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# Objective Morality

Some Preliminaries

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# A Conceptual Conflict

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- ❖ 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.

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## On one side. . .

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- ❖ 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.

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## . . . and on the other

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- ❖ 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!

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# The Conflict

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- ❖ 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.

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# Some Terminological Clarity

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- ❖ A property  $\Phi$  is *subjective* =<sub>df</sub>  $\Phi$  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.

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# Illustrations

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- ❖ 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

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# Descriptive Claims

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- ❖ Descriptive claims purport to describe the world as it is.
- ❖ One may fairly and uncontroversially ask, when confronted with a descriptive claim: is this claim true or false? What fact, if any, makes this claim true?
  - ❖ Some examples:
    - ❖ Margaret Thatcher was the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.
    - ❖ The speed of light in a vacuum is 299,792,459 metres per second.
    - ❖ N.b. that we may not actually know the truth value of this or that descriptive claim:
      - ❖ Uruguay won the first World Cup, in 1930.
      - ❖ It is not possible that anything can travel faster than the speed of light.

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# Normative Claims

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- ❖ Normative claims make appeal, explicitly or implicitly, to some *norm*; they are generally evaluative or prescriptive.
- ❖ Some examples:
  - ❖ Wagner is the greatest opera composer of all time.
  - ❖ One should never harm another person willingly.
  - ❖ ‘Those who would give up essential liberty, to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.’ (Benjamin Franklin)
  - ❖ You really should do something about that brother of yours.

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# A Dispute about Normativity

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- ❖ Although many people suppose this is so, we do not want to make it *definitional* of normativity that normative statements are not truth evaluable.
- ❖ Consider:
  - ❖ Murder is always and everywhere wrong.
    - ❖ If there are *moral facts*, then this is simply true.
  - ❖ The sunset over the Alps was simply gorgeous.
  - ❖ Each person should always pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively.
- ❖ The crucial point: such statements make implicit or explicit appeal to some norm, either prescriptively or by being evaluative.

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# Moral Judgments, as Normative, Seem Unstable

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

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# One Standard Retreat

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- ❖ 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*

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# Two Types of Relativism

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- ❖ Descriptive Relativism (DR): different societies / sub-cultures / individuals have different attitudes regarding the moral permissibility of the same sorts of acts.
  - ❖ The Romans and the Americans of an earlier day thought slavery was permissible; we do not.
- ❖ Moral Relativism (MR): When societies / sub-cultures / individuals differ in their moral judgements, their disagreements are not even in principle resolvable.
  - ❖ There are no moral facts.
- ❖ Two important non-connections:
  - ❖ DR  $\neq$  MR
  - ❖ Possibly DR is true and MR is false. That is to say, then, that DR does not entail MR.

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# A Presupposition of Anti-Realism

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- ❖ There are no moral facts.
- ❖ But why should we be so secure about this judgment?

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# No Queer Facts, Thank You

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- ❖ 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.

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# Queer Facts?

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- ❖ 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.  $(p \rightarrow \text{possibly } p)$
      - ❖ 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.

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# Why are so many so shy about realism?

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- ❖ 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.

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# One of the Bad Reasons

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- ❖ 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.

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# Is Goodness Objective?

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- ❖ 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?