

Objective Morality



Just too queer?

A Conceptual Conflict

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

On one side. . .

- ❖ Moral claims are not empirically verifiable.
- ❖ Only what is empirically verifiable is objectively true or false.
- ❖ So, moral claims are not objectively true or false.

. . . and on the other

- ❖ People speak as if moral 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!

The Conflict

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

Some Terminological Clarity

- ❖ A property Φ is *subjective* =_{df} Φ constitutively depends on the psychological attitudes or responses an observer has to some phenomenon.
- ❖ A property Φ is *objective* =_{df} Φ is not subjective.

Illustrations

- ❖ Some subjective properties:
 - ❖ being amusing
 - ❖ being fashionable
 - ❖ being gaudy (in the sense of Dickens, ‘an intricate winding of gaudy colours. . .’)
- ❖ Some objective properties:
 - ❖ being square
 - ❖ being positively charged
 - ❖ being even

Moral 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*.

One 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: moral properties are subjective.
 - ❖ ‘Stalin was evil’ means, roughly: ‘We don’t care for Stalin.’ (= Stalin has the property of being disliked by us. This is no doubt an accurate report of our likes and dislikes, but says nothing more about Stalin himself—rather like our saying that we don’t like ginger ice cream.)
- ❖ Non-cognitivism: moral judgments do not really ascribe properties (or even try to ascribe properties) to objects or acts; they are not truth-evaluable.
 - ❖ ‘Stalin was evil’ seems to ascribe a property to Stalin, but upon reflection we find that it does no such thing. It means, roughly: ‘Stalin? Yuck!’ or ‘Boo Stalin!’ (= We’re not trying to ascribe a property to Stalin and so not failing to do so; we’re not even making a claim at all.)
- ❖ Nihilism: moral judgments do attempt to ascribe properties to objects—but there are no such properties available for ascription.
 - ❖ ‘Stalin was evil’ means exactly what it seems to mean: ‘Stalin manifested the property of being evil.’
 - ❖ Unfortunately, there is no such property. So, the claim is false.

A Shared Assumption of these Varieties of Anti-realism

- ❖ There are no moral 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, moral facts are indeed queer. But that's okay. Maybe the world is queerer than we had realized.
 - ❖ No, moral facts are not queer. Moral 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. ($p \rightarrow$ possibly p)
 - ❖ The facts of category theory, e.g.,
 - ❖ Nothing is such that it is both sleepy & divisible by two without remainder.
 - ❖ Nothing is such that it is both altogether red & altogether green.

Why are so many so shy about realism?

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

One of the Bad Reasons

- ❖ No law-givers, no laws.
 - ❖ This seems to be the frightened hope motivating the DCTM we encountered earlier.
 - ❖ Proponents of the DCTM evidently want the binding force of an objective law in the guise of a subjective law.
 - ❖ This presupposition tends to conflate objective and subjective laws.
 - ❖ To be sure, there are subjective laws, some just, some unjust—these are especially civic or societal laws, laid down by intersubjective agreement or implied force.
 - ❖ The laws of physics and mathematics are not subjective laws; so, they are objective laws.
 - ❖ Perhaps there are no laws of morality (if, say, nihilism is correct). Then again, might there be objective laws of morality?
 - ❖ What strikes some people as odd: that there should be laws that are both objective and normative.

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?

Ethical Intuitionism

- ❖ There are moral facts.
 - ❖ These facts are not especially queer; they are rather like 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.

A Final Word from the Original Realist

❖ 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 (Plato, *Rep.* vi 517b7-c1).