<sup>140</sup> “This objectivity is correlative, not of some trait in an isolated subject but of his relation with the Other.”<sup>141</sup> Objectivity, therefore, for Levinas, is not about the objects, but about thematizing them in relation to the “other.” According to Levinas, ethics is the placing into question of my spontaneity by the face of the other and it precedes everything: language, discourse, being etc. It evokes an objective categorical imperative that is not one of ontological necessity, it is an imperative that precedes being

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<sup>140</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 209

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, 209

itself; it unsettles being in the “surplus of the other’s non-encompassable alterity.”<sup>142</sup> The presence of the “other” is in Levinasian thought, not an ontological presence, it is not an essence, it is a presence that unsettles from ‘beyond being’, a presence that is not thematized, it is not ontological. This unsettling of the spontaneity of the self also imposes responsibility, meaning an obligation for the self to respond for the other. “The responsibility for the other can not have begun in my commitment, in my decision. The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a “prior to every memory,” an “ulterior to every accomplishment,” from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence. The responsibility for the other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity, where the privilege of the question “Where?” no longer holds.”<sup>143</sup> This null-site of subjectivity is a locus that is not really a locus because it stands in a place prior to essence, it is the flip-side of my freedom, a non-place where responsibility is located, which calls out to the self in the form of a command. Ethics, then, is about being “for-the-other before oneself.”<sup>144</sup> Is this a sort of intuitionist approach then? Is it the intuition that recognizes the presence of the other? I think that Levinas would disagree. No, ethics is not an “is” that the intuition would recognize. That would be looking at it from the wrong perspective. Ethics is about a command that the very presence of the other utters, that precedes being; it is an “ought” that cannot be described by using terms that belong to “is.”

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<sup>142</sup> Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*, 137

<sup>143</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, Duquesne University Press, 1998, 10

<sup>144</sup> Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*, 145

At this point I would like to return to the case scenario with which I opened this dissertation. When that bleeding woman stands at your doorstep, you find yourself in a peculiar circumstance; you are obliged to make a decision about how to act. As Thomas Nagel puts it: freedom forces you to make a choice about the action that you are going to take. The moment of deliberation about what to do forms part of the human experience of moral evaluation, but what exactly happens in the space that is located between the fact or event and the action? Thomas Nagel describes this space as a “subtle but profound gap between desire and action into which the free exercise of reason enters.”<sup>145</sup> It is at this point that the agent takes a step back, a step away from the background of personal interests and desires to consider what she “ought” to do. The agent finds herself in the position of an “ideal observer” who contemplates human action from a perspective that transcends her own desires and interests. Nagel calls this perspective the “centerless point of view.” He argues that an objective point of view can be obtained by imagining a world that includes oneself as just another one of its contents, in other words, to conceive of oneself from outside of oneself.<sup>146</sup> Moral objectivity, can therefore be achieved by adopting a perspective from outside “all the points of view and experiences of that person and others of his species, and considering the world as a place in which these phenomena are produced by interaction between these beings and other beings”<sup>147</sup> Nagel believes that the connection between objectivity and intersubjectivity is obtained from this centerless point of view.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, 109

<sup>146</sup> Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 76

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, 77

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 77

He further asserts that: “Morality is possible only for beings capable of seeing themselves as one individual among others...”<sup>149</sup> Morality implies that the individual does not consider herself in any unique status with respect to anyone else. The centerless point of view is hence also a “familiar point of view” that we share with all other human beings present both in the memory and in the expectation of one’s own experience. We can use our imaginative powers and our capacity to form universal concepts to think about possibilities that we ourselves have not experienced.<sup>150</sup> This allows us to go beyond our own experiences to get a feel for the experiences of others. The centerless point of view is, thus, a perspective that enables one to step away from one’s own personal interest, and is – I argue – therefore, also one that enables us to, in the words of Levinas, ‘be-for-the-other before oneself.’” Although Nagel represents this point of view as an impersonal one, I believe that it is actually profoundly interpersonal. The scenario of the wounded woman at the door inspires a heartfelt, painful and immanently inter-personal deliberation about what one “ought” to do and not only a distanced impersonal assessment of what anyone “ought” to do under those circumstances. Although Nagel, like Putnam does successfully provide an explanation for the objectivity of moral evaluation that excludes what Mackie would call “queer ontological properties”, he is challenged by the Humean claim that reason cannot provide non-instrumental reasons for human conduct. To contest to this challenge, he argues that human freedom forces upon us the choice of whether or not to act according to

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<sup>149</sup> Nagel, *The Last Word*, 120

<sup>150</sup> Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 33

our own interests.<sup>151</sup> In the gap between desire and action, one is forced to make a decision, the agent thus reasons about what she “should” do. This deliberation is not orchestrated from the perspective of a lone individual, instead according to Nagel, it takes on a generality; it becomes “what any person ought to do in these same circumstances.” This gap, places me before a universal standard “within myself that enables me to get outside of myself,” and – I argue - when I step out of myself I stand in the presence of the ‘other’. I believe that Nagel’s centerless point of view is not an impersonal perspective but a perspective that we adopt because we are aware of the presence of the “other.” It is this presence that questions my spontaneity in that gap between action and desire. Nagel rightly points out that freedom forces it upon me to choose an action, and when I deliberate about what that action “should” be, I step out of myself into the presence of the “other” who sets a universal standard. When I open the door and find a dying woman at my doorstep, in that gap between the desire to ignore her and return to my pastime and my action of reaching out to her, I experience an imperative that comes from the presence of an “other” who places my egoism into question. I argue that it is not rational deliberation alone that moves me to decide to open my door wider and let her in; I am first confronted with an imperative that I cannot give to myself, but that comes from outside of myself when I take on the centerless point of view. An imperative cannot be uttered by a thing or by an idea, an imperative is spoken by an-other. This premise entails an implicit premise: that the “other” is a subject and not an object. According to Martin Buber, the I-It relationship is one that is

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<sup>151</sup> Nagel, *The Last Word*, 118

established between the subject and a passive object. The I-Thou relationship, however, is radically distinct since it is one of reciprocity between two subjects.<sup>152</sup> For Levinas, this I-Thou relation is one in which the “other” obligates me.<sup>153</sup> It is the “Other” who takes precedence calling for responsibility - to respond to the other. I believe that by understanding the ‘centerless point of view’ as one that allows me to be objective in my moral deliberation not only because it takes me out of the realm of my personal interests but also because it places me in the presence of the ‘other’, we can satisfactorily respond to the question of how in our moral deliberation we experience both an imperative as well as a reason or motive to act independent of personal motives or interests? In that gap between desire and action, we cannot help but find ourselves confronted by an imperative that places into question my spontaneity that precedes my rational objective deliberation about what I “ought” to do.

In this chapter, I have attempted to address the “queerness” of the objectivity and prescriptivity of moral evaluation. I have presented Hilary Putnam’s arguments for “objectivity without objects” to demonstrate that it is possible to conceive of objective moral evaluations without taking recourse in non-natural properties to explain how such statements can be true or false. Since the problem of the prescriptive nature of non-institutional moral evaluations remained unresolved, I have explored the thought of Emmanuel Levinas to show that it is the presence of the “face” of the “other” that offers an acceptable explanation for the prescriptivity nature of moral judgments. I have then gone on

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<sup>152</sup> *The Levinas Reader*, Edited by Seán Hand, Basil Blackwell, 1989, 59

<sup>153</sup> *The Levinas Reader*, Edited by Seán Hand, Basil Blackwell, 1989, 59

to investigate the moment of moral deliberation that takes place in the space between desire and action through the lens of the “centerless point of view” proposed by Thomas Nagel. I believe that by showing how the “centerless point of view” is one that not only enables us to obtain objectivity in our practical reasoning, but is also one that first situates us in the presence of the “other” who “places into question my spontaneity,” I have demonstrated that morality might not be such a “queer” thing after all. In other words, I believe that these suggestions indicate that one could reasonably defend the objectivity of moral judgments without assuming the existence any queer ontological entities. The question is whether or not these explanations of the nature of moral evaluation are more plausible and more reasonable to accept than Mackie’s moral-error theory.



## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

I believe that our modern society is faced with a dilemma when it comes to morality. We make statements that involve moral judgments with the firm belief that they are objectively true: “Slavery is wrong,” or “Genocide is evil,” for example. In ordinary moral discourse they are intended to be categorical imperatives. The problem is that we are unable to identify a property or a reason outside of common interest that makes slavery or genocide evil. If someone were to demonstrate, for example, that genocide is in fact favorable to human flourishing because it purifies human genetics from weaker genetic codes, we would have no reason to argue that genocide is still wrong. Nonetheless, we are convinced that it is wrong, and that the Holocaust was an evil event. Without the reference point of a supreme being who has established a moral code, there doesn’t seem to be anything to account for the authoritative nature of categorical imperatives. According to Robert Audi, modern society suffers from “moral fragmentation.” He points out that the naturalistic worldview commonly held by modern society “seems to leave no place for value: for what is intrinsically good or intrinsically bad.”<sup>154</sup> Science is “valueless;” it does not make judgments of value beyond those “warranted by its own standards of evidence used to assess claims to truth in terms of scientific acceptability.”<sup>155</sup> According to Audi, the challenges to ethics in modern society are intensified by rapidly advancing technology, the

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<sup>154</sup> Audi, *Moral Value and Human Diversity*, 3-4

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, 4

extension of human life beyond the years of vitality, the selfish preoccupation with one's own pursuits at the expense of the environment or the future of humanity, religion and citizenship and globalization.<sup>156</sup> Mackie's moral-error theory is, I believe, a perfect exemplification of the dilemma, he must deny that objective moral values exist since they are "queer" entities that are not accessible to scientific investigation, and yet he is not ready to sacrifice morality. "Rather, the point of morality, and particularly of that branch of it which I have called morality in the narrow sense, is that it is necessary for the well-being of people in general that they should act to some extent in ways that they cannot see to be (egoistically) prudential."<sup>157</sup> The moral-error theory, however, fails to offer an appropriate response to the question "Why be moral?" Both Mackie and Joyce argue that a society with moral principles is more conducive to human flourishing than a society without them. Since objective moral values do not exist, they suggest that we "ought" to live as though they did. Just like some parents think it beneficial to our children to tell them that Santa Claus exists and if they behave well, they will receive gifts at Christmas, but if they are bold, they will receive a lump of coal, Mackie and Joyce think that maintaining the illusion of objective moral values even though they do not exist is advantageous. They are of course themselves making an evaluation that seems to incorporate a claim to objectivity: it is the claim that morality is good for humanity so we "ought" to continue to live according to moral principles even if they do not exist.<sup>158</sup> Furthermore, Harrison, as we have previously mentioned, points out that Mackie himself makes moral claims in his book *Ethics*:

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 35

<sup>157</sup> Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing right and wrong*, 234

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 233-234

*Inventing Right and Wrong*, such as the assertion that capital punishment would in all circumstances be wrong.<sup>159</sup> These claims in my opinion amount to a blatant self-contradiction. Some would defend Mackie's moral judgments by arguing that they are hypothetical imperatives; that is, they are true in the case that morality is conducive to human flourishing. This is of course true of morality, but there is a categorical imperative embedded in this claim, the categorical imperative that human flourishing is a good thing and we "ought" to do whatever is conducive to human flourishing. If moral values do not exist, why in the world "ought" we to consider human flourishing "good"? And if someone were to argue that I "ought" to consider it good because it is in my personal interest, I would ask: Why "ought" I act according to whatever is beneficial to my personal interest? Why is that "good"? Why be ethical at all? Mackie's response to this question ends up in self-contradiction: there are no objective moral values, but we "ought" to maintain a moral code. To be consistent, Mackie must either admit that something -"human flourishing" for example- has intrinsic value, or he cannot make evaluative claims at all.

Up to this point it has been argued that moral judgment is a phenomenon that is characteristic of humanity in general. Human beings evaluate, and when they make an evaluation, they also consider their evaluation to be objective, that is, they consider it to be true. It is also generally accepted that evaluations that are contained within an institution (hypothetical imperatives); can in fact be considered to be objective, they are the result of proper reasoning about the goodness or badness of an action in relation to the desire or goal we intend to satisfy or obtain. Hypothetical imperatives are imperatives because they

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<sup>159</sup> Harrison, "A Critique of Mackie's Error Theory", 563

incorporate a desire or goal, in other words, a motive or reason for acting in a certain way. If I want to live peacefully without worrying about having to protect my private property, I must obey the rules of a society that endorses and protects the right to private property. The want, desire, or personal interest provides the motive for me to act in a certain way. There is little dispute on this matter, and it is generally accepted that such evaluations are objective. The difference between the realist and the anti-realist, however, is that the realist might, and to be consistent “should,” hold that for such assessments to be objective, there must be some sort of property or quality that these evaluations have by way of which we are able to evaluate the goodness or badness of the action; the anti-realist holds that such properties do not exist, and that the evaluation is objective only on the conceptual level. We can nevertheless hold that no one is really disputing that the hypothetical imperative can be true or false. It is when we come to the categorical imperative (Mackie’s understanding of the term) that we are faced with the great divide. Moral judgment that makes a categorical claim is problematic. Some argue, as I have shown in chapter four, that we never actually make such claims, and that all morality remains on the hypothetical level. However, Mackie disagrees, and I would argue that he is right on this matter. When we make moral claims, we often mean that they are true independent of the interest of the agent. So when Lupita Nyong’o receives her award at the Oscars in 2014 for best supporting actress in the movie “Twelve Years a Slave”, and says that she hopes that this award will “remind me and every little child that, no matter where you’re from, your dreams are valid,”<sup>160</sup> what she is trying to say is that we are all born equal; that every

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<sup>160</sup> National Post: Oscars 2014: Watch newcomer Lupita Nyong’o tearfully accept her best

human person has dreams. These dreams are precisely an expression of human personhood and therefore no person can consider it to be their right to sever the dreams of another person; no one has the right to hinder the possibilities of another person by forcing them into slavery. Lupita is stating that slavery is wrong - was always wrong - even if certain civilizations considered it to be justified, and even if some people would *happily* submit themselves to enslavement. When she makes this statement, not only do we all assent wholeheartedly, but we feel a few tears well up as we remember that many have suffered because this principle has been violated in the past. When we say that to discriminate against someone because of race, religion or gender is wrong, we mean that it is wrong outside and beyond the realm of the institution. We mean that it was just as wrong in Nazi Germany as it is wrong right now. Such claims are assertions that appeal to an authority that goes beyond the institutional interest of the common good. I believe that to deny that we make such categorical moral evaluations is to turn a blind eye to the evidence at hand.

If we are to affirm together with the moral-error theorist, that categorical imperatives (on the level of meaning) are part of the phenomenon of human morality, then disagreement arises because the anti-realist argues that these categorical or non-institutional imperatives are untrue, since they have no referent (quality or property of goodness that is unidentifiable), and the realist argues that they are true since they do have a referent (non-natural or natural property of goodness). It seems that one must either assert the existence of “queer” moral properties, or deny that they exist and adopt the moral-error theory. But

the moral-error theory ends up being self-contradictory, and moral properties that have a commanding nature do indeed seem to be quite odd things.

I suggest that there is another approach to morality that upholds the truth of moral judgments without ontological pluralism, and offers a plausible explanation for the prescriptive nature of moral judgments. My proposal is that ethical evaluations are objective; that is that they are true or false on the conceptual level. The moral claim that “discrimination is wrong,” for example, is true based on the reasoning that it would be inconsistent for us to say that a person with a certain skin pigmentation has more “right to be” than a person with a different skin pigmentation. The deliberation that leads to this conclusion is located in the gap between desire and action; a space that first places us in the presence of the “face of the other.” The resulting moral judgment is therefore preceded by an imperative, one that surges from the mere presence of the “other.” It is a “you *ought* not to discriminate against another person on the basis of race, color or sexual orientation.” The “ought” is not derived from the “is”, it is uttered by the presence of “an-other,” a subject who has just as much “right-to-be” as the agent. Awareness of the presence of the “other” is pre-rational, and could therefore be understood to be somewhat intuitive. I believe that this explanation of human morality corresponds to the experience of moral evaluation that we make in our everyday life. It is also an approach that allows for “evolution” in moral evaluation. Conceptual truth as explained in the previous chapter, allows for corrigibility. Evolution of moral evaluation is not uncommon, in the Christian Bible for example, Paul writes: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye

is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.”<sup>161</sup>

There are other similar passages in the Bible that would indicate that slavery was an accepted practice, and yet Christians today firmly agree that slavery is wrong. Rational deliberation upon principles of Christianity, such as “do unto others as you would have done unto you”, has led them to draw the logical conclusion that slavery is inconsistent with most moral principles predicated by Christianity. Such examples and many more indicate that moral evaluation is highly influenced by rational deliberation, and at the same time is not purely rational. The presence of the “face of the other” looms before us and questions our spontaneity even before we begin to rationalize; it is a presence that calls to responsibility. When I look straight at the “face of the other” and see injustice, I am moved, appalled, disgusted, and I am called to action. If however, I refuse to acknowledge the “face of the other”, I remain unethical, and in doing so, I refuse to acknowledge my own “face” because I refuse to acknowledge that which precedes being itself.

The question of whether or not it is plausible to argue for objective moral evaluation without asserting the existence of queer ontological properties has been the interrogation guiding and stringing together this dissertation. I have delved deeply into the anti-realist position represented by the moral error theorists, especially J.L. Mackie, and have explored many responses to his arguments. Since I find his assertion that the ontological implications of the realist position are “queer” to be compelling, and yet cannot agree that the moral error-theory is the best explanation for the fact that we human beings do make moral

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<sup>161</sup> Col 3:22, New International version: <http://biblehub.com/colossians/3-22.htm>, accessed march 3, 2014

evaluations believing them to be objectively true, I have sought and discovered other possible explanations. By exploring Hilary Putnam's position that there can be "objectivity without objects," I believe I have successfully defeated the false dilemma created by Mackie and the moral error-theorist. Accounting for the imperative nature of moral evaluation remained however problematic on Putnam's position. The "queerness" of moral evaluation persisted due to the problem of motivation when dealing with categorical imperatives (Mackie's understanding of the term). I therefore considered it convenient to explore other approaches to the question of human morality arriving at the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. The ethics of presence of the "other" provides in my opinion a captivating and innovative approach to the phenomenon of human moral evaluation. I have limited my analysis of Levinas to interrogating the notion of the imperative of the presence of the "face of the other" since this is the issue that concerns this dissertation. The "presence of the 'face of the other' that places into question my spontaneity" is, I believe, precisely the imperative that characterizes moral evaluations. In Levinas' view, it is a presence that precedes ontology: that precedes being and is therefore a truly ethical "ought" that cannot be interpreted in terms of an ontological "is." By combining both Hilary Putnam's "objectivity without objects" and Levinas' "presence of the "face of the other," I believe that I have been able to assemble a plausible third option to explain the phenomenon of human moral evaluation that is neither "queer" nor far-fetched. In so doing, I believe that it is not absurd to claim that: yes it is possible to assert that there can be objective moral evaluation without affirming the existence of queer ontological properties. Indeed, the explanation proposed appears to be a more adequate explanation of



human morality than the first two options: that of the realist and that of the moral-error theorist. I believe that the moral principles that we hold to be true in our society shall continue to undergo adaptations and corrections as we continue to deliberate with objectivity on the coherence of our body of beliefs. It is however the presence of the “face of the other” that impels us, commands us to move us towards the ethical point of view: that of “being for the other before oneself”. J.L. Mackie, Richard Joyce and many other moral-error theorists acknowledge that morality is a “good” thing for human society, in fact we need morality to flourish as human beings. Hidden in their anti-realist approach is a moral evaluation that cannot ignore the imperative of the “face of the other”, that calls to responsibility, not only for one’s personal interest, but that echoes below the surface of being itself: “being for the other before oneself.” Hence, when in the movie “Twelve Years a Slave,” the character who was played by Brad Pitt states that slavery is wrong, he means that it was wrong then, it is wrong now and will be wrong in the future, and his claim is not only objectively true, it is also an imperative.

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