



# Queer Facts

The Good and The True



# A Conceptual Conflict

- \* Most people do not regard value judgments as objectively true or false.
- \* Yet most people make free and easy value judgments, speaking as if what they were saying were somehow *true*.
- \* Moreover, conflicts about value seem perfectly real and perfectly genuine.



# On one side. . .

- \* Value claims are not empirically verifiable.
- \* Only what is empirically verifiable is objectively true or false.
- \* So, moral claims are not objectively true or false.

VALUES ARE RELATIVE



# . . .And on the other

- \* People speak as if value judgments were more than mere make-believe.
- \* When it is said that genocide is *wrong*, or not morally *permissible*, the suggestion does not seem to be akin to, e.g.:
  - \* I don't like ginger ice-cream.
  - \* Boo Manchester United!



# Value Judgments Seem Unstable

- \* They strike many as *subjective* or *relative*.
- \* Yet, people expect them to have the binding or prohibitive force of the *objective* or *absolute*.



# Our Terminological Clarity

- \* A property  $\Phi$  is *subjective* =<sub>df</sub>  $\Phi$  is constitutively depends on the psychological attitudes or responses an observer has to some phenomenon.
- \* A property  $\Phi$  is *objective* =<sub>df</sub>  $\Phi$  is not subjective.



# The Conflict

- \* Value judgments are not objective, since there are, after all, no *value facts*. If they are not objective, it follows that value judgments are subjective.
- \* Value judgments are not subjective, since it is, after all, *true* that murder and rape are always and everywhere wrong. If they are not subjective, it follows that value judgments are objective.
- \* Plainly, however, no judgment is both objective and subjective. So, something must give.



# The Standard Resolution

- \* A retreat to relativism: If  $p$  seems true to  $S$ , then  $p$  is true *for*  $S$ .
- \* What do we think about the standard resolution?
  - \* We think it is *lame*.
  - \* What is this ' $p$  is *true-for-S*'?
    - \* If ' $p$  is *true-for-S*' simply means ' $p$  seems true to  $S$ ', then the standard resolution holds: If  $p$  seems true to  $S$ , then  $p$  seems true to  $S$ .
    - \* In that case, the standard resolution is unassailable.
    - \* Unassailable—and vapid.
    - \* As we said: *lame*



# Three Anti-Realist Theories

- \* Subjectivism: value properties are subjective.
  - \* ‘Stalin was evil’ means, roughly: ‘I don’t care for Stalin.’
- \* Non-cognitivism: value judgments do not really ascribe properties to objects or acts; they are not truth-evaluable.
  - \* ‘Stalin was evil’ means, roughly: ‘Stalin? Yuck!’
- \* Nihilism: value judgments do attempt to ascribe properties to objects—but there are no properties available for ascription.
  - \* ‘Stalin was evil’ means, exactly: ‘Stalin manifested the property of being evil.’
  - \* Unfortunately, there is no such property. So, the claim is false.



# Why are so many so shy about the non-standard resolution?

- \* Some prevalent but bad reasons:
  - \* There are value disagreements.
  - \* Cultural relativism (= descriptive relativism) is indubitably correct.
  - \* Humility and a principle of toleration commend subjectivism about morality.
- \* Some *prima facie* good reasons:
  - \* Epistemic: if there were truths about value, they would be unknowable.
  - \* Metaphysical: if there were normative truths, there would need to be normative facts; but there are no normative facts.



# A Shared Assumption of these Varieties of Anti-realism

- \* There are no normative facts.
- \* But why should we be so secure about this judgment?



# No Queer Facts, Thank You

- \* Mackie: Moral facts, if there were any, would be unlike all other facts, and known in ways not akin to the ways in which other facts are known. If moral knowledge of moral facts were possible, what could these possibly be? What could explain such things?
- \* Mackie's answer: Nothing.
- \* 'None of our ordinary accounts of sensory perception or introspection or the framing and confirming of explanatory hypotheses or inference or logical construction or conceptual analysis, or any combination of these' could explain the existence of moral facts or our knowledge of them.
- \* That would be just too 'queer'. —Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 37-38.



# Queer Facts?

- \* Two responses from the realist:
  - \* Yes, value facts are indeed queer. But that's okay. Maybe the world is queerer than we had realized.
  - \* No, value facts are not queer. Value facts are like other facts—and known as other facts are known.
- \* What Mackie claims is simply false: missing from his list is one perfectly commonplace way of knowing, viz. intellectual intuition:
  - \* The facts of logic and mathematics, e.g.  $(p \rightarrow \text{possibly } p)$
  - \* The facts of category theory, e.g.,  $\neg(\exists x)(x \text{ is sleepy} \ \& \ x \text{ divisible by two without remainder})$ ; or  $\neg(\exists x)(x \text{ is altogether red} \ \& \ x \text{ is altogether green})$



# Ethical Intuitionism

- \* There are moral facts.
- \* These facts are not especially queer; they are rather like other modal facts.
- \* They are known as other necessary facts are known, viz. by intellectual intuition.
- \* This is not an infallible source of knowledge; but there is no infallible source of knowledge.
- \* This is not a queer or even uncommon source of knowledge. We do it every day.
- \* Still, it does not follow that moral knowledge is easy knowledge.



# Is Goodness Objective?

- \* Moral anti-realists: No, of course not.
  - \* Don't be silly.
  - \* Grow up.
  - \* Morality is a myth sponsored by (pick your favourite): the Church; the frightened; the exploitative; the holders of power; the bourgeoisie; the white males in grey suits who control the world bank; the self-appointed enforcers of political correctness; or generally speaking, the agents of repression and social control.
- \* Moral realists: Yes, it is.
  - \* Would that really be so queer?



# A Final Word from the Original Realist: Plato

- \* Then, when they are fifty years old, one must lead those who have survived, and who have excelled in all matters and manners in both their deeds and their studies, to their immediate goal; and they must of necessity throw open the soul's shining eye, to focus on that very thing which provides light to all, and once they have seen the Good itself, they must use it as their paradigm when ordering the city, the citizens, and themselves (*Rep.* vii 540a4-b1).
- \* In the realm of what is known, the Form of the Good is the last thing learnt and is hardly ever seen; but once it has been seen, it is necessary to conclude that it is in every way the cause of all that is right and fine (*Rep.* vi 517b7-c1).