

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE ANTHROPOCENTRICITY OF ETHICAL NORMS AS AN ARGUMENT FOR SUBJECTIVISM

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If people in diverse social formations have engaged in what is recognisable as philosophical inquiry, one recurrent motivation has been to better understand how we should live—what the content of an examined life might be—another has been to better understand the world in which we live. However much traditions of philosophical debate have moved away to pursue smaller issues thrown up in these inquiries, answering these large questions remains what the general public perceives to be the point of philosophical discussion. A particularly pressing question arises at the intersection of these two concerns: what sort of issue is at stake in wondering how we should live? Is it a question whose answer is given in the nature of things, like questions about the chemical nature of our surroundings, however provisional our attempts at revealing such answers may be? Or is it a question that calls for a decision on our part, like questions about whether to have a tie-break in a game of tennis? Or, to counter our proclivity to deal in binary oppositions, is it a bit more complicated than either side of this contrast?

The answer I am inclined to give derives from John Mackie, whose position is mostly summed up in his well-known *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* of 1977. As the sub-title suggests, Mackie's sympathies lie mainly with the second sort of answer. We have to invent moralities, just as we have to invent the languages we speak. That analogy reveals at once that "invention" is here being used in a somewhat extended fashion: nobody sat down and invented English or Ojibwa, but equally nobody got them from the nature of things. And that last claim is what is important in Mackie's espousal of subjectivism—the non-human world does not mandate this or that language or moral belief or practice. But just as language persists because it satisfies certain needs we have (I do not have to choose between needs to think or needs to communicate) and its

capacity to provide those functions for animals such as *homo sapiens* puts certain limits on what its nature can be, so moral beliefs and practices persist for various reasons, and those reasons constrain to some extent its content.

In developing his account, Mackie made an important distinction between what he called “morality in the narrow sense” and a wider understanding of morality. Morality in the narrow sense comprises sets of mechanisms for achieving the basic ends to provide for which human animals have invented morality. Very roughly, on one side graded constraints on conflict and violence against others, and on the other mechanisms to allow mutual benefit through co-operation (again typically graded and giving priority to family, friends, etc. over more distant persons), and a set of practices to inculcate these ways of behaving and the manner of thinking appropriate to their maintenance. The Darwinian idea is that a group of hominids that adopted such mechanisms would be more likely to prosper in generally disadvantageous environments than populations that adopted more extreme versions of altruism or egoism. But prohibitions on murder and theft, and mechanisms to make promises, do not exhaust most people’s understanding of what morality involves. That wider, and often all-encompassing conception is what Mackie contrasts with the narrow core of morality. It, or rather its many variants, do not seem tightly constrained by the narrow core, and may often end up in conflict with it.

In both areas, Mackie thinks our unsophisticated “take” on morality involves us in thinking that its requirements are demanded by the nature of things. This is the objectivist error in his “error theory”. But just as we naïvely take colours to belong to objects themselves until able to appreciate some sort of Lockean, secondary quality account of their nature, so we can continue to see the point of at least the narrow core of morality (and perhaps the desirability of some elements of a more extensive concern) when once we have abandoned the error of thinking that its demandingness or prescriptivity is part of the natural order.

So much by way of setting the scene, the perspective from which I am coming. Mackie (1977, 21) reports Hare as not understanding what the objectivity of ethical value was all about. There are certainly problems in understanding what objective values would be like—Mackie made those problems a central part of his case against them, together with their being explanatorily otiose—but let us leave those issues aside and grant that we have some conception of objectivity in this context of the sort gestured at above in terms of what the natural world contains. Rather than focus on possible ways of taking the objective/subjective contrast, I propose to

make use of what I claim is an associated point. Items we take to be objective are such that we have to allow for various ways in which, as a matter of fact, they may be radically different from how we conceive them to be.¹ We have many examples where we think not only that they may be, but most probably are, radically different. Philosophically interesting examples here will be contentious, but one might suggest colour, an example I have already invoked, or the nature of spatio-temporal relations where Einstein's theorising has subverted many of the notions we take for granted, or the idea of a self as a ghostly tenant of the body, which may remain how we naïvely think of ourselves but which is surely one of the least likely hypotheses about the nature of the self or consciousness. Less grandiosely, we have uncontentious examples in the unmoving earth and much else in our unschooled conception of things around us.

I propose then that one aspect of what the objectivity of ethical value would entail is that we could be as radically mistaken about it as we have proved to be about the lack of motion of the earth. My suggestion is that no one would countenance that as a real possibility, so the implicit commitments of *soi disant* objectivists make them subjectivists in Mackie's sense.

In saying that objectivity brings with it the possibility of radical error I am assuming that whatever provokes our thought is not self-guaranteeing. A lot of what we think is simply picked up from our social environment, and some of it is purely fictitious. When perceptual experience exists to support our cognition, there may be extremely unspecific existentially quantified claims that are not likely to be mistaken (I shall leave aside sceptical hypotheses of evil demons or brains in a vat which could possibly be invoked to undermine even this much), but the point about the examples mentioned earlier is that much of the straightforward specific detail which we naïvely take to be there can be wrong: to take one of Sellars' examples (1963), a pink ice cube is not a continuous chunk of pink stuff. Given that this is so for our ordinary beliefs about the world around us, it would surely be most peculiar if an exception should be made for our normative beliefs. It would no doubt be salutary to inquire where those beliefs come from: Freud has offered us a story of the aetiology of the Kantian conscience, as an introjection of parental/paternal demands,

¹ Cf. Rescher's remark: "The ontological independence of things—their objectivity and autonomy of the machinations of mind—is a crucial aspect of realism.... It is a salient aspect of the mind-independent status of the objectively real that the features of something real always transcend what we know about it" (2002, 251). Of course, this is not to say that our conceptions of the objectively real must be partially in error, but it certainly allows for that possibility.

that would undermine its claims to objective authority. Even granting that Freud may have got it wrong, there most probably are stories to be told here that equally subvert our normative intuitions.

What would it look like to be radically mistaken about ethical questions? How can we acquire a feel for radical alternatives to the ethical values we currently endorse? I propose to borrow Hume's notorious suppositions that this universe is not the work of an omnipotent and beneficent creator who made us in his image but, as local observation might well suggest:

This world ... is very faulty and imperfect, compared to a superior standard; and was only the first rude essay of some infant deity, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance: it is the work only of some dependent, inferior deity; and is the object of derision to his superiors: it is the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated deity; and ever since his death, has run on at adventures, from the first impulse and active force which it received from him (Hume 1947, 168).

These wild conjectures at least afford us the possibility of thinking that the over-riding goal of such incompetent creators might be the flourishing of beetles, dolphins, or the fractal intricacies of planetary systems. I am, of course, supposing that one source of objectivity could be the will of a creator—following in this Mackie's preferred way of avoiding the Euthyphro dilemma (1977, 231).

We could then suppose that one of Hume's apprentice demiurges may have put us in as bit players in a cosmic drama focused on quite another galaxy; the rules for the universe might not speak to our concerns at all, any more than ours speak to the interests of oysters.

My claim is that scenarios such as these would be rejected as not giving us what ethical norms are for: guidance on how *we* should live *our* lives. I think the rejection cannot be that such norms are logically impossible—the Humean suppositions are intended to show that they are logically possible. But rather it must be that the only norms that matter to us are ones that apply to us, that speak to our concerns and our condition. Supposedly objective norms must be anthropocentric in this way, even if it turns out that they apply more widely than to our own species. It is as if you were confronted with a problem in playing football but the only rule-book you could find was for cricket. I submit that if that was your situation you would just have to decide how to proceed—you might not be following what has been laid down by whoever makes the rules for the game, but too bad, you need to go on with the game. If the universe has been given, not to *homo sapiens*, but to super-intelligent beings in Alpha

Centauri, we have still to go on with our game, and I don't think we would decide to devote all our efforts to trying to discover what they would like us to do for them.

While we are playing with theological fantasies, let us assume that the Carthaginian Ba'al is our actual task-master, and that those who sacrificed their children to him got it right. Again, my suspicion is that our objectivists would be horrified, and would reject the objectively grounded norm in favour of what they now regard as more enlightened. They would rightly be following in Karamazov's footsteps (in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan says he would refuse to forgive those who butchered babies, even if the creator of the universe set the example). But that, or the assurance of the impossibility of my supposition that the truth about morality might be more "primitive" than our current conception, is in effect to privilege our actual thinking over whatever might be its objective grounding.

If that is how people would reject the relevance of radically different objective norms, what they are doing is in effect putting our lives first in the order of things. I claim that they can only be assured that supposedly objective morality does fit the bill if in fact it is up to us what it looks like, that is to say, if we are indeed inventing it *à la* Mackie.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) claim that western philosophy has been a matter of what one might call the anthropology of ideas, a reflective exploration of the varying conceptions we have employed. Western philosophy has, of course, seen itself as doing more, limning the ultimate structures of the world. It is not my present purpose to consider the ambivalence of Lakoff and Johnson's considered view of what (western) philosophy might become, once it learns the lessons of their neuropsychology, but simply to make use of their pleasingly simple contrast. Whatever one might want to say about the aspirations of metaphysics or philosophy of language, it seems to me that Lakoff and Johnson have got to be right about ethics, since there is nothing else for the subject to be than the reflective exploration of our varying ideas about these matters. Or, at least, there is no further reality of the sort objectivists have supposed there to be, whereas there is a reality of some sort answering to our metaphysical or linguistic speculations.

Yet just as philosophy might, for Lakoff and Johnson, get beyond ethnography if it listens to the third wave of research in cognitive science, there might be something more than the seeking of a reflective equilibrium for moral philosophy, if what I have said is correct. The Mackean view says in effect, given what our lives are like, what "the human condition" is like, here are some ways of coping with it, of achieving at least some of

our aims. This is a field where we may hope, not only to describe what we have evolved by way of coping mechanisms, but also perhaps to discover new ones. They would, of course, lack objective prescriptivity, but they would be, pertinently, discoveries. One might try to see some examples of what we like to think of as moral progress in this light. Utilitarian criticism of savage punishments showed, among other things, that they simply didn't work very well to achieve goals that everyone would want to see achieved, as one might hope people would realise that the criminalisation of recreational drugs signally fails to produce worthwhile results. Some of the criticisms of slavery, patriarchy, or the use of torture work in similar ways, arguing that these institutions deform those who appear to benefit from them.

Some of the features of Mackie's position may be seen more clearly if we note that we can think in the same way about the situation of any other living creature and use the facts of its condition to indicate what would be conducive to its flourishing and what would be inimical. In doing this one needs no more than the facts of the case. One is deriving hypothetical imperatives (if you want healthy rabbits, give them lettuce; if you want a virulent strain of smallpox virus, ...). The associated ought-statements acquire a truth-value from the basic claims on which they are based, given the agent's desires. They are not the sort of thing that objectivists about morality want; they are not absolute, unconditional requirements.

It may not be unfair to say that the Aristotelian tradition has seen humans as covered as much by these hypothetical imperatives as rabbits or viruses. Some of us, however, think that there is a significant difference, in that it is not obvious that we can tie down what will count as flourishing for human beings. We can specify some machinery that generally helps with whatever specific goals one might have (institutions to promote cooperation, for instance). But importantly we can also specify various ways in which human life does *not* flourish, and thus indicate what to avoid or to ameliorate. For liberals that might be enough by way of objectively based hypothetical imperatives to be going on with.

What I have just done is echo very briefly some of the points Mackie made to ground the utility of his "morality in the narrow sense". If I am right in seeing it all as a matter of hypothetical imperatives, we have perhaps part of an explanation for what has seemed puzzling to several commentators (my earlier self included, cf. 1980) in Mackie's overall position. The puzzle is that on the one hand he thinks most people's conception of morality is shot through with erroneous assumptions about objective prescriptivity, while on the other he wants us to self-consciously refashion a moral code understood without the factitious packaging. The

puzzlement is similar to that occasioned some years previously by the then Bishop of Woolwich's apparent atheism combined with continuing practice as an Anglican bishop. If it is all error, then one would think the honest thing to do is to junk it all, rather than carry on with a revised version.

But as Burgess (1998) has observed, there are many cases where we want to say that there is an admixture of pervasive error in ordinary conceptions of things; what we think we ought to do next can vary from outright scrapping of the conception to continuing with that language game but with a more sophisticated interpretation on hand when we need it. (Burgess' examples include witches for the first rejectionist strategy and engineers' reliance on Newtonian theory for the opposite strategy of speaking with the vulgar.)

The resolution in Mackie's case would then be something like the following. For the elements in the narrow core of morality, we can find a basis in the human condition that makes them likely to be necessary² for whatever other projects we might have. That basis shows them as intelligible and desirable in general without having to invest them with any factitious authority—Burgess draws attention to Mackie's passing comment that “perhaps the truest teachers of moral philosophy are the outlaws and thieves who, as Locke says, keep faith and rules of justice with one another, but practice these as rules of convenience without which they cannot hang together” (Mackie 1977, 10-11). If outlaws can live with the objective truth about morality, so can the rest of us³—so we can reasonably propose to ourselves a project that includes both recognising that basis as all there is for morality in the narrow sense and drawing the consequences of that recognition for our extension beyond the narrow core to encompass wider and less constrained values.⁴ It is important that this

² I am letting myself off too easily by qualifying “necessary” here. I think it needs argument to show that a feasible alternative to morality in the narrow sense (such as Hincfuss 1987, advocated) is not available that would do the trick. My feeling is that any proposed alternative will turn out to be ordinary morality minus its objectivist pretensions, but that feeling is not an argument.

³ As Burgess also comments, it is perhaps odd that Mackie did not offer an account of what outlaws, or John Mackie himself, meant by their use of first-order moral language.

⁴ It is part of this suggestion that a revisionary view of morality will not destroy everything of current value. But I think it must also be acknowledged that revisionary views of morality (and of other associated claims about the universe) will undermine many values *some* people currently espouse. Such people are then right to fear the consequences of teaching the truth about (meta-)ethics (cf. Waldron 1998).

way of presenting the issue does not operate with an “all or nothing” approach: we can deny that there is an objective requirement for *Y* without saying that consequentially anything goes, or that our moral demands on each other are nothing more than expressions of subjective feelings. The human condition generates the utility of *X* which itself, when extended, has an “elective affinity” with *Y*. So norms of kindness to family members are pretty obviously useful for those in a family; when multiplied exponentially to the human race, they suggest creating agencies to relieve hunger and alleviate the effects of disasters rather than building higher and more offensive borderlines, though one has to admit that these nasty reactions can also find a basis in the exclusionary aspects of limited altruisms.

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