

The anthropocentricity of ethical norms, or the impossibility of a Copernican revolution in ethics

E.P. Brandon

I

The fundamental point is not new. It may perhaps go back to Xenophanes' thought that horses would conceive gods as horses.¹ I wish to find in it strong support for the subjectivity of ethical value.

The contrast subjective/objective is of course by no means clear. Rather than focus on possible ways of taking the contrast, I propose to make use of what I claim is an associated point. Items we take to be objective are such that we have to allow for various ways in which, as a matter of fact, they may be radically different from how we conceive them to be. We have many examples where we think not only that they may be, but most probably are, radically different. Philosophically interesting examples here will be contentious, but one might suggest colour, the nature of spatio-temporal relations, or the idea of a self as a ghostly tenant of the body. Less grandiosely, we have uncontentious examples in the unmoving earth and much else of our unschooled conception of things around us.

Mackie (*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 21 [Penguin, 1977]) reports Hare as not understanding what the objectivity of ethical value was all about. There are certainly problems in understanding what objective values would be like – Mackie made those problems a central part of his case against them – but let us leave those issues aside and grant that we have some conception of objectivity in this context (or that, since we have no grasp of what quantum mechanics tells us about the physical world, it may not matter too much). I propose then that one aspect of what the objectivity of ethical value would entail is that we could be as radically mistaken about it as we have proved to be about the lack of motion of the earth. If values were objective, a Copernican revolution² with

¹ “But if cattle or lions had hands, so as to paint with their hands and produce works of art as men do, they would paint their gods and give them bodies in form like their own-horses like horses, cattle like cattle.” Taken from <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/presoc/Xenophan.html> [Zeller, 525, n. 2. Diog Laer. iii. 16; Cic. *de nat. Deor.* i. 27].

² It was Kant who gave the notion of a Copernican revolution, or perhaps more appropriately an anti-Copernican revolution, a central place in our philosophical thinking when he claimed that his own reworking of our cognitive state exhibited important analogies with what Copernicus had done for our self-conception. Kant tells us (*Critique of Pure Reason*, Introduction, trans. N. Kemp Smith, p. 22) “Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge. This would agree better with what is desired, namely, that it should be possible to have knowledge of objects *a priori*, determining something in regard to them prior to their being given. We should then be proceeding precisely on the lines of Copernicus' primary hypothesis. Failing of satisfactory progress in explaining the movements of the heavenly bodies on the supposition that they all revolved round the spectator, he tried

respect to them would be possible. My argument is that no one would countenance that as a real possibility, so the implicit commitments of *soi disant* objectivists make them subjectivists in Mackie's sense.

In saying that objectivity brings with it the possibility of radical error I am assuming that whatever provokes our thought is not self-guaranteeing. A lot of what we think we simply pick up from our social environment, and some of that is purely fictitious. When perceptual experience exists to support our cognition, there may be extremely unspecific existentially quantified claims that are not likely to be mistaken (I shall leave aside sceptical hypotheses of evil demons or brains in a vat which could possibly be invoked to undermine even this much), but the point about the examples mentioned is that much of the straightforward specific detail can be wrong: a pink ice cube is not a continuous chunk of pink stuff. Given that this is so for our ordinary beliefs about the world around us it would surely be most peculiar if an exception should be made for our normative beliefs. It would no doubt be salutary to inquire where those beliefs come from: Freud has offered us a story of the aetiology of the Kantian conscience that would undermine its claims to objective authority. Even granting that Freud may have got it wrong, there most probably are stories to be told here that equally subvert our normative intuitions.³

II

How can we acquire a feel for Copernican alternatives to the ethical values we currently endorse? I propose to borrow Hume's notorious supposition that this universe is not the work of an omnipotent and beneficent creator who made us in his image but, as local observation might well suggest:

This world ... is very faulty and imperfect, compared to a superior standard; and was only the first rude essay of some infant deity, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance: it is the work only of some dependent, inferior deity; and is the object of derision to his superiors: it is the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated deity; and ever since his death, has run on at adventures, from the first impulse and active force which it received from him. (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part V, p. 168 of the Kemp Smith edition, from <http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/dnr.htm>)

These wild conjectures at least afford us the possibility of thinking that the over-riding goal of such incompetent creators might be the flourishing of beetles, dolphins, or the

whether he might not have better success if he made the spectator to revolve and the stars to remain at rest. A similar experiment can be tried in metaphysics, as regards the *intuition* of objects." From <http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~ppp/cpr/prefs.html>.

³ There are other aspects of a supposedly objective system of norms that may well be questioned, once its objectivity is taken seriously. For instance, it is often supposed that such systems are complete (but cf. T. Nagel, 'The Fragmentation of Value' in his *Mortal Questions*, ch. 9 [Cambridge University Press, 1979]), but why should an independent, objective system of norms cover every possibility, any more than that there really is a great chain of being with every possible intermediate entity?

fractal intricacies of planetary systems. I am, of course, supposing that one source of objectivity could be the will of a creator – following in this, Mackie’s preferred way of avoiding the Euthyphro dilemma (*op. cit.*, p. 231).

A sufficiently indeterministic world, or a deterministic world with a sufficiently incompetent creator, could operate in ways that the creator did not desire, and so one could see some way in which there might be norms applying to inanimate matter. But it is much easier to think in terms of norms that apply first and foremost to the actions of reflective agents.

We could then suppose that one of Hume’s apprentice demiurges may have put us in as bit players in a cosmic drama focused on quite another galaxy; the rules for the universe might not speak to our concerns at all, any more than ours speak to the interests of oysters.

III

My claim is that scenarios such as these would be rejected as not giving us what ethical norms are for: guidance on how *we* should live *our* lives. I think the rejection cannot be that such norms are logically impossible – the Humean suppositions are intended to show that they are logically possible. But rather it must be that the only norms that matter to us are ones that apply to us, that speak to our concerns and our condition. Supposedly objective norms must be anthropocentric in this way, even if it turns out that they apply more widely than to our own species. It is as if you were confronted with a problem in playing football but the only rule-book you could find was for cricket. I submit that if that was your situation you would just have to decide how to proceed – you might not be following what FIFA has laid down, but too bad, you need to go on with the game. If the universe has been given, not to Man, but to super-intelligent beings in Alpha Centauri, we have still to go on with our game, and I don’t think we would decide to devote all our efforts to trying to discover what they would like us to do for them.

While we are playing with theological fantasies, let us assume that Ba’al is our actual task-master, and that those who sacrificed their children to him got it right. Again, my suspicion is that our objectivists would be horrified, and would reject the objectively grounded norm in favour of what they now regard as more enlightened. We would defy the objectively grounded rules (cf. Karamazov’s defiance of forgiveness for those who butchered babies).⁴ But that, or the assurance of the impossibility of my supposition that

⁴ “If all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have children to do with it, tell me, please? It’s beyond all comprehension why they should suffer, and why they should pay for the harmony.... Some jester will say, perhaps, that the child would have grown up and have sinned, but you see he didn’t grow up, he was torn to pieces by the dogs, at eight years old. Oh, Alyosha, I am not blaspheming! I understand, of course, what an upheaval of the universe it will be when everything in heaven and earth blends in one hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud: ‘Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed.’ When the mother embraces the fiend who threw her child to the dogs, and all three cry aloud with tears, ‘Thou art just, O Lord!’ then, of course, the crown of knowledge will be reached and all will be made clear. But what pulls me up here is that I can’t accept that harmony.... I don’t want the mother to embrace the oppressor who threw her son to the dogs! She dare not forgive him! Let her forgive him for

the truth about morality might be more “primitive” than our current conception, is in effect to privilege our actual thinking over whatever might be its objective grounding.

If that is how people would reject the relevance of radically different objective norms, what they are doing is in effect putting our lives first in the order of things. I claim that they can only be assured that supposedly objective morality does fit the bill if in fact it is up to us what it looks like, that is to say, if we are indeed inventing it *à la* Mackie.

Lakoff and Johnson (*Philosophy in the Flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought* [Basic Books, 1999]) claim that western philosophy has been a matter of what one might call the anthropology of ideas, a reflective exploration of the varying conceptions we have employed. Western philosophy has, of course, seen itself as doing more, limning the ultimate structures of the world. It is not my present purpose to consider the ambivalence of Lakoff and Johnson’s considered view of what (western) philosophy might become, once it learns the lessons of their neuropsychology, but simply to make use of their pleasingly simple contrast. Whatever one might want to say about the aspirations of metaphysics or philosophy of language, it seems to me that Lakoff and Johnson have got to be right about ethics, since there is nothing else for the subject to be than the reflective exploration of our varying ideas about these matters. Or, at least, there is no further reality of the sort objectivists have supposed there to be, whereas there is a reality of some sort answering to our metaphysical or linguistic speculations.

Just as philosophy might, for Lakoff and Johnson, get beyond ethnography if it listens to the third wave of research in cognitive science, there might be something more than the seeking of a reflective equilibrium for moral philosophy, if what I have said is correct. The Mackean view says in effect, given what our lives are like, what “the human condition” is like, here are some ways of coping with it, of achieving at least some of our aims. This is a field where we may hope, not only to describe what we have evolved by way of coping mechanisms, but also perhaps to discover new ones. They would, of course, lack objective prescriptivity, but they would be pertinently discoveries. One might try to see some examples of what we like to think of as moral progress in this light. Utilitarian criticism of savage punishments showed, among other things, that they simply didn’t work very well to achieve goals that everyone would want to see achieved. Some of the criticisms of slavery or of patriarchy work in similar ways, arguing that these institutions deform those who appear to benefit from them.

herself, if she will, let her forgive the torturer for the immeasurable suffering of her mother’s heart. But the sufferings of her tortured child she has no right to forgive; she dare not forgive the torturer, even if the child were to forgive him! And if that is so, if they dare not forgive, what becomes of harmony? Is there in the whole world a being who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? I don’t want harmony. From love for humanity I don’t want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it’s beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It’s not God that I don’t accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket.” Taken from <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/d/dostoyevsky/d72b/index.html>. (F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book V, ch. 4 [trans. C. Garnett].)

Some of the features of Mackie's position may be seen more clearly if we note that we can similarly think about the situation of any other living creature and use the facts of its condition to indicate what would be conducive to its flourishing and what would be inimical. In doing this one needs no more than the facts of the case. One is deriving hypothetical imperatives (if you want healthy rabbits, give them lettuce; if you want a virulent strain of smallpox virus, ...). The associated ought-statements acquire a truth-value from the basic claims on which they are based, given the agent's desires. They are not the sort of thing that objectivists about morality want; they are not absolute, unconditional requirements.

It may not be unfair to say that the Aristotelian tradition has seen humans as equally covered by these hypothetical imperatives as rabbits or viruses. Some of us, however, think that there is a significant difference, in that it is not obvious that we can put many constraints on what will count as flourishing for human beings. We can specify some machinery that generally helps with whatever specific goals one might have (institutions to promote co-operation, for instance). What we can also do, however, is specify various ways in which human life does not flourish, and for liberals that might be enough by way of objectively based hypothetical imperatives to be going on with.

IV

What I have just done is echo very briefly some of the points Mackie made to ground the utility of his morality in the narrow sense. If I am right in seeing them all as hypothetical imperatives, we have perhaps part of an explanation for what has seemed puzzling to several commentators (my earlier self included) in Mackie's overall position. The puzzle is that on the one hand he thinks most people's conception of morality is shot through with erroneous assumptions about objective prescriptivity, while on the other he wants us to self-consciously refashion a moral code understood without the factitious packaging. The puzzlement is similar to that occasioned some years ago by the then Bishop of Woolwich's apparent atheism combined with continuing practice as an Anglican bishop.

As Burgess has observed ('Error Theories and Values' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 76 [4] 534-552, 1998), there are many cases where we want to say that there is an admixture of pervasive error in ordinary conceptions of things; what we think we ought to do next can vary from outright scrapping of the conception to continuing with that language game with a more sophisticated interpretation on hand when we need it. (Burgess' examples include witches for the first rejectionist strategy and engineers' reliance on Newtonian theory for the opposite strategy of speaking with the vulgar.)

The resolution in Mackie's case would then be something like this. For the elements in the narrow core of morality we can find a basis in the human condition that makes them likely to be necessary⁵ for whatever other projects we might have. That basis shows them

⁵ I am letting myself off too easily by qualifying 'necessary' here. I think it needs argument to show that a feasible alternative to morality in the narrow sense is not available that would do the trick. My feeling is that any proposed alternative will turn out to be ordinary morality minus its objectivist pretensions, but that feeling is not an argument.

as intelligible and desirable in general without having to invest them with any factitious authority – Burgess draws attention to Mackie’s passing comment that “perhaps the truest teachers of mortal philosophy are the outlaws and thieves who, as Locke says, keep faith and rules of justice with one another, but practice these as rules of convenience without which they cannot hang together” (Mackie, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11) – if outlaws can live with the objective truth about morality, so can the rest of us⁶ so we can reasonably propose to ourselves a project that includes both recognising that basis as all there is for morality in the narrow sense and drawing the consequences of that recognition for our extension beyond the narrow core to encompass wider and less constrained values.⁷ It is important that this way of presenting the issue does not operate with an “all or nothing” approach: we can deny that there is an objective requirement for Y without saying that consequentially anything goes, or that our moral demands on each other are nothing more than expressions of subjective feelings. The human condition generates the utility of X which itself, when extended, has an “elective affinity” with Y.

⁶ As Burgess also comments, it is perhaps odd that Mackie did not offer an account of what outlaws, or John Mackie himself, meant by their use of first order moral language.

⁷ It is part of this suggestion that a revisionary view of morality will not destroy everything of current value. But I think it must also be acknowledged that revisionary views of morality (and of other associated claims about the universe) will undermine many values *some* people currently espouse. Such people are then right to fear the consequences of teaching the truth about (meta-)ethics (cf. Jeremy Waldron, ‘Hobbes, Truth, Publicity and Civil Doctrine’ in A. Rorty (ed.), *Philosophers on Education*, ch. 10 [Routledge, 1998]).