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

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The points at issue

From even so summary an account of just these two participants in the controversy concerning the objectivity of moral values it is possible to locate and identify the major points at issue. Among these are four that arouse the deepest and most basic disagreement:

- (1) the nature of objectivity and whether there is a real and genuine issue posed by the question: is the basis of morality objective or merely subjective?
- (2) the test of objectivity: what would count as an adequate way of determining whether values are objective or not?
- (3) the moral import of human nature: do the common features of human existence provide a suitable basis for making objective moral judgments?
- (4) the basic problem and primary purpose of moral philosophy: is it concerned with what constitutes the human good and how the individual can achieve it, or, instead, is it concerned with how men can live together and enjoy the benefits of political society?

On each of these four questions Mackie and Adler take opposite positions and present arguments in support of them. In this, however, they are not unique, but representative of others who have taken part in the controversy by arguing either for or against the objectivity of moral values. This will become clear as we turn now

to consider in greater detail each of these issues and the arguments about them. In doing so, we will have occasion to review the work of some other recent writers on the subject.

Objectivity: a genuine issue?

Objectivity itself constitutes an issue inasmuch as there are differing and opposed positions regarding what it is, what is to count as an objective moral value, and how objectivity is to be distinguished from subjectivity. On this, the most radical position is that which claims that there is no real genuine issue at stake when it is asked whether moral values are objective or not. Such is the position taken by the British philosopher R. M. Hare, who, in the article “Nothing matters,” published in his *Applications of Moral Philosophy* (London, 1972), and quoted by Mackie, claims that no real difference can be detected between an objectivist and a subjectivist when they happen to agree on a particular moral judgment. It must be admitted that the two might well agree that a certain course of action is wrong. If so, and if the question of objectivity is a real one, it should be possible to detect some difference between them, Hare argues; but, he declares, none is to be found: “Think of one world into whose fabric values are objectively built; and think of another in which those values have been annihilated. And remember that in both worlds the people in them go on being concerned about the same things—there is no difference in the ‘subjective’ concern which people have for things, only their ‘objective’ value. Now I ask, ‘What is the difference between the states of affairs in these two worlds?’”; and he then adds, “Can any answer be given except ‘None whatever?’” With this he concludes that there is no genuine issue between the objectivist and subjectivist position; the only difference between the two is verbal—they are different names for the same thing.

Heidegger, the German existentialist, would also dismiss this issue, although for very different reasons from those of Hare. He maintains that the issue is wrongly posed in that the distinction between subject and object as it is applied in moral matters is a mistaken one. True and valid thinking about such matters is prior to such a distinction: “Such thinking is neither theoretical nor practical. It occurs before such a differentiation.”

Adler and Mackie in common with other objectivists and subjectivists maintain not only that a valid distinction can be drawn between subject and object but also that as applied to morals such a distinction gives rise to a genuine issue on which there can be real

and serious disagreement.

The distinction between subject and object and their corresponding judgments seem clear, indeed obvious, when it is made in Adler's terms of want and desire. The statement that I want *x* is subjective inasmuch as it is a statement about the subject's condition, namely that I as a person feel a certain desire which I am seeking, or will seek, to satisfy. But the statement that I need *x* is objective in that it states an exigency or requisite of human nature that is quite separate from subjective desire; in fact, I might well have a need for *x* without actually wanting or desiring it. So far, however, neither statement is distinctly moral and does not become so until there is the added note of prescriptivity, namely that I ought or ought not to seek to obtain *x*. And whether there is a genuine issue regarding moral objectivity depends upon whether there is a real difference between claiming that this latter judgment has an objective basis apart from the subject or does not.

There is no doubt that in the practical order of human action an objectivist might well agree with a subjectivist in recommending or condemning a certain course of action. Human beings do not have to share identical moral philosophies in order to pursue a common course of action. But that is not the question here. As Mackie points out, in arguing against Hare, the difference that is crucial for showing that there is a real issue is not at the first order level but rather at the second order. The question at issue is whether there is anything in the nature of things apart from individual wantings that provides a basis and justification for the recommendation or for condemnation.

Mackie argues that Hare oversimplifies the situation and so mutes the difference by imagining only the case in which both the subjectivist and the objectivist are agreed upon a particular action. The difference between them becomes more evident when a change in a given policy is being argued. For, as Mackie writes, "if there were something in the fabric of the world that validated certain kinds of concern, then it would be possible to acquire these merely by finding something out, by letting one's thinking be controlled by how things were. But in the world in which objective values have been annihilated the acquiring of some new subjective concern means the development of something new on the emotive side by the person who acquires it."

That there *is* a difference and that it is significant appears also from the fact that it makes a difference for general philosophy as well as morals if values have an objective basis. As we have already seen

from Adler's analysis of the truth of prescriptive judgments, to maintain the objectivity of values one must also admit that there is more than one kind of truth, that truth is not limited to descriptive judgments. But with this we are leaving the area of our first issue and entering upon the discussion of the second.

The test of objectivity

Among those who hold that the question of objectivity does indeed pose a genuine issue, there arises at the very start an issue over which there is deep disagreement. That is the question of what is to count as an adequate test of objectivity so that, once successfully concluded, it will serve to confirm that a moral judgment has an objective basis. In other words, what is to count as evidence of moral objectivity? On this matter the sharpest disagreement concerns whether or not the ultimate test has to consist in something like an empirically established observable fact, one that will provide the ground for making a true descriptive judgment, or at least something similar to that. The subjectivist argues that nothing less than such a test is sufficient to validate moral objectivity. The objectivist argues, to the contrary, that no such test as this is needed, since there are other ways, indeed ways more suitable to moral philosophy, that provide all the evidence that is needed.

For the subjectivist case, Mackie again provides a good starting point. He points out that the objectivity of values is sometimes confused with other notions which are not only not the same but which also do not provide a test. Among these the most important are those of intersubjectivity and universalizability.

Many individuals may in fact share the same beliefs about what is good or bad, right or wrong, but that does not mean these values have an objective basis, nor does it provide any evidence that they do. As shared, the values are intersubjective, but they are not for that reason objective. So, too, those sharing such beliefs might well universalize them and claim that all persons in the relevant circumstances should hold them and act accordingly. But this is no more than to advance a claim on the part of those making it and does not entail that those values *are* objective. Mackie admits, however, that the converse does hold: "If there were objective values they would presumably belong to kinds of things or actions or states of affairs, so that the judgments that reported them would be universalizable."

What then for Mackie would count as a test of the objectivity of

values? On this subject, he is not as clear as one might wish. He declares that they would have to be “part of the fabric of the world,” and also “perhaps something like Plato’s Forms”—those eternally subsistent immaterial Ideas. Also, as we have noted earlier, Mackie emphasizes that they would be very “queer” entities. Presumably by this he means that they would be different from the observable entities of the natural world. And, as we have seen, because of this alleged “queerness” he argues that values cannot be objective.

Whereas the test of observability is only implicit in Mackie’s work, it is made explicit and indeed the very keystone of objectivity in another recent book by Princeton professor Gilbert Harman, entitled *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York, 1977). In the first sentence of his first chapter on “Ethics and Observation,” Harman asks: “Can moral principles be tested and confirmed in the way scientific principles can?” Since scientific principles are tested by observation, the question is whether moral principles are likewise tested by observation. Harman allows that we do make moral as well as nonmoral observations, where by *observation* he understands an immediate perceptual judgment made without any conscious reasoning. As an example he cites the case of children drenching a cat with gasoline and igniting it; a person observing it could both “see” the action and “see” that it is wrong. Here the first seeing is a nonmoral observation, the second a moral one. The question at issue is whether such moral observations provide a test of the objectivity of moral principles or values.

Harman answers in the negative and offers as support a comparison between this situation and that which holds between observation and theory in scientific practice. A physicist, testing a micro-particle theory, observes a vapor trail and judges immediately that it is a proton. Again there are two “seeings,” that of the vapor trail and that of the proton, and these supposedly correspond to the two in the moral example. It should also be noted that in both cases the second “observation” is not as immediately perceived as the first. Harman himself does not make this point, since he maintains that all observations are “theory laden” as presupposing concepts, hypotheses, theories, all of human construction. Yet clearly the wrongness of the act and the proton are not perceptible and hence not perceived in the same way as the children’s action and the vapor trail. However, this is not the difference that is Harman’s concern. He is concerned to point out that there is a real relation (though this is not his term) between the proton and the vapor trail, whereas there is no such relation between the children’s act and its wrongness. There “really was a proton” in the cloud chamber, it is

a “physical fact” that causes the vapor trail and has a real effect upon the physicist’s “perceptual apparatus,” given the particle theory and the other assumptions under which he is operating.

In the moral example, however, there is no such connection between the wrongness and the children’s act. The wrongness is not a “moral fact” corresponding to the proton as a “physical fact.” Even if the children were perversely acting as they did because they thought it was wrong, this motive only reveals something about their beliefs and is not evidence of the “actual wrongness of the act” as something objective apart from their belief. Scientific observation provides “evidence not only about the observer but also about the physical facts,” whereas “a particular moral observation ... does not seem to be evidence about moral facts, only evidence about you and your moral sensibility.” Hence, Harman concludes, “there does not seem to be observational evidence, even indirectly, for basic moral principles.”

To the extent, then, that moral values must meet the test of observability, the subjectivist case is buttressed by the failure to find any observational evidence for the existence of moral values. To this argument the objectivist can reply at once that, so phrased, the conclusion is scarcely surprising, since the wrong test is being applied: in short, that objectivity is not exclusively dependent upon observability. For this claim we need look no further than to the argument that Adler makes for objectivity as summarized above.

His argument, as we have seen, rests on a double basis: first, a factual one about human needs rooted in the nature of man and, second, a categorical injunction that the real good ought to be sought. The evidence for objectivity is accordingly double: the facts about human nature and the truth of the categorical injunction. It is this second one that is our concern here; the first will be considered later when we come to discuss the issue regarding the import of human nature for moral judgments.

What evidence is there that the categorical injunction is true? Adler claims, as we have already noted, that its truth is self-evident in that it is impossible to think the opposite. Once the meaning of its terms is understood, that is, of real good and that it ought to be desired, its truth is seen immediately. It thus contains in itself all the evidence that is needed to show its truth. Even without knowing what things are really good, we know that they ought to be desired and that we should not desire what is really bad.

There is more that can be said about self-evident truths, and Adler

does so in the chapters of his book that deal with truth and knowledge. Self-evident truths, he claims, constitute the strongest, the most certain, and the most incorrigible knowledge that we have. They thus provide evidence in the strongest sense of that term. Examples of such truths, in addition to the categorical injunction, are the following: nothing can both exist and not exist at the same time, or at that time both have and not have a certain characteristic; the whole of any physical body is greater than any of its parts; no triangle has any diagonals. Although all of these are self-evident, they differ in important ways, and to see how they do enables us to understand better how they are evident and also why they need no other evidence for their truth.

Take first the mathematical example. The truth that no triangle has a diagonal appears at once as soon as it is understood that a triangle is a three-sided plane figure, whereas a diagonal is a straight line drawn between two nonadjacent angles, for a triangle in being three-sided has no nonadjacent angles. Although this truth depends upon the definition of the terms in that one must know what is meant by a triangle and a diagonal, the proposition is not a mere tautology and a matter merely of words. In this it differs from such a proposition as all triangles have three sides, which is true but tells us no more than the definition of a triangle. The proposition about the diagonal is instructive in that it notes a further characteristic about triangles.

More significant for our purposes here, however, are those self-evident truths that involve terms that are themselves indefinable. Such, for example, is the proposition that no part is greater than the whole. We cannot understand what a part is without reference to whole, and vice versa; yet, as soon as we do understand, we see at once that in the case of any finite whole, without any further reasoning or any other evidence, the whole is greater than any of its parts.

The self-evident truths about existence and the moral good resemble this latter proposition rather than the mathematical example. Both are concerned with terms that are indefinable and yet also stand in no need to be defined. For as soon as we come to understand what is meant by existence and the real good, we also see that the same thing cannot both exist and not exist at the same time and that the real good ought to be desired. We see that they are true and that their opposite cannot be and cannot be thought.

With these principles, then, we have reached an ultimate and can go no further. But there is no need to. For they are first principles

and underlie all our thinking about existence and morality. And as Aristotle pointed out, it is impossible to define and prove everything; one must ultimately reach an indefinable and unprovable—an ultimate evidence.

But at this point we reach an impasse. For what Aristotle and the objectivists take to be an evidence, the subjectivists deny, claiming that at most it is only a postulate and gains what force it has only from the agreement granted to it by those who accept its use as a principle. Thus Mackie, for example, explicitly denies that any categorical imperative is objectively valid and claims that to think so is just an error; the only basis is human agreement or convention.

With this we come to another issue in the controversy over objectivity. It bears closely upon the question of evidence that we have just been considering. Indeed, as we have just seen from Adler's argument, the evidence for moral objectivity does not rest solely upon the categorical injunction that the real good ought to be sought. It depends also upon the factual nature of human needs. Here the question at issue concerns the import of such needs for moral judgment. Consideration of this issue will also help to prepare the way for facing the question whether morality is ultimately only a matter of human agreement and convention, as the subjectivist holds.

Human nature as a basis for moral judgment

On this issue there is no doubt that the two positions are clearly at odds. The subjectivist doubts and denies that any facts about human nature and its needs provide a sound basis for moral judgment about what men ought to do. The facts, of course, by and of themselves provide no basis for the prescription that human needs ought to be satisfied; the "ought" here, according to Mackie, is a subjective preference smuggled in to pose as an objectively based injunction. The objectivist position, as we have seen from Adler's argument, would agree that the facts of themselves provide no prescriptive "ought." That derives from the self-evident truth of the first principle of the moral order that we have just been considering. But the two positions are also at odds over the relevance for moral judgment of any facts about human nature. The objectivist thinks they are of the greatest importance and relevance, whereas the subjectivist tends to dismiss them as of little or no importance.

Mackie, for example, asserts as a warning against the objectivist

that “there may well be more diversity even of fundamental purposes, more variation in what different human beings will find ultimately satisfying, than the terminology of ‘*the good for man*’ would suggest.” Indeed, he attaches so much importance to the diversity of the ways in which men satisfy their needs that he tends to deny that they are of any help in establishing the objectivity of moral judgment; in short, he reiterates that the argument from the relativity of morals and mores still holds.

Adler, in arguing the objectivist case, admits the diversity in human behavior but denies that it is so great as to destroy entirely all invariant human needs which provide the basis for objective values. To think that it does, he argues, comes from the failure to differentiate between “a basic human need and what is needed to implement the satisfaction of that need.” Thus, such things as mechanical means of transportation, protection against environmental pollution, and extended school systems are all facts that are new to our contemporary technological society; and they are real goods. This is so, Adler says, not because they satisfy needs that are new, but only because in present circumstances they are required as implements for satisfying invariant needs rooted in human nature:

Wealth, health, and knowledge are always and everywhere real goods, no matter what the circumstances of human life may be. But means of transportation, environmental protection against pollution, and the institution of school systems are not, under all circumstances, required to implement the satisfaction of the basic human needs for the real goods just mentioned.

Strong support for the objectivist case on this issue is also supplied by William A. Galston in his book *Justice and the Human Good* (Chicago, 1980). In this work Galston claims that there is an intimate relation between the good of human nature and the moral virtue of justice. The position he argues for is in inspiration Aristotelian (or “quasi-Aristotelian,” as the author prefers) in claiming that “although our ruling *ideas* are anything but Aristotelian, many of our *experiences* and *intuitions* are.” Of further importance for our purposes, Galston is especially concerned to argue at some length against the conventionalist and contractarian theory of justice so prevalent today, largely because of the acclaim accorded to *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls (Cambridge, 1971). As we have seen from reviewing Mackie’s position, he has adopted a version of this theory as a basis for the subjectivist position. Galston, in arguing for a natural as opposed to a contractarian basis, provides support for the objectivist position. But more of that later when we come to consider the relation between morality and society.

Against the charge that the concept of human nature is so indeterminate as to be philosophically useless, Galston argues persuasively that not only does it have a determinate content, it provides an actually existing unity that underlies the diversity among human beings. As the most obvious and important traits that men share in common, Galston lists the following:

- a distinctive kind of consciousness, self-awareness, that produces both introspection and the knowledge of mortality;
- a distinctive kind of comprehension, rationality;
- a distinctive kind of communicative competence;
- complex and differentiated passions;
- the interpenetration of reason, passion, and desire that constitutes the moral realm;
- unique kinds of activities, such as artistic expression;
- a distinctive form of association that we call “political” containing enormously complex conventions;
- and, finally, what we may with Rousseau think of as instinctual underdetermination.

Certainly, Galston does not seem to be excessively bold in declaring that “it seems reasonable to assert that something like this ensemble of fundamental characteristics is what we mean by human nature.”

Galston argues that these characteristics also provide a basis for determining what constitutes the human good. And this good is not one of subjective desire that varies from one individual to another. There is no “simple and direct equating of individual benefit and individual preference.” Here, Galston means by “benefit” a real good that satisfies in Adler’s terms a “need,” whereas a “preference” corresponds to an individual “want.” Thus Galston, like Adler, finds in human nature, which all human beings share in common, the ground on which to base the claim for moral objectivity: in short, the intersubjectivity of human good suffices to overthrow the argument for moral subjectivism. To this end, Galston quotes with approval the followings words of Isaiah Berlin:

We seem to distinguish subjective from objective appraisal by the degree to which the central values conveyed are those which are

common to human beings as such, that is, for practical purposes, to the great majority of men in most places and times. . . . Objectivity of moral judgment seems to depend on (almost to consist in) the degree of constancy in human responses.

Galston claims that there are four elements that are constitutive of the human good. They are “ends, states, qualities, and activities that human beings value for their own sake.” In the terminology he uses, there are principles of worth. There are four such: the worth of existence, the worth of developed existence, the worth of happiness, and the worth of reason. For each of these, Galston provides an analysis and a justification to the extent that a justification is possible, usually by meeting objections raised against them as constituting real goods or as achievable.

There is no need in such a brief review as this to say any more about the first, the value of human life. That a human being is endowed with certain capacities and that it is good that these capacities be developed is equally obvious. Galston points out that there are many different capacities, some higher than others, and not all equally shared or at least to the same degree by all individuals. But it is possible to arrive at a principle of choice that is objective yet also sensitive to the needs of different individuals, namely: “Develop one or more of the highest capacities within your power, subject to the constraints of unity, coherence, and balance between these capacities and those in other classes.” By happiness Galston understands the fulfillment of desire so as to equate it with “the presence of the totality of what appears to be good.” (In this he differs from Adler, for whom happiness consists in the totality of real—not apparent—goods that satisfy natural needs.)

The fourth principle, the worth of reason, is of a different sort and deserves closer consideration because of the important claims that Galston makes for it, nothing less than that “morality rests” on it.

The principle of rational action on which morality is said to rest is formulated thus: “Take or do only what you are entitled to. To be entitled to *x* is to have a warranted claim on *x*; to have a warranted claim is to be able to advance a satisfactory reason to have or to do *x*.” Since Galston is concerned in this book to propound a theory of justice, it is understandable that he should emphasize the importance of this principle. However, it is by no means obvious that all morality rests upon it. Galston points out the advantages of adopting such a principle: its help in securing agreement, resolving difficulties, and explaining our actions to one another so that we have greater insight to ourselves. Ultimately he allows that it implies “the choice of a particular way of life—a life of self-understanding

and -control, of mutually giving and receiving explanations, of striving for moral knowledge and for human community based on that knowledge.” But except for claiming widespread acceptance for it, Galston does not provide any basis for such a choice’s having a categorical prescriptive force: for its being a categorical and not merely a hypothetical “ought.” Here it looks as though Mackie could say that objectivity is being confused with intersubjectivity.

Yet for this principle, as for the other three, Galston makes strong claims to objectivity. He asserts that all four principles are not “an arbitrary axiomatization, justified only by clarity and simplicity.” They are said to be widely acknowledged and to be presupposed by our deeds and judgments. More important, they are said to be ultimate, not only in that they need no further defence, but are themselves “constitutive of the moral sphere,” as having their own evidence. Unfortunately, it would not seem that this can be so unless it is also understood that the real good ought to be sought. And about this self-evident principle of the moral order I do not find that Galston has anything to say.

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