

The chapter entitled “Objectivity in Ethics: Two Difficulties, Two Responses”¹ begins by considering some difficulties that were outlined by a previous moral philosopher, J. L. Mackie, on the topic of the purported objectivity of ethical judgments. The first difficulty is what is known (in terms that have not aged well, originally from an Australian philosopher, and so speaking using a British vernacular from the middle of the last century) as the “Argument from Queerness” (here is a link to a good encyclopedia page containing an overview of the argument with references: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-anti-realism/moral-error-theory.html>)

Wiggins describes this argument as the “metaphysical *peculiarity* of such things as values or obligations” (325, emphasis mine). This is to say that values and obligations are like nothing else in the world -- they are not facts, they are not properties of things, etc., so if they *are real*, then what are they? Wiggins goes on to say that in order for such ‘peculiar’ entities to have any sort of claim for us, then we should have to understand ourselves as possessing a kind of ‘peculiar’ faculty for perceiving/noticing them. In the way that the capacity that bats have for echo-location could be said to be a ‘faculty’ of bats (like our faculty for seeing, hearing, etc.) for detecting real things that may or may not be in their path or may or may not be tasty treats, so we should need to have some sort of faculty for detecting values/obligations where they are real. This argument depends upon the apparent strangeness of values/obligations, and so is not a conclusive argument against objectivity in ethics, but only makes this objectivity seem to be an unreachable goal, something very strange, or perhaps an article of faith more than anything real (i.e., objective, in a scientific way of understanding that term).

The first difficulty is this ‘peculiarity’ or the ‘queerness’ of values/obligations.

The second difficulty is related to the theme of relativism. In the text (p. 325) this is described as the ‘variability of some important starting points for moral thinking and their actual dependence on actual ways of life’ (citing Mackie). This is to say that no ethical judgment can be objective, because everybody (potentially) views values/obligations differently. We will call this second problem *relativity*.

In Wiggins’s description of Mackie’s argument, Mackie comes across as someone who thinks that ethics/moral theory has primarily been about ways of encouraging the sorts of behaviors that we ought to approve of, not as reflecting anything like a ‘natural law’ implanted by God, but something that has been ‘constructed’ to spur people on to behaving in ways of which we approve.

But the question here is how these ‘ways of which we approve’ are settled -- in Wiggins’s words: “It gradually becomes evident [according to Mackie] that there is no real possibility of specifying in advance *the one objective* that the morality device is to encompass.” (328) Meaning that the constructed device which Mackie regards morality/ethics to be needs some sort of guidance in its functioning. But what this guidance will be is never settled by Mackie, and cannot be since, for Mackie, there is no obvious objective candidate to slide into this guiding role.

¹ Citations will be to the required text of the course.

But Wiggins thinks that Mackie is looking in the wrong places for objective ethical judgments. He draws a nice analogy with thought from mathematics on p. 330, and I would suggest that we look at that argument in particular:

“Consider the efforts of a philosopher of arithmetic who seeks to reconcile us to the wondrous ontology of natural numbers by showing how naturally and seemingly inevitably it is cantilevered from the first of the indefinitely many needs that arithmetic is to subserve, namely that of counting the ordinary objects of human experience. Just as we can see the achieved satisfaction of all these needs as sustaining, well enough, the ontology of natural numbers and the corresponding ideology (conceptual apparatus) of their properties, can we not see the inward or lived accumulated aims of ethical thinking as sustaining the proper ontology and ideology of first-order ethics?” (330)

This is an interesting argument to unpack, and I suggest you try it out on your own before reading further. Translate it into an argument where you can understand and feel like you can justify each of the steps.

The argument that you made should look something like this:

- 1) Numbers might be said to be ontologically queer (i.e., they don't have any resemblance to objects in the world where these objects are conceived scientifically).
- 2) But we seem to not have that much of a problem saying that numbers are objective.
- 3) We seem to not have that much of a problem with the objectivity of numbers because there are many aspects of human life which call for and demand something like the conceptual reality of numbers.
- 4) So because of the various necessary uses that numbers have in our lives, their ontological queerness is not a reason to doubt their objectivity.
- 5) We seem to have similar needs for moral/ethical concepts in our lives.
- 6) It thus seems that the ontological queerness of moral/ethical concepts should not automatically be thought of as a challenge to their objectivity.

At the start of 11.4 Wiggins points out (citing Hilary Putnam's important essay *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*) that a lot of philosophical effort has been spent trying to isolate what is meant by a 'fact' which distinguishes it from a value. Wiggins decides he won't take this road in following up on the problems from Mackie.

The question Wiggins briefly pursues is what it is like to think of something as true. The sense of truth he is after in the paper is the kind of judgment 'about which there is nothing else to think', "there being nothing else to think but that X" (331). Wiggins emphasizes here that he doesn't say "there is nothing else *for us* to think but that so and so" because the thought is that this does not capture the idea of truth.

Wiggins will defend the idea that there are some ethical truths (call one of them *T*) that are true exactly in the sense that “there is nothing else to think but that *T* is true.” We might illustrate this sort of a claim, again, with a mathematical parallel -- there is nothing else to think except that $2+2=4$. But I will come back to this below.

Let’s go over one of Wiggins’s arguments against one of Mackie’s positions, as he begins some new criticisms here after outlining the central ideas of his paper: “the first point that needs to be made here is that a non-natural property [i.e., a ‘queer’ entity] is something less strange than Mackie seems to suppose.” (333) Wiggins cites Putnam’s essay in order to begin his own criticism of Mackie:

“How can there be ‘value facts’? After all, we have no sense organ for detecting them...

Consider the parallel question: ‘How could we come to tell that people are *elated*? After all, we have no sense organ for detecting elation.’ ... [Answer:] Once I have acquired the concept of elation, I can see that someone is elated.... Perception is not innocent; it is an exercise of our concepts.” (on Wiggins’ 334)

This is an interesting and still-expanding line of research. Ask yourself about what you understand a fact to be, and how you perceive that something is factually evident to you. And then ask *what* it is that you are perceiving. Are you seeing the value-neutral givens of inhuman nature before you yourself filter them into significance, *OR* is the very act of perception itself ‘an exercise of our concepts’??? This latter option is part of a long line of post-Kantian argumentation in philosophy that is certainly a tangent for me to get into here, but if you’d like references I’d be happy to give them.

This is to say, “once you have the concept of elation [i.e., to be exceedingly happy! Once you know what that word/concept means] then you already know what to look for as evidence of someone’s being elated, you do not need an extra sensory organ to understand elation.

Wiggins uses the example of being ‘considerate’ -- whatever it means to be considerate, or whatever qualities that involves, clearly is related to some sort of ethical interest that we have. To talk about someone as ‘considerate’ is usually an act of praise, we might, in a different register, talk about considerateness as a virtue, etc., What does it mean, then, to see that someone is being considerate, or to judge that some one is considerate? Whatever properties might be thought to be involved (‘queer’ properties or ‘natural’ properties) in seeing *that* such properties are there in a person, these properties only become visible in light of our capacity to understand what it means to be considerate. This is to say “Such properties are to be conceived *in the light of what it takes to exercise that grasp* -- not vice-versa.” (334) The vice-versa side would be to say that we only recognize an ethical/value property by seeing those marks or behaviors or traits which we then, using some sort of special interpretive mechanism, interpret as being ‘considerate.’

“The objectivity of the reasonable exercise of the grasp of an ethical concept is not established by reference to the product of some *independent* understanding of the property.” (335)

Remember: this is part of an argument against the sort of peculiarity of value/ethical concepts or obligations. That argument said that because these sorts of things are unnatural, then they cannot have any objective claim on human attention. Wiggins's argument (borrowed from Putnam) here is to say that it is a bad philosophical move to think that we can understand *anything at all* on the basis of human-independent givens. It is not through some 'independent' understanding of a property that I come to have concepts, but, somewhat counter-intuitively, that I come to perceive certain things as products or grounds for conceiving or identifying someone as X in light of my understanding of the concept X.

Wiggins continues this thought onto 336 by elaborating an idea about the objectivity of our concepts. This is to say against a famous dictum/motto from a Sophist of Ancient Greece (Protagoras), Wiggins hopes to provide some evidence for thinking that our concepts are rooted in what he calls a 'human scale.'

Essentially, it seems to me, the line of thinking is just this:

Protagoras claims that 'Human beings themselves are the measures of all things.' This is to say that there is no standpoint which could ground the human standpoint *from outside of that standpoint*, and so we will never have anyway of understanding ourselves as "getting things right" in a way that transcends our own perspective. But the argument on 336 seems to say the following.

Let's take the measurement metaphor seriously. We might say -- "Ok, sure, human beings have constructed the various systems of measurement, and not all of them agree on what units to privilege.' But this doesn't mean -- quite the contrary -- that they disagree about the relevant phenomena to be measured, and it seems that all of these measurements are given from a human point of view (i.e., are not given in units which are impossible for humans to think).

For Wiggins these measurements must be engaged in ways "that we can find out about or pursue or care about" things that are a part of human life as we are coming to understand it. (336)

"Morality is not just one among numerous possible ways of thinking about how we are impinged upon from without [i.e., how we are merely affected by the world or nature]. It is our response to things which, in the light of certain distinctive unforsakeable concerns, matter distinctively. Our sense of how they matter and why they matter is something we come to understand progressively more exactly, moreover, as we join with others in the business of applying or refusing to apply one or another ethical predicate to that which we confront or look out upon in the ordinary business of work, survival, or participation in shared enterprises." (*ibid.*)

This seems to defuse the 'queerness' argument -- and it also says something about relativism along the way. But in the course of the article, Wiggins makes stronger claims about 'what we cannot help but think' if we are to understand any of these predicates at all. This is to say that later in the article he discusses the moral harm of slavery. He makes a rather startling claim that

there is nothing else for us to think but that slavery is wrong ('unjust and insupportable'). The point of his thinking here is that there is no room for us to quibble about slavery when it comes to understanding what sort of things 'right' or 'wrong' are in light of the preceding material which argue that our understanding of rightness or wrongness are not given to us from without and are not natural properties of things in the world. His point is to say that the very same capacity which we use in understanding what slavery is *already can tell us* that it is wrong. This is to say that it is not a matter of relativism, but really only an extension of the kinds of concepts that he has just argued are a part of our 'unforsakeable' concerns in life and in ethics which provide a guide for understanding the objective truth of certain moral judgments.

This latter part of the article will not make sense unless you understand what he is saying about the basis of our application of concepts in judgment, and that even if they are constructions they nevertheless exert a force of objectivity.