J.L. Mackie's Shmoral Realism (20151215)
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Introduction

"There are no objective values," J.L. Mackie tells us at the start of his book, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*.

To be more specific, Mackie claimed that all of our moral statements are false. Every time we make a moral claim, we are attributing a property of "objective, intrinsic prescriptivity" to that which we are evaluating. The claim is built into the very meaning of the term. However, no such property exists. Therefore, all of our moral claims are false.

Yet, Simon Blackburn saw an apparent incoherence in Mackie's book. After arguing that all moral claims are false, Mackie went on to do what appeared to Blackburn to be standard normative moral philosophy. This caused Blackburn to ask, "Why should we have to fall into error?"

> If a vocabulary embodies an error, then . . . our old, infected moral concepts or ways of thought should be replaced by ones which serve our legitimate needs, but avoid the mistake. Yet, Mackie does not say what such a way of thought would look like, and how it would differ in order to show its innocence of the old error. (Blackburn: p. 2)

To Blackburn, Mackie seems to have concluded that, though all moral claims are false, we are compelled to make these false moral statements and act as if they are true.

What would Mackie's work have looked like if he had done this correctly?

According to Blackburn, Mackie should have specified some practice found in moralizing that is grounded on this error, and then introduced a new practice, perhaps using different terms, that avoided this error. Blackburn calls this alternative "shmoralizing".

> Surely it would be better if we avoided moral (erroneous) views altogether, and contented ourselves with some lesser, purged commitments which can be held without making metaphysical mistakes. Let us call these shmoral views, and a vocabulary which expresses them a shmoral vocabulary. Then the puzzle is why, in the light of the error theory, Mackie did not at least indicate how a shmoral vocabulary would look and did not himself go on only to shmoralize, not to moralize. (Blackburn: p. 2-3)

I will argue that Mackie did exactly what Blackburn suggested. After describing the error found in common morality, he proposed a solution that did not contain this error. He explained how the two practices differ, then went on to engage in this new practice of error-free moralizing.

Mackie did not invent a new vocabulary for this new practice. He did not introduce a term like "shmorality" to replace "morality". Instead, he thought that the current moral language could be reformed. He also provided an example:

The fact that the word 'atom', as used in nineteenth-century physics, had as a part of its meaning 'indivisible particle of matter' did not in itself, even in the nineteenth century, compel anyone to believe that there are indivisible material particles. One could either refrain from using the term 'atom' in affirmative statement or, as physicists have subsequently done, use the term with other parts of its meaning only, dropping the requirement of indivisibility. (Mackie: p. 100).

In physics, the difference between the old practice and the new practice was simply to make it no longer the case that a proposition of the form, "X is an atom" implies "X cannot be divided". In Mackie's ethics, the difference between old moralizing and the new error-free "shmoralizing" (to borrow Blackburn's term) is found in a different type of universalizing. While moralizing universalizes across physical traits and social status, "shmoralizing" also universalizes across interests.

It seems that if we followed Mackie's plan and adopt error-free "shmoralizing" then we could be "shmoral" realists. There are objective moral facts that are substantially independent of the beliefs and desires of the agent, though these facts report relationships between objects of evaluation and desires rather than intrinsically prescriptive properties.

What's Wrong with Moralizing?
To clarify the distinction between shmoralizing and moralizing, I wish to look at what Mackie was rejecting in the practice of moralizing.

Mackie argued that, in our common moral practices, we attribute a special value property to actions or states of affairs or character traits to the thing itself. There is no fact about us that is relevant to something having value. It has that value as a part of its nature.

Furthermore, it is built into the meanings of our moral terms that this is the case. When a person says, "Rape is wrong," that person means (assuming he is using moral terms correctly) that there is a wrongness built into the very nature of rape.

...ordinary moral judgments include a claim to objectivity, an assumption that there are objective values . . . . And I do not think it is going too far to say that this assumption has been incorporated in the basic, conventional, meanings of moral terms. Any analysis of the meanings of moral terms which omits this claim to objective, intrinsic prescriptivity is to that extent incomplete; and this is true of any non-cognitive analysis, any naturalist one, and any combination of the two. (Mackie: p. 35)

Mackie actually put a great deal of effort into specifying what he was saying when he denied the existence of objective values – and what he was not saying.

For example, Immanuel Kant's categorical imperatives provide a way of understanding the types of objective values that Mackie claimed did not exist.

A categorical imperative . . . would express a reason for acting which was unconditional in the sense of not being contingent upon any present desires of the agent to whose satisfaction the recommended action would contribute as a means. . . . So far as ethics is concerned, my thesis

that there are no objective values is specifically the denial that any such categorical imperative element is objectively valid. The objective values that I am denying would be action-directing absolutely, not contingently (in the way indicated) upon the agent's desires or inclinations. (Mackie: p. 29)

Plato's Forms provide another way of understanding this claim.

Plato's Forms give a dramatic picture of what objective values would have to be. The Form of the Good is such that knowledge of it provides the knower with both a direction and an overriding motive: something's being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it. An objective would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it. Similarly, if there were objective principles of right and wrong, any wrong (possible) course of action would have not-to-be-doneness somehow built into it. (Mackie: p. 40)

When we learn moral terms – when we learn to speak and write proper English – we learn to use these terms in a way that assumes that the values reside in the things themselves.

Then he argues that these things do not exist. He provides two arguments for this conclusion, and there are other arguments that can be made. However, none of that is relevant for this paper. It is sufficient to understand the types of objective values that our moral terms assumed (according to Mackie), and that he held that these properties did not exist, from which it follows that moral claims are false.

The assertion that there are objective values or intrinsically prescriptive entities or features of some kind, which ordinary moral judgments presuppose, is, I hold, not meaningless but false. (Mackie: p. 40)

However, I want to note that there is a different type of objective value that Mackie asserted certainly does exist. These are not claims about intrinsic prescriptivity. These are claims about how well objects of evaluation measure up to some set of standards.

There are certain kinds of value statements which undoubtedly can be true or false, even if, in the sense I intend, there are no objective values. Evaluations of many sorts are commonly made in relation to agreed and assumed standards. . . . .Given any sufficiently determinate standards, it will be an objective issue, a matter of truth and falsehood, how well any particular specimen measures up to those standards. (Mackie: p. 22)

Mackie then examined the question of the objectivity of standards. Here, he argues that standards are never entirely arbitrary – they generally have something to do with the wants and interests served by that which is being evaluated.

Something may be called good simply in so far as it satisfies or is such as to satisfy a certain desire; but the objectivity of such relations of satisfaction does not constitute in our sense of an objective value. (Mackie: p. 24)

If we made the evaluation of something fully determinate on the degree to which it satisfies certain desires, then we would have value claims that are objective in the sense that these claims are true or false. However, this is fully compatible with the thesis that the object of evaluation contains no objective, intrinsic prescriptivity.

We may then ask whether the choice of which desires to use is arbitrary. Mackie does not investigate this question, but I think it would be useful to compare the types of value claims being discussed here with claims about location. It is impossible to describe the location of anything without describing where it is relative to "something else". Furthermore, there is no inherently correct "something else" to use when describing location. We use the "something else" that is customary or convenient given the context. Yet, the objectivity of location is never called into question. Similarly, the fact that there is no inherently correct set of desires to use in making evaluations is no threat to the objectivity of being such as to fulfill the desires selected.

Recall, we are looking for ways in which common moralizing differs from Mackian shmoralizing. Common moralizing assumes the existence of objective intrinsic prescriptivity – which does not exist. Mackie's "shmoralizing" uses relationships between objects of evaluation and desires. More specifically, they will identify whether objects of evaluation are "such as to fulfill the desires in question." This allows value claims to be objectively true or false, but in a way that is consistent with denying the existence of intrinsic prescriptivity.

There is still more to be said on the distinction between moralizing and "shmoralizing". Mackie finds a way of distinguishing them in the type of "universalizability" each uses. I will turn to that subject next.

Universalizability

According to Mackie, we are to drop "intrinsic prescriptivity" from the meaning of moral terms and use that which is left – the way physicists dropped "cannot be divided" from the meaning of "atom" and worked with what is next.

So, when we drop intrinsic prescriptivity from moral terms, what is left?

Mackie argues that an important part of the meaning of moral terms asserts that a moral principle or rule must be "universal". It must apply to all people in similar circumstances. However, there is a certain amount of ambiguity in determining what counts as "similar circumstances".

In his writing, Mackie distinguishes three stages of universalization, which I will look at in more detail shortly. The first stage, he argues, is so far removed from morality that it would have no claim to the name. He relates the second stage of universalizability to common moralizing. This is the type that follows upon the assumption that intrinsic prescriptivity exists. He then relates the third of these stages to what we are here calling "shmoralizing". This will identify the key way in which the practice of moralizing differs from the practice of "shmoralizing".

I will start with the first stage.

Stage 1 Universalizability

At the first stage of universalizability, claims leave out indexicals such as "I" and "you" and speak only in generalities. A principle of the sort, "everybody should give their money to me" or, even, "John Smith should be executed" would not be universal in the sense that even this first level requires.

However, this first stage of universalizability would not rule out statements such as, "All political offices or offices of public trust shall be held by men", or "All blacks shall be held as slaves." These claims contain no indexicals. They say that political office can be held by anybody – so long as they are male. They say that anybody may be enslaved, so long as they are black.

Mackie asserts that this level cannot be said to be captured in the meanings of our moral terms, and can consequently be set aside. Insofar as we are looking for what is left in our moral terms after intrinsic prescriptivity is removed, we won't find it in Stage 1 universalizability.

Stage 2 Universalizability

Mackie would say that the second level of universalizability corresponds to the assumption that moral values contain an objective, intrinsic prescriptivity, and are captured in the meanings of moral terms.

> *In this second stage of universalization, we look for prescriptive maxims that we are prepared not only to apply to all persons (groups of persons, nations, and so on) alike as things are, but also to go on applying no matter how individuals change their mental and physical qualities and resources and social status. And we must allow not only for changes which may, as a matter of practical, causal, possibility come about, starting from where we are, but also for differences of condition and inversions of role that could not possibly occur, and which it may take a considerable effort even to imagine. (Mackie: p. 90)*

This removes the unfairness of saying that only men may hold public office because being a man represents a difference in mental and physical qualities. It would allow us to reject slavery based on race, since this, too, is not independent of physical qualities.

However, according to Mackie, this second level of universalization still allows another type of unfairness – an unfairness regarding interests and desires.

I believe that we can get a clearer idea of how second stage universalizability works – and its compatibility with an assumption of intrinsic prescriptivity - by looking at homosexuality.

The claim made against homosexual acts is that they are "unnatural" - which is a way of saying that they contain an intrinsic "ought-not-to-be-doneness" built into the very fabric of these actions. People explain their revulsion towards these types of activities in terms of their ability to correctly perceive and to respond to this property. Since it is an intrinsic property, anybody else who perceives these activities the same way should have the same reaction to them. If it turns out that some individuals do not respond correctly – if they want to do that which is intrinsically bad – then they suffer from a perversion,

a sickness, or perhaps some moral defect. People making moral evaluations can disregard these perverse, sick, or morally depraved desires or interests.

Shmoralizing uses Stage 3 universalizability, so let's look at that.

Stage 3 Universalizability

According to Mackie:

> *In this third stage we are taking some account of all actual desires, tastes, preferences, ideals, and values, including ones which are radically different from and hostile to our own, and consequently taking some account of all the actual interests that anyone has, including those that arise from his having preferences and values that we do not share . . . We must . . . look not for principles which can be wholeheartedly endorsed from every point of view, but for ones which represent an acceptable compromise between the different actual points of view. (Mackie: p. 93).*

Here, we will deny intrinsic prescriptivity. Continuing with our previous example, some people happen to prefer sexual relationships with people of the same gender, while other people happen to prefer sexual relationships with people of another gender. Neither are responding to anything that can be found in their preferred activities themselves. They simply have different likes and dislikes. We will refrain from discriminating based on desires and interests, as we do not discriminate based on gender and race.

This does not imply that we will say, "Everybody can do what they want, when they want, how they want, and with whom they want." That would be nonsense. Instead, what we will look for – in Mackie's terms "an acceptable compromise between different actual points of view". I will have more to say on this standard later.

Stage 2 Moralizing versus Stage 3 Shmoralizing

Here, in the distinction between Stage 2 and Stage 3 universalizing, we find the difference between common moralizing and "shmoralizing".

Morality assumes that the value is in things and that, where our likes and dislikes should track this value, we should all like the same things and dislike the same things. We should all want a heterosexual marriage and none of us should want a homosexual marriage.

Shmorality works on the assumption that there is no ought-to-be-liked and that its principles should consider differences in tastes and preferences as it would differences in gender and skin color. Some people have an interest in heterosexual marriage, some in homosexual marriage, and some in no marriage at all – and that's just the way people are.

> *This second sort of universalizability is linked with the fact . . . that moral judgments commonly include a claim of objectivity. The claim that some difference is objectively morally relevant in a certain context is not easy to reconcile with the admission that, while it appears relevant from*

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one interested point of view, it does not appear relevant from the point of view of someone whose situation and qualities are different. By contrast, the claim to objectivity has no tendency to support the third stage of universalization. Quite the reverse. It is all too easy to believe that the objective validity of one's own ideals provides an overwhelmingly strong reason for taking no account at all ideals that conflict with them, or of interests associated with including rival ideals (Mackie: pp. 96-7).

Whose Error?

Simon Blackburn did not recognize Mackie's shmoralizing, with its Stage 3 universalizing, to be something distinct from moralizing, with its Stage 2 universalizing.

So far, I have written as if this is Blackburn's fault because he failed to see that Mackie did, in fact, specify a difference between old-fashioned moralizing and his proposed improved moralizing.

However, another way of describing the issue is to say that Blackburn looked at Mackie's "shmoralizing" and found nothing in it that did not fit the word "moralizing" as it is commonly understood.

It may be the case that the reason Blackburn – and many who followed after him – failed to recognize a difference between "moralizing" and "shmoralizing" in Mackie's work was because Mackie made a mistake. Mackie was wrong to claim that "moralizing" contains as a part of its meaning a claim of objective, intrinsic prescriptivity. Consequently, when Mackie began "shmoralizing" later in his book, readers looked at it and said, "That's moralizing, too. What's going on here?"

It may be true that people, when they make moral claims, often assume a property of objective, intrinsic prescriptivity – that those who do not sense the same value in things are suffering from some defect – and that they use this to dismiss interests different from theirs. However, they can do all of this without building "intrinsic prescriptivity" into the very meaning of moral terms. They can do this simply by assuming that intrinsic prescriptivity exists and counts as one of the many types of reasons to act or refrain from acting – one of many considerations relevant in making evaluations.

Moral Realism and Shmoral Realism

We are now faced with two options. We can say that what Mackie does in his book is "shmoralizing" - something distinct from moralizing. Or we can say that what Mackie does in his book is simply one of the accepted and recognized forms of moralizing.

If we choose the first option, Mackie may be a moral anti-realist, but we may be forced to conclude that Mackie is, at least, a shmoral realist.

If we go with the second option, we may have to conclude that Mackie is, in fact, a moral realist. He thought he was a moral anti-realist, and he made several claims that would have supported this conclusion if those claims were true. However, one of those claims – a very important claim about the meaning of moral terms – may well be false. Consequently, Mackie's conclusion that he is an anti-realist may not be true either.

To determine whether Mackie turns out to be a shmoral realist (and, potentially, a moral realist), we will need to start by looking at what moral (or shmoral) realism comprises.

Realism

I will begin with a definition of realism offered by David Brink (Brink, p. 18).

> [Moral Realism]: (1) There are moral facts or truths, and (2) these facts or truths are independent of our evidence for them.

Now, Brink himself recognized that there is a certain ambiguity in this definition. There are two ways in which the first criterion can be denied. One can deny that moral claims can be true or false. This option applies, for example, to the emotivists (e.g., C.L. Stevenson) who claimed that moral utterances were expressions of approval and disapproval as in verbal cheers or boos. and prescriptivists (e.g., R.M. Hare) who equated moral claims to commands.

Another way of denying that there are moral facts or truths is to argue, as Mackie does under the assumption that moral claims attribute intrinsic prescriptivity, that moral claims have a truth value, but that they all are false.

Brink claims that both of these would contradict his first criterion.

> I construe cognitivism in ethics as the claim that we possess or could possess moral knowledge; so construed, cognitivism implies that there are moral facts and true moral propositions, and so implies nonnihilism. But this is not the only way of construing cognitivism; for instance, we could understand it as the claim that we can hold some cognitive attitude, such as belief, towards moral claims. (Brink: .. 18).

Geoffrey Sayre-McCord offered a different account of moral realism.

> (1) The claims in question, when literally construed, are literally true or false; (2) Some are literally true. (Sayre-McCord: p. 5)

One difference with Sayre-McCord's definition compared to Brink's is that it allows us to classify subjectivism as a type of realism. A statement of the form, "I like X", when literally construed, is literally true or false – and sometimes literally true.

I would like to employ a concept of moral realism that combines these two suggestions. It will make Brink's ambiguity explicit and, unlike Sayre-McCord's definition, allow us to classify subjectivism as a type of moral anti-realism.

> 1a) Moral claims, when literally construed, are literally true or false.

> 1b) Some are literally true.

> 2) These facts or truths are independent of our evidence for them.

Dividing up Brink's first criterion into two criteria accounts for the two ways of being an anti-realist. This definition also introduces the requirement that at least some moral claims are literally true.

Though this was not an explicit part of Brink's definition, I believe he would not protest that this distorts what he meant by moral realism. He, too, seemed to accept that moral realism requires at least some moral claims to be literally true.

> *Realism about the external world asks us to take the claims of the natural sciences and common sense physical theory literally, as claims that purport to describe more or less accurately a world whose existence and nature are independent of our theorizing about it. (Brink: p. 7).*

> *A moral realist thinks that moral claims should be construed literally, there are moral facts and true moral propositions, and moral judgments purport to state these facts and express these propositions. (Brink: p. 20).*

As both Brink and Sayre-McCord pointed out, an error theorist admits that we can have moral beliefs, but holds that all such beliefs must be false. Mackie denies that 1b is true of our common moral claims. However, I suggest that Mackie provides a way to create "shmoral" terms where 1b is, in fact, true.

J.L. Mackie's Shmoral (Moral?) Realism

Now that we have an account of what "shmoral" realism would look like, would Mackie have been a "shmoral" realist?

Here is an example of what a shmoral claim would look like.

> *Honesty is a virtue; and by this I mean that honesty as a universal character trait would generally tend to satisfy the interests of persons regardless of what those interests are.*

Note that this does not say that it satisfies all interests. Nor does it say that everybody necessarily has interests that would be supported by this practice. Nor does it say that nobody has interests that honesty would thwart. It merely says that a widespread disposition towards honesty would tend to satisfy the interests of persons.

It also does not exclude any interest on the basis of that interest having an intrinsic "ought-not-to-be-consideredness" built into it. All interests are considered – even those that eventually end up being thwarted.

To determine whether shmoral realism is possible, we need to determine if statements of this type fulfill the criteria for realism.

First: Is it the case that statements of this type are literally true or false?

It appears that they are. There is a fact of the matter as to whether honesty, if generally promoted within a community, will tend to promote the interests of persons regardless of what those interests are.

There will be a question as to whose interests we will consider. Does this include the interests of animals, the future interests of future generations, or the interests of people remote from the community in which the statement is made?

Here, we return to the analogy to location. Recall, with location, the location of something can only be given relative to something else. Countless location relationships are true at the same time. No location relationship has an intrinsic priority. Instead, we discuss different location relationships in different contexts, and report what is objectively true of those relationships.

Similarly, error-free shmoralizing can only say that there are different relationships between objects of evaluation and different groups of persons, we may get different answers about relationships to different groups, we focus on the ones that we have reason to talk about, and we must limit ourselves to that which is objectively true about those relationships. These would seem to be some of the requirements of error-free shmoralizing, but this is possible.

Second: Is it the case that some shmoral statements can be literally true?

All we need to prove this is one shmoral statement that is literally true, and one has already been provided above. A universal disposition towards honesty would, literally, tend to satisfy the interests of persons regardless of what those interests are. We could, perhaps, imagine a possible world in which this would not be the case. However, the fact that a statement would be false in some hypothetical fantasy world does not change the fact that it is literally true in our world.

Third, is it the case that the truth of a shmoral claim is independent of an agent's evidence for it?

Here, too, the answer is "yes." No matter what an agent believes, no matter what an agent desires, and no matter what an agent thinks is good or bad, it is the case that honesty, as a universal character trait, would generally tend to satisfy the interests of persons regardless of what those interests are. Moral relationships would be as independent of what an agent believed or wanted to be true of that relationship as location relationships are.

Mackie, it seems, would count as a "shmoral" realist.

Now, if we add the claim that Mackie was wrong about the meaning of moral terms – that what Mackie was doing was something that native English speakers would have easily and naturally understood to be moralizing, then it would follow that Mackie was also a moral realist. He simply thought (mistakenly) that he was a moral anti-realist because he did not correctly understand the meaning of moral terms. While all moral claims that attributed intrinsic prescriptivity would be false, at least some moral claims that related objects of evaluation to all interests would be true, and that truth would be as objective as truths regarding location.

Realisms and Anti-Realisms

Even here, there is a potential problem with declaring moral realism or moral anti-realism to be the one true and correct account of all morality. Nearly all of moral philosophy makes this type of claim – that

moral realism is true, or that moral anti-realism is true. However, there is a sense in which this may not be the best way of describing the situation.

Mackie gave us reason to worry that there could be a problem with this type of claim.

Let us assume that Mackie was correct in what he wrote, as it has been described here. Moral claims contain an intrinsic claim of intrinsic prescriptivity. Intrinsic prescriptivity does not exist. Thus, all of these claims are false. However, Mackie is introducing a new set of terms. He could have called this new institution "shmoralizing", but he did not. Instead, he sought to reform the original terms and simply use them in a new way – the way physicists reformed the use of the term "atom" (or, if we want another example, the way that physicians reformed the term "malaria" which, originally, meant "bad air").

He started to bring about this change in our use of moral language by writing his book. Let us assume that he acquired a few early adopters who went out into the world to teach people a new way of using moral terms.

There is no international body to define moral terms the way the International Astronomical Union can simply declare a new meaning to the term "planet". This change would take root slowly. It would take a great deal of effort and publicity to get the number of people using moral terms in these new ways up to one percent. However, we can imagine this project growing more successful over time so that the number of adherents continuing to grow beyond that to five percent, then ten percent, then twenty-five percent.

This would have important implications for the question of whether moral realism was true, or moral anti-realism was true.

The answer must be, "It depends on which definition of morality you are using. If you are using moral terms in the old way, then moral anti-realism is true because all moral claims are false. However, if you are using moral terms in the new way, moral realism would be true."

Technically, moral realism and moral anti-realism would not be both true at the same time. Saying so requires equivocating between two different definitions of the moral terms. However, it is the case that the answer to the question of whether moral realism is true may be, "Well, for those people over there who use terms as they do, it is true, while, for those others who are using moral terms in some other way, it is false." And the question of which is right and which is wrong would be comparable to the question of which definition of "planet" is the correct definition.

An Application - Normative Reasons

Finally, I would like to further illustrate Mackie's "shmoral realism" by applying it to a specific set of claims.

In a discussion of desire-based reasons versus value-based reasons for action, Chris Heathwood presented two arguments in defense of value-based reasons. He called the first of these arguments the Argument from Arbitrariness.

> *[I]f some desire is the ultimate basis for some reason, then there can be no reason for having this desire. If there were, then the desire wouldn't be the ultimate basis for the reason. Whatever supplied the reason for having the desire would be more fundamental. But if there is no reason for having the desire, then the desire is arbitrary. Thus, anytime it is supposed to be that some desire is providing a reason, this reason is ultimately based in arbitrariness. But, the argument claims, it can't work that way. Arbitrariness is anathema to reasons. If a "reason" is based ultimately on an arbitrary state—a state we have no reason to be in—it can't be a real reason after all. (Heathwood: p. 87).*

A Mackien response to this may go as follows: If arbitrariness is anathema to reasons, then the problem may exist in our definition of reasons. Fundamental non-arbitrary reasons simply do not exist. Consequently, all statements that make a claim that there are fundamentally non-arbitrary reasons are false.

This application of Mackie's error theory would tell us to drop "non-arbitrary" from the meaning of our reasons term and then continue on with the project of discussing reasons for action without continuing this mistake. Desires such as that for food, sex, aversion to pain, and desire for pleasure provide legitimate reasons for intentional action even if they are, in an important sense, somewhat arbitrary.

Evolutionary theory gives us reason to believe that these desires are, in fact, arbitrary in an important way.

Let us look, for example, at how pain is processed in the brain. It will not be necessary to understand pain in great detail. The only thing I am interested in drawing from the facts about pain is that things could have been different.

When I was a child, and had a throat that was so sore that I refused to eat or drink anything, I was given pills for the pain. Shortly after starting the pills, my mother gave me a glass of orange juice. Obviously, I thought, she did not love me anymore. However, as an obedient child, I drank the orange juice. I recall the same scratching, burning sensation in my throat as I swallowed the orange juice. However, it did not bother me. I finished the whole glass of orange juice without difficulty or suffering.

The explanation for this phenomenon is that the physical sensation of pain is processed in one part of the brain (the somatosensory cortex) while the aversion to pain – the wish to make it stop component - is processed in the limbic system. Pain dissociation results when the processing of pain in the somatosensory cortex remains while processing in the limbic system is blocked. The agent experiences the physical sensation of pain, without the desire to make it stop.

The brain processes in the limbic system give us our reason to avoid pain. As I drank my orange juice, I had no reason to avoid the burning and scratching sensation that it generated. That reason – the reason that had previously stopped me from eating and drinking – simply did not exist.

This is, admittedly, only a roughly accurate description. However, adding complexities will actually reinforce, rather than challenge, the claim that the way the brain processes pain could have been different.

We need not go into the details of this phenomena to use it to understand evolution.

Apparently, the brain structures responsible for generating the motivation to make pain stop proved useful in an evolutionary sense to our biological ancestors. Those ancestors who acted to make pain stop lived longer and had offspring while ancestors who lacked this response died out.

However, many factors responsible for our acquiring this disposition are contingent or arbitrary.

The arbitrary part comes from mutations occurring randomly – from the fact that copies of DNA in the offspring are not exact replicas of the DNA of the parent. It is purely on the basis of a string of accidents that our ancestors acquired the genetic traits that now give us not only our experience of pain, but our disposition to immediately and urgently make it stop, if possible.

This is not the only piece of luck involved in our acquisition of these evolved traits. A very beneficial trait could have been acquired by an individual who just so happened to have died in a freak accident, or somebody with a generally harmful trait could have been the only ones to have survived an accident that isolated them from the rest of their kind. Thus, a population came into existence where this trait was universal.

The contingent element comes from the fact that the fitness of these random mutations depends on the environment. For example, a trait that adapts a creature to a cold climate is of no use – and may even be deadly – if it shows up in a creature living in a tropical environment.

As it turns out, many of our most basic reasons are, in fact, arbitrary and contingent and could have been something other than what they are.

Heathwood also wrote:

> Here is a way to illustrate the point. A says to B, "What reason is there for you to do X?" B replies, "Doing X will lead to Y, and I want Y to occur." A inquires further, "Why do you want Y to occur?" (Heathwood: p. 88).

The answer is, "Because evolution and environment made me this way. Yes, I might have ended up some other way and only chance and contingencies made me this way, but this is the way I am and that's all there is to it."

A likely response to this would be that this is not a normative reason. A person might tell the same story about acquiring a desire to rape or a desire to kill and mutilate anybody who belongs to a competing tribe. That there is an evolutionary story to tell about a desire justifies nothing.

The objection does not prove that we do not value certain things because of a process of natural selection. Instead, it raises a question we should try to answer. Given that our values are grounded in

part on luck and contingent facts of our evolutionary past, how do we go about justifying some of those values?

Justification

The claim that our base desires are, in some strong sense, arbitrary does not imply that we must throw out justification.

Heathwood suggested that we had two options. Either our justifications for action – our reasons – must suffer from an infinite regress (each reason being justified by appeal to another, justified by appeal to yet another), or it must end at some sort of self-justifying reason. We can add to this the argument that the fundamental normative reason could be either a desire or a value. If it is a desire, then it is ultimately arbitrary. Arbitrariness is anathema to reasons. Therefore, it must be a value.

This dilemma is similar to a common problem in epistemology. There, too, some argue that we have two options. Either a belief must be justified by appeal to another belief, which is justified by appeal to another belief, ad infinitum, or there are some fundamental self-justifying beliefs that provide a foundation for other beliefs.

Many epistemologists recognize a third option – called coherentism. Coherentism justifies beliefs based on their membership in a large interconnected relationship of beliefs. The degree to which any belief is justified is determined by the number and strength of its connections to other beliefs, and the number and strength of the further connections of those beliefs. These justifications are infinite, in a sense, and even circular. However, epistemologists argue that these are not problems for a sufficiently large web of beliefs.

Following their lead, we can speak of desires being justified based on the number and strength of their connections to other desires. Those other desires, in turn, are evaluated by the number and strength of their connections. A desire that tends to fulfill many and strong desires (charity, honesty, kindness) would provide a good normative reason to perform those actions. A desire that tended to thwart other desires or prevent their fulfillment (cruelty, selfishness, sloth) would not.

Such a system, properly fleshed out, would fulfill Mackie's criterion that third-level universalizability treat no interest having an intrinsic property of "ought-to-be-consideredness" or "ought-not-to-be-consideredness". It would involve "*taking some account of all the actual interests that anyone has, including those that arise from his having preferences and values that we do not share.*" It would count as a form of error-free moralizing.

This would give us something like David Hume's moral theory, in which a character trait is judged according to the degree to which it is (1) agreeable to self, (2) useful to self, (3) agreeable to others, and (4) useful to others. This is simply an 18th century way of understanding the number and strength of the connections between one "character trait" (desire) and others.

It would also be a realist ethics, at least in the sense described above, since the relationships that desires have to other desires would be matters of fact independent of the beliefs that any agent has about those relationships or their interests regarding such relationships.

Conclusion

For a few decades now, J.L. Mackie's "error theory" has suffered from a significant misunderstanding.

Simon Blackburn argued that Mackie told us that moralizing depends on a mistake – an assumption of intrinsic prescriptivity – that made every moral claim false. Yet, he made moral claims, suggesting that this was a mistake we were doomed to continue making.

In fact, Mackie distinguished error-filled moralizing from error-free "shmoralizing" by relating the former to "Stage 2 universalizing" of moral claims and the latter to "Stage 3 universalizing".

Second stage universalizing says that moral principles should not only ignore indexicals, but also physical and social properties such as gender and skin color. Third-stage generalizing says that moral principles should also ignore interests, since no interest contains or points to anything that contains a property of intrinsic prescriptivity.

Once we see how shmoralizing works, we see that Mackie might be a shmoral realist. These relationships between objects of evaluation and desires exist as a matter of objective fact. Although the relationships we are interested in talking about depend on our interests, this still allows third-stage universalizing to generate moral claims that are as objective as claims about location - without requiring that we make claims about intrinsic prescriptivity.

There are two ways in which Mackie may have been – or become – a moral realist. This would be the case if Mackie was a "shmoral realist" and was wrong in thinking that moral terms did not capture "shmorality" under the term "morality". It would also be the case if the definition of moral terms changed as Mackie suggested.

I also argued that it is possible for moral realism and moral anti-realism to be true at the same time to the degree that people within a language adopt different meanings for the same terms. Even if Mackie was not a moral (old use) realist, he could still be a moral (new use) realist.

I then took Mackie's moral theory and applied it to an argument offered against desire-based normative reasons. The argument I applied it to criticized desire-based reasons as being fundamentally arbitrary and "arbitrariness is anathema to reasons". Mackie, I argued, could question this claim that non-arbitrariness was built into the meaning of normative reasons. Fundamentally non-arbitrary moral reasons do not exist. However, this does not imply that we needed to drop the concept of justification. We could still justify desire-based reasons using methods that are similar to Mackie's third stage universalization – by looking at the number and strength of the connections among desires.

Ultimately, this argues that it would be a mistake to say that Mackie was a moral anti-realist and, if you follow Mackie, you must hold that we are forever stuck with anti-realism. Rather, a better way of understanding Mackie may well be, "Moral realism is dead. Long live moral realism."

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