



ETHICS IN A PERMISSIVE SOCIETY: THE CONTROVERSY REGARDING THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL VALUES

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The relation between ideas and society is a complicated one. At times, ideas have clearly formed society, as when they led to the establishment of the great religions, or when they shaped our modern, secular societies, whose very names incorporate the ideas—of freedom, equality, democracy—that brought them into being. Yet, at other times, ideas and the elaboration that they receive seem rather the reflection than the source of the society in which they occur. Such is the case today in the field of moral philosophy and the theory of values. The permissive society has begotten a permissive theory of ethics.

To be permissive is to permit, to allow, to let go, and not to forbid or prohibit. Shakespeare uses the word in this sense and, signifi-

cantly, lists as characteristic of such a society some of the very traits that are perceived today:

And liberty plucks justice by the nose;
The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart
Goes all decorum.

—*Measure for Measure*, I. iii. 29-31

Liberty plucking justice by the nose may be said to be what happens when terrorists, acting as they please, do injury to the innocent. Children who turn upon and violate the government of parents or schools that have allowed them to act as they like are beating their nurse. The widespread abandonment of any standard of the decent, proper, and right in speech, dress, and behavior clearly attests that decorum has “gone athwart.” Such a state of affairs, Shakespeare goes on to say, is one in which

. . . evil deeds have their permissive pass. (ibid. 38)

The claim implicit in this statement that such deeds are evil in themselves, objectively, and not just in the opinion of the speaker, is contrary to a permissive ethics. Permissiveness as an ethics should be distinguished from permissiveness as a method. In the latter sense it may well be compatible with a general objective morality in that it advocates allowing an individual to follow a way of discovery as opposed to explicit instruction from another as a method of moral training. As an ethics, however, permissiveness is characterized by the claim that there is no objective right or wrong. Such notions as right and wrong, good and bad, are held to be of man’s making, having no root in the nature of things. Ethics, as proclaimed in the subtitle of a recent book, consists in “Inventing Right and Wrong.”

This book, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* by J. L. Mackie, an Australian professor at the University of Oxford, merits analyzing in some detail. Besides providing ammunition for a permissive ethics (although as we will see later on, the author is by no means entirely “permissive”), the book raises a larger issue regarding the fundamental basis of moral values and argues for their subjectivity. It is thus opposed to other recent writings that argue for the objectivity of those values. Representative of such writings is *Six Great Ideas*, by Mortimer Adler (New York, 1981), which argues for the objectivity not only of the idea of the good but also for that of truth and of beauty. (The remaining three great ideas that Adler discusses are liberty, equality, and justice.)

From these works of Mackie and Adler it is possible to obtain a clear and summary statement of the issue that divides them. By comparing the two books and identifying the points at which they disagree, one can isolate further issues in the controversy as a whole. Having done that, we can then consider each of these issues in greater detail, reviewing for that purpose some other recent contributions to the controversy; in particular, *The Nature of Morality* (New York, 1977) by Gilbert Harman of Princeton and *Justice and the Human Good* (Chicago, 1980) by William A. Galston, professor at the University of Texas.

The issue

What precisely is at issue when it is claimed that there are no objective values, as Mackie does in the first sentence of his book? Or, to make the same claim in the opposite term, that our values are only subjective?

The question, it should be emphasized, is about the status of values, not about their content: about good and bad, right and wrong, as they exist in the world—not about what things or actions are good or bad, are right or wrong. All of us make judgments and statements about good and bad, right and wrong, about what one should do or should not do. To ask whether such judgments are objective or subjective is to ask about their basis and validation: whether they are based on and validated by something in the objective nature of things apart from the way we think about them, or whether their basis and validity lies merely in the feelings, attitudes, and policies that we choose and adopt. The question, in short, is whether good and bad, right and wrong, value and disvalue, are to be discovered and identified, or whether they can be—and have been—invented and made?

To understand the issue it is necessary to distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive judgments. In its simplest form a descriptive statement is one that describes how something is as in ascribing color to an object: “My cat, Yum-Yum, is grey.” But it is also possible to make descriptive statements by using evaluative instead of descriptive terms. To make descriptive judgments with evaluative terms is, in fact, a common practice. Thus, as Mackie points out, we have no difficulty in distinguishing between a kind and a cruel action or in describing the difference between the action of a brave man and that of a coward. Judgments about such matters are descriptive and, given what is meant by kindness and cruelty, bravery and cowardice, can be true or false. The prescriptive judgment enters in when we go beyond this to evaluate the actions and claim that kindness and bravery are good and ought to be

pursued, whereas cruelty and cowardice are bad and ought to be avoided. It is only with respect to the latter, the prescriptive judgment, that the issue arises regarding the objectivity or subjectivity of values.

Another way of formulating the issue is in terms of truth and falsity: the question is whether prescriptive judgments can be true or false. To claim that they can is to maintain the objectivity of values. To deny that they can is to claim that those values are merely subjective. But again, it is important to note, as Mackie does, that it is the objectivity of the norm or standard that is at stake, and not the judgment made in accordance with the standard. Given the positive law as a standard, a court's decision on a criminal case is a true judgment provided the decision is in accord with the relevant law and the facts of the case. Here the issue concerns the action in question, i.e., the facts of the case, the relevant law, and whether or not the law has been broken and a crime committed. And although both the action and the law and its application are subject to argument and interpretation, the question is objectively answerable and the corresponding judgment true or false. The issue regarding the objectivity of values arises only when we go on to address the law itself: is the law just, and is there any other basis for justice than the choice and policy of men expressed in the positive law? Also, the same question can be asked of justice as of kindness and bravery: why should or ought one to act justly and do the just thing? Is there any objective basis for that "should" and "ought," or is it only a matter for human decision and policy?

The case for the subjectivity of moral values

Moral subjectivism can take both a positive and negative form. Its positive form is found in the account known as the emotive theory of value, the classic expression of which is Charles L. Stevenson's *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, 1944). According to this theory, the normative and prescriptive character of distinctively moral terms and judgments is no more than an expression of the speaker's feelings of approval and a desire to evoke the approval of others. The theory amounts to a positive form of moral subjectivism inasmuch as it claims to provide an explanation of the meaning of moral terms and judgments. Since it reduces that meaning to the feelings of the subject, it also implies the negative form that denies any objective basis to them. In this positive form the theory is compatible with the most extreme permissiveness—which is not to say all proponents of the theory actually subscribe to that doctrine.

Although the positive form implies the negative, the reverse does not hold. In denying objectivity to values, Mackie acknowledges that in our ordinary and common use we make claims to their objectivity, which he regards as false and erroneous. He maintains, however, that moral subjectivism by no means implies the abandonment of morality, and, in arguing the case for being moral as well as in specifying its content, he considerably restricts the ground for mere permissiveness. But before turning to these topics, we will look at his arguments for moral subjectivism.

Mackie offers three main arguments for the claim that moral values have no objective basis, based on (1) the relativity of moral codes such as appears from their variability over time and place, (2) the “queerness” of objective values, if such things existed, both in their status in the world and in our knowledge of them, and (3) the possibility of explaining why values are commonly thought to have some objective basis.

The argument from relativity rests on the fact that moral codes are found to vary widely from one time or place to another—a fact that Mackie takes to be so widely known that he makes no effort to document it. Indeed, he is so struck by the effects of technological change upon human desires and purposes that he declares: “The human race is no longer something determinate whose members have fairly fixed interests in terms of whose satisfaction welfare might be measured and decisions thus morally assessed.” With this in mind he tends to dismiss the significance for ethics of such notions as the good for man or basic goods and primary purposes.

The argument from queerness is both more complex and more difficult. It is complex in that Mackie finds both a metaphysical and an epistemological queerness in his subject. He claims that if objective values did exist, they “would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe.” But he says nothing more about the contents of the universe, and one might almost forget that there are many strange things in it, especially in the universe of modern science with its quarks, black holes, and so forth. But another queerness is said to lie in our knowledge of objective moral values—the difficulty of understanding the connection between an act and its wrongness, e.g., between the act of causing pain just for fun and its wrongness, and the additional difficulty (as Mackie claims) of understanding how we can “see” the two together—the act and its moral “consequentiality.” Before such “queernesses,” Mackie finds it much simpler to identify the “moral quality” with a “subjective response” that has been found socially undesirable.

The third argument rests on the claim that it is easy to understand (hence less “queer”?) why and how people come to believe in the objectivity of values through a process of “objectification.” But again the argument is a complex one since, according to Mackie, this phenomenon has more than one source. The phenomenon in question is described as a reversal of direction between desire and its object. We desire an object and then, seeing it is good at satisfying the desire, we mistakenly think that we desire it because it is good. We thus get “the notion of something’s being objectively good, or having intrinsic value,” and hence as something that ought to be desired, when conditions are suitable, “by reversing the direction of dependence here.” We are encouraged in this confusion, Mackie declares, not only by the tendency of the mind to project its feelings upon objects, as in attributing foulness to a fungus because we feel disgust for it, but even more so by the need to “internalize” the pressures and demands that society exerts upon us. If society is to exist, certain patterns of behavior are incumbent upon all its members, and, since the sources of these demands are “indeterminate and diffuse,” we tend to attribute an intrinsic prescriptive quality to the demands themselves. Hence, Mackie says, ethics might be considered “a system of law from which the legislator has been removed,” and even, given the religious sources of society, “the persistence of a belief in something like divine law when the belief in the divine legislator has faded out.”

The relation between morality and society is a topic that calls for further consideration. But here we can conclude our review of the case for moral subjectivism as set forth in this book. In brief, Mackie’s argument reduces to the claim that it is easier and simpler to explain moral values with their normative and prescriptive force if we consider them to consist in human feelings, attitudes, and policies rather than in anything objective to which such feelings, attitudes, and policies are a response.

The conventionality of morals

Although Mackie holds that values are subjective and that morality is something that men themselves make, yet he also maintains that the “whole content of morality” cannot and must not be left to the determination of each individual agent. Much of it apparently can, and to this extent he sides with permissiveness. But where morality cannot be left to the individual conscience is in the social arena and the way an individual behaves toward his fellow human beings. Thus Mackie asks us to distinguish between morality in a broad sense, as consisting in the whole code of behavior that an individual follows, and morality in a narrow sense as “a system of a par-

ticular sort of constraints on conduct—one whose central task is to protect the interests of persons other than the agent.” Mackie dismisses as of no significance the question of which sense is “more correct,” yet his main concern is with morality in the narrow sense. In other words, for him, morality is primarily a social matter and a social need that cannot be left up to individual choice.

The reason it cannot lies in both the human situation and the constitution of society. The human situation is everywhere a finite one: our goods, resources, information, and intelligence are all in limited supply; but, more importantly, according to Mackie, our sympathies toward our fellow man are so limited that one person not only endeavors to obtain more than another but will even act with malevolence to do so. Mackie thus agrees with Hobbes that if individuals were left to their own devices the competition among them would amount to a war of all against all, and society would be impossible. The need in such a situation is for some “device to counteract the limitation of men’s sympathies,” and it is precisely the function of morality, according to Mackie, to provide such a device.

Where does this morality come from? Just as Mackie finds in Hobbes what he takes to be an accurate description of the human situation, so he also finds in Hobbes’s account of a social compact the main lines of an answer and a solution. Since the situation is that of violent competition, the main need is to put some limit on that competition. This is accomplished by an agreement to limit the claims against one another and provide a way of enforcing them, namely by the establishment of a sovereign state. Individuals then have a double reason for keeping their bargain: to avoid punishment for breaking it, to obtain benefit by keeping it. Mackie thus interprets Hobbes’s “laws of nature” as the fundamental principles of morality. Some of the many “laws” that Hobbes enumerates may call for change with changes in the world and society, but the law that men perform the covenants they have made is declared to be “an eternal and immutable fragment of morality.” Agreement, contract, compact, covenant is thus made the foundation stone of society and morality. The contract need not be thought of as explicit historical occurrence; rather it is “implicit in human societies.”

It is important to note that morality is thus claimed to have an external and nonarbitrary source: it is an objective condition and requirement for the existence of human society. Yet this fact of itself, Mackie would argue, does not provide any objective prescriptive moral value. Why should or ought one keep one’s word? Only in order to avoid punishment or to obtain the benefits of life

in society. The only “ought” here is hypothetical and no way categorical as imposing a moral obligation in and by itself.

The case for the objectivity of moral values

Mackie maintains that the argument he advances holds for all values, although in his book on ethics he deals in fact only with moral values. Mortimer Adler, however, in *Six Great Ideas* deals with truth and beauty as well as goodness and presents reasons for believing that all three have an objective basis. In his treatment of goodness and of justice Adler thus provides the material for stating the case for the objectivity of moral values.

This case, as made by Adler, lies in the answers that seem to him to be required by the following questions:

1. Can a true judgment be made about what is good for all men, and not just individuals? Or are there any objects that are really objectively good for all men?
2. Is an object regarded as good simply because it is in fact desired, or is it something that ought to be desired because it is in fact good?
3. How can a prescriptive judgment be true or false when no number of factual truths can ever lead to a prescriptive conclusion?
4. How can there be more than one kind of truth, i.e., a truth different from that found in descriptive statements?

As is evident from the way the questions have been formulated, the argument makes use of the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive judgments, but it goes beyond anything we have discussed in two significant respects: First, it asserts that there are descriptive statements that are true for all men—i.e., facts about mankind. Second, it claims that there exists a prescriptive truth, and that truth therefore is not something that belongs exclusively to descriptive statements.

If it can be shown that there truly are objects that are good for all men, we will have taken the first step toward overcoming the claim that all moral values are subjective. For to assert that they are entirely subjective is to equate them with desires, and desires are the properties of individuals and vary from one individual to another. As dependent upon desires, values are thus made relative to the

individual: the good is an object of an individual's desire. Hence, if there is an object that can be shown to be good for all men, it cannot be truly asserted that all good is relative to the individual.

Adler accepts the identification of the good with the desirable: we desire what *appears* to us to be good, so the good is an object that we see as desirable. But Adler denies that this equivalence thereby makes the good relative to the desire of an individual. He bases this denial upon the distinction that can be drawn between natural and acquired desires—the former of which are “needs,” the latter “wants.” The needs are “inherent in human nature, as all truly specific properties are,” and are accordingly “present in all human beings, just as human facial characteristics, human skeletal structure, or human blood types are.” Furthermore, these needs “are always operative tendentially or appetitively (that is, they always tend toward or seek fulfillment), whether or not at a given moment we are conscious of such tendencies or drives.”

In all three respects wants differ from needs. They are acquired, not natural; they differ from individual to individual, since, as acquired, they depend upon the individual temperaments, experiences, and circumstances; and, third, wants are conscious desires at the time they exert their motivating power.

Adler's argument requires that these common words be understood in their precise meaning. That they must be taken so becomes plain as he notes still a fourth way in which needs differ from wants. Needs, he claims, can never be misguided or excessive, whereas wants obviously can be. This feature enables him to distinguish between “right and wrong desires.” A right desire is one that is truly in accord with a human need. A wrong desire is one that mistakes what is required by a human need; it consists in a want for an object, looked upon as good, which in fact will not satisfy the need it seems to serve—as when we think to meet our bodily requirements with what is called “junk food.”

It might appear in using such morally charged terms as “right” and “wrong,” Adler has departed from the realm of descriptive fact. Yet from the example he adduces, it is clear that he is claiming to be still at the descriptive factual level of the way things are. Thus it is a fact about human nature that knowledge is a need for man: he has an innate capacity for knowing that naturally tends toward fulfillment, and it is a need common to all men. Evidence of this is the fact that all men, with the exception of the handicapped, learn to speak a language. The efforts of a child learning to speak also show how he actively wants to acquire that ability. When this occurs, it is a case of a natural need being met through right desire—

”right” in the sense that what it seeks will, in fact, meet the need it seems to serve.

The distinction between needs and wants thus makes it possible to distinguish real from apparent goods: real goods are those that really satisfy natural needs, whereas apparent goods consist of those that are objects of desire, and good in that sense, but that, while perhaps harmless and certainly pleasant, do not correspond to natural needs. We may and often do want the wrong food and drink, or too much or too little of it, for the good of our health.

So far, in identifying natural desires and needs, and even in distinguishing right and wrong desires, and real and apparent goods, we remain at the factual level, have made no prescriptive statement that we claim is true or false. Any statement we might make in a given instance about a need and a right desire is a descriptive statement and is true or false according to the kind of truth appropriate to such statements. The desire is right if it is for an object that is in fact capable of fulfilling the need for a real good, and, if that is the case, the corresponding statement of it is a true one; but, if we are mistaken about either what we take to be a need or the capacity of the given object to satisfy it, the statement is false. However, we still have no basis for making a prescriptive statement that is true.

We have that, according to Adler, only when we see that “we ought to want and seek that which is really good for us (i.e., that which by nature we need).” And we see this, Adler maintains, and also see that it is true, as soon as we understand the meanings of its terms. It is a “self-evident truth” in that it is impossible to think the opposite: “Without knowing in advance which things are in fact really good or bad for us, we do know at once that ‘ought to desire’ is inseparable in its meaning from the meaning of ‘really good,’ just as we know at once that the parts of a physical whole are always less than the whole.” It is categorical in that it does not depend upon anything other than itself, and “upon this one categorical prescription,” Adler asserts, “rest all the prescriptive truths we can validate concerning the real goods that we ought to seek.”

The truth of prescriptive judgments thus has a double basis: the prescriptive injunction that is self-evidently true combined with knowledge of the goods that are truly real as satisfying needs of human nature, which is a matter that ultimately has to be determined by factual investigation of that nature. The objectivity of moral values accordingly also rests on a double basis: the existence of real goods which is a matter of objective fact combined with the

general prescriptive injunction which is also objectively true in being self-evident and not merely a subjective desire.

Little more can or need be said about the prescriptive injunction. But to complete the case for moral objectivity, more remains to be said about real goods. For unless these goods can be identified as goods needed by all men and not something to be left to be determined by individual wants, the case against the subjectivity of moral values has not been made. But this task, Adler maintains, is readily accomplished. He identifies six real goods, as follows: wealth, health, pleasure, friends or loved ones, liberty or freedom of action, and knowledge and skill in all their forms. About these goods, Adler holds, we know enough to be sure beyond reasonable doubt that they correspond to natural human needs and are common to all human beings.

With this understanding of need and real good, Adler adopts as his own Aristotle's definition of the truth of practical judgments as consisting in conformity with right desire. The statement that one ought to want and seek knowledge is a true practical judgment. It is practical as being regulative of human action in declaring what ought to be done, and it is objectively true in that it calls for an action motivated by a desire for a real good that satisfies a natural need of every human being. Thus, in the human order of desire and action of what ought to be done, objective truth is to be found quite as much as it is in the descriptive order of the way things are. But it is a different kind of truth in that it consists in conformity with right desire rather than in conformity with the way things are.

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