



Review of J. L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory*

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Hume's Moral Theory, by J. L. Mackie. (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1980. Pp. vii + 166. Paperback £4.50, cloth £8.95.)

After a brief introduction and a short chapter on some of Hume's predecessors - Hobbes, Shaftesbury, Clarke, Wollaston, Mandeville, Hutcheson and Butler - Mr. Mackie proceeds to discuss Hume's own moral theory. This Mackie divides into three parts. First there is a chapter on Hume's moral psychology. Secondly, there are two chapters on Hume's moral epistemology, one on Hume's criticism of his opponents' view that moral distinctions are derived from (Mackie says 'based upon') reasons, and another on Hume's positive contention that moral distinctions are derived from a moral sense. Thirdly, there are another two chapters on Hume's contribution to substantive moral philosophy - if that is what it is. One is on justice and the other artificial virtues, the other on the natural virtues. A chapter on some of Hume's successors - Smith (Adam, not to be confused with the lesser known Alexander Smith), Price and Reid - precedes a concluding chapter, which among other things discusses the advantages and disadvantages of morality.

Mackie appears to think that Hume's moral psychology is confined to a discussion of the one statement that reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions. By 'ought only to be the slave of the passions' Mackie thinks Hume means that it is not the case that reason ought not to be the slave of the passions, which makes Mackie suggest that Hume is denying a moral proposition, not asserting one. But it could equally be taken to mean that reason ought not to be anything other than the slave of the passions, which looks more like a moral proposition. (If all moral propositions were false, the first might be true, but the second false.)

Mackie criticises Hume's view on the grounds that

there is a very common kind of case to which it does not apply. I may want to drink so much that I persuade myself that alcohol is good for me, and then both a violent passion (desire for alcohol) and a calm passion (desire for my own good) combine to make me drink. In this case, Mackie says, we have 'an unholy alliance of calm passion with present desire opposing and perhaps suppressing well-founded belief'.

Whether passion might lead one to suppress a belief is not something Hume considered, though doubtless he ought to have done. But I think he might have said that suppressing a belief is an action, for which there is a motive, desire for anxiety-free drinking, coupled with the (true) belief that if I suppress my belief that drinking is bad for me, I will achieve anxiety-free drinking. We may suppose, it is true, that every belief wants to stay alive, so to speak. Or rather, I must have a want to retain my belief that alcohol is bad for me for, unless I do retain it, I will drink, and I do not want to do what is bad for me. There is no reason, however, why this desire to go on believing that alcohol is bad for me should not be overridden by a stronger desire to have anxiety-free drinking. When my belief that alcohol is bad for me is finally suppressed, there is no problem. I am no more acting contrary to reason, in Hume's sense - Hume should really have said 'contrary to rational or irrational belief' - than I was in suppressing it, for this belief no longer exists.

Mackie also argues that if Clarke and Butler are right in thinking that situations necessarily demand the actions which fit them, Hume must be wrong in thinking that beliefs alone cannot move us to action, for the judgement that something is fit has 'inextricably interwoven in it the representative character and the motivating character which Hume thinks can belong only (sic) to distinct items'. I can not make sense of this, any more than I can of Butler's 'sentiment of the understanding and...perception of the heart' which Mackie quotes with some approval. Mackie

later argues that Hume must be wrong in thinking that reason must be the slave of the passions if someone can believe, if only mistakenly, that there are necessary fitnesses. But I cannot see that one would be moved by the belief that an action was fit unless one had the desire to do what was fit. In any case, I think it is really Mackie's view not that it so happens that an action is not fit, but that the belief that an action is fit has something fundamentally wrong with it, and so cannot possibly be true. His view then is that, though one cannot be moved to action by an ordinary coherent belief alone, one can alone be moved to action by an incoherent one. I did not find this view plausible.

In Chapter IV, 'Morality not Based on Reason', Mackie discusses the argument by which Hume attempted to demolish the epistemological views of his opponents, which uses as its premise the proposition just discussed: a belief (reasonable belief? inferential belief? belief arrived at by demonstration?) cannot alone move us to action; apprehending a moral distinction can alone move us to action; therefore apprehending a moral distinction is not a matter of arriving at a belief. To one of my criticisms of this argument (in Hume's Moral Epistemology, O.U.P., 1976) viz., that the second premise is not true, and that it is quite easy for a rationalist, or anyone else who thinks that there are such things as rational beliefs, to explain how this belief moves us to action, if only he will postulate - as some of them do - a desire to do what is right, Mackie replies that postulating a desire to do what is right would involve giving up the prescriptiveness of moral distinctions. But I cannot see that a prescription can alone move us to action, without the co-operation of a passion, any more than a belief can. The prescription 'Take two at bed-time', for example, cannot alone modify the behaviour of someone who does not want the end which it is a prescription for attaining or, at any rate, some end

which you can get by acting on it. (And it is just because commands are not by nature action-guiding that they need to be enforced.) One could even argue that the action-guiding nature of prescriptions is derived entirely from the action-guiding nature of beliefs, such as it is. It is only because I believe that acting on a certain prescription will bring about a certain end, and want that end, that a prescription can move me to action. In any case, it is only after severe mutilation at the hands of the philosopher that moral judgements look even remotely like prescriptions, as I think Mackie agrees. (I do not think the thought that they were ever crossed Hume's mind.) Nor is it a view that Mackie ought to be espousing, even to the limited extent that he espouses it here, because he does want to hold a view which entails that moral judgements are all false. Moral beliefs could be false, but moral prescriptions could not be. Later on in this chapter Mackie discusses and rejects eight other arguments by which he thinks Hume attempts to show that moral judgements are not derived from reason. After this wholesale rejection, it comes as something of an anti-climax when Mackie says 'We must in the end admit, therefore, that though III i I is an extremely important contribution to moral epistemology, it is neither as neat nor as conclusive as it initially seems to be'. It is difficult, after reading Mackie's chapter about it, to see how any one could have regarded it as even remotely plausible.

Mackie deals with Hume's positive view in Chapter V, 'Variants of Sentimentalism'. As I do myself in the final chapter of Hume's Moral Epistemology, Mackie distinguishes between several different strands in Hume's view, and holds that it is impossible to say unequivocally which of these possible views is Hume's. I suspect Mackie is sometimes excessively catholic in the views he thought could be combined. For example, when discussing that strand in Hume's writing which suggests that Hume believed

that moral judgements were statements about people's sentiments, Mackie points out that Hume (who he says was not interested in questions of meaning) did not distinguish between the views that such judgements are about the speaker's feelings, about the sentiments of his group, about the sentiments of the whole of mankind, or about the sentiments an impartial spectator would have. Mackie suggests that sometimes moral sentences mean one thing, and that sometimes they mean another. And Mackie suggests that perhaps moral judgements both state facts and express emotions and arouse them in other people and are also prescriptive. I do not, however, think Mackie really thinks they are prescriptions, so much as that they are statements ascribing a kind of 'false prescriptiveness' to the objects described. (The view that they are solely prescriptive he rightly rejects on the grounds that moral judgements at least purport to ascribe an objective quality to something.) The view that Mackie favours is that they ascribe a fictitious quality to things. The fact that this fictitious quality is a projection of our sentiments on to the action explains how we are moved to action by the belief that something possesses it. The fact that it is also the projection of certain social demands means that 'the fictitious features are taken to involve corresponding requirements and necessities'. Since, in attributing fictitious qualities to things, we are attributing to them qualities they cannot have, this view seems to lead to the conclusion (unfortunate or cheering, depending on how you look at it) that all moral judgements are false. Mackie thinks that there are hints of this view to be found in Hume. It is, however, worth mentioning that, if so, Hume would still not have succeeded in explaining - any more than Clarke had - how moral judgements alone could move us to action. Discerning a moral distinction would still issue in a judgement, albeit an invariably false one, and it is difficult to see how a judgement's ascribing bogus and impossible qualities

to things can move us to action without the co-operation of a passion, when perfectly normal judgements cannot do this. We would also need to want to avoid the actions onto which we (falsely) projected moral attributes. We must, presumably, have the sentiments that we project on to the actions judged of, but it is still our sentiments, not our judgements alone, that move us to action. It seems to me that many modern discussions of moral objectivism would be very much improved if they paid more attention to the chapters on this subject in G. E. Moore's Ethics (a much better book than the more well-known Principia Ethica).

When it comes to discussing Hume's substantive treatment of moral matters, as opposed to his answer to the question 'How do we know that certain things are right or wrong, virtuous or vicious?' Mackie says that Hume does not try to answer the question 'What things are virtuous?' so much as to answer the question 'What things do people approve of, and how does it come about that they approve of the things they do?'. But Hume (sometimes) defines a virtue as 'any action, sentiment or character which gives us pleasure by the mere view and contemplation'. This entails that, if a 'character' arouses such a pleasure, it is a virtue. Hence the 'sociological survey' Hume was engaged in should tell us what characters, etc., are virtues, and why they are, not just what characters are commonly regarded as being virtues, and how it comes about that we approve of them.

There are two kinds of virtue, Hume thinks, artificial virtues (discussed in Book III, Part II of the Treatise) and natural virtues (discussed in Book III, Part II). Mackie does not give a consistent account of what Hume thought an artificial virtue was. In the introduction (Page 5) he says 'both the tendency to act in each of these ways and the tendency to approve of such actions can be seen as inventions, (he omits to say that the rules we approve of are inventions), artificial devices which have somehow been

added to whatever tendencies to action men instinctively possessed and whatever instinctive moral sense they originally had'. In Chapter VI (page 85) he says (this time correctly) that Hume says the sense of justice is not artificial. 'Tho' justice be artificial, the sense of its morality is natural.' Though Mackie does not clearly say so, Hume, though he in fact regarded justice as a system of man-made rules, thought we approved 'naturally' of the rules (or most of them) from sympathy with the pleasure given to people by their usefulness. Man creates the rules, but he does not create our duty to obey the rules. Though Hume thought our approval could to some extent be modified by education and the artifices of politicians, it could not be created or changed beyond certain limits by those.

Mackie discusses in a fair amount of detail Hume's very difficult argument to show that justice is an artificial virtue. Oddly enough, however, he does not pay adequate attention to one of its premises, which Mackie puts in the words 'Any action which is virtuous is made so by its having a virtuous motive'. Nor does he, still more oddly, consider Hume's further statement that a motive is virtuous if it is one which human beings usually possess (just as a swan's neck is beautiful if it is the shape swan's necks usually have). These two propositions together, in my view, enable one to make more sense of what Hume says than is usually done (and than Mackie does). You can say that natural vices are defects, and naturally vicious actions so because they are signs of defects. But then, since there is no motive the absence of which is signified by a man's taking the possessions of someone, or not returning a service done by him, or a woman's not being faithful to her husband, rules have to be invented enforcing such actions, which are artificially virtuous only because they are demanded by a useful rule, which rule is invented by man in order to remedy by artifice a defect in his nature.

But Mackie, on the other hand, is extremely good and interesting in his application of games theory to Hume's views. Hume, of course, likens our obedience to the rules of justice to two men co-operating in rowing a boat, which they do without making an explicit agreement. Mackie points out that, given certain assumptions about how much I stand to win by getting to the other side of the lake, Hume's example is a kind of prisoners' dilemma. So long as neither rower is in a hurry, and is not so keen to get to the other side as to make it worth his while to do all the rowing himself, it will be to the advantage of each to row neither if the other rows, nor if he does not. So neither will row, and neither get to the other side. Mackie rightly points out that their difficulty cannot be solved by each promising to row, for exactly the same problem will arise for each about whether to keep his promise. It could be solved if they were physically linked so that they could neither of them opt to let the other row all by himself, and a sense of duty does something like this. But Mackie's solution is that I can start off rowing just a little bit, and see if my partner rows just a little bit too. If he does, I can row a little bit harder, and see if he does the same. Our actions are psychologically linked, then, if small increases or diminutions in the force with which I row bring about small increases or diminutions in the force with which my partner rows. This solution can be generalised to cover a large number of similar problems involving the co-operation of people with one another (though only to those situations where men can see what other men are doing; it will not cover Hume's promises made in secret). But I doubted, oddly enough, whether it applied to rowing a boat. Mackie is thinking of two rowers, each with two pairs of oars, when either might, like the lady on the rear of the tandem, get along very nicely if only the other rowed. But Hume may have been thinking of two rowers, with only one oar each, sitting side by side, in which case neither would move at

all, except in circles, unless the other rowed. And, another large class of cases involving human co-operation will resemble this one. This section of Mackie's book contains a useful discussion of the problems occasioned by the fact that Hume thought (I think rightly) that many acts of justice were useless by themselves; it is the general practice that is useful. Part of Mackie's solution of this problem is that we ought to perform apparently useless acts of justice because if we do not, we will form the habit of being unjust even when being just is useful. For example (mine) one ought in New Zealand to stop at a level crossing even when there is no train coming because, if one does not, one will form the habit of not stopping (or lose the habit of stopping) and cross even when one cannot see that there is no train coming. On this view, there are no useless acts of justice (or none that I ought to perform) for it will be an actual consequence of my not stopping on this apparently harmless occasion that I also do not stop on occasions when not to stop is not harmless.

In the section entitled 'The Obligation of Promises' Mackie claims that the function of the sentence 'I promise to do A' is to cause anyone who uses it and subsequently does not do A, to incur social disapproval. (This would be true, provided it is not added that to say 'I promise' is to make a statement.) But, though true, it is over-simplified. Men do make the rule that anyone who says 'I promise to do A' and subsequently does not do A incurs various social sanctions. But the tendency for men to disapprove of the breaking of this rule (which, according to Hume, is the result of sympathy with its utility) is not something men make, any more than they make the usefulness of promising. Hence, though men created promising, they created neither the usefulness or the approval of promising, and so did not create the morality of the social rule demanding that promises ought to be kept. This section contains an interesting view about why gratitude must be

supplemented by promising. I am likely to perform services for people to obtain their gratitude only if I can do someone, who I believe to be prone to feel gratitude, a great service at small cost to myself. Otherwise it will not be worth my while. Such cases are relatively infrequent. Promises are necessary so that I may do something for someone in order for a promised return which is only a little greater than my original outlay.

In the section entitled 'The Artificiality of Justice' Mackie discusses three very difficult arguments of Hume designed to re-inforce Hume's original contention that justice is an artificial virtue. Mackie does not, to my mind, sufficiently appreciate the merits of the second of these three arguments. A rule of justice (in this case the Larceny Act of 1961) may prescribe an instant (9 p.m.) at which an illegal act (housebreaking) becomes burglary, but there are no instants to be found in nature, and nothing natural could change in an instant from, say, being a chrysalis to being a butterfly. Also, though Hume does not actually say so, I think it would be in accordance with the spirit of what he does say to argue that justice must be artificial because some of its ordinances are disjunctive - a rule may lay down that you may be punished by fine or imprisonment - whereas disjunctive things cannot be found in nature. Hume was wrong, however, if he thought that this would prove that morality was artificial. The most it would prove would be that it was 'intentional'. The fact that an equation has a disjunctive solution does not mean that men decide what the solution is. Positive law is both artificial and intentional, but the moral law, I suspect, is intentional but not artificial.

In the section entitled 'The Origin of Government and the Limits of Political Obligation' Mackie tells us (correctly) that Hume regarded government as a human invention made necessary in order to prevent men from breaking rules of justice by indulging their tendency to prefer near

to remote advantage. There is no need for government to be justified by a social contract; the rule that governments be obeyed and that promises be kept both independently derive from their usefulness. Hume's criticism of the social contract theory is conclusive. (I agree). Rebellion is justified when the government is so bad that rebellion is the less of two evils, but the dreadfulness of civil war means that this will seldom be the case.

In the section entitled 'International Justice' Mackie tells us that Hume thinks that rules of justice apply to nations as well as to persons (though there are some, like those regulating declaration of war, which logically can apply only to the latter). They apply with less stringency to nations than they do to persons, however, as mankind could survive in that perpetual state of war into which it would be thrown without international justice, but could not survive without 'interpersonal' justice. Mackie doubts the correctness of this explanation, even in Hume's day; it is more obviously incorrect in ours, when war could or would be carried out with atomic weapons. Mackie thinks that the right explanation of why we regard international justice as less obligatory than interpersonal justice is that its rules are less securely established. Mackie rejects the view that the reason for this is that 'a state is by nature analogous to those individuals in whom mental defect produces diminished responsibility' which, he thinks, is not true 'even in a democracy'. He produces an alternative Humean view of justice, according to which self-interest, moral approval and law are more closely interwoven than he thinks Hume supposed.

In the section entitled 'Chastity and Modesty' Mackie says that Hume thinks chastity is an artificial virtue because there is no instinct impelling men, and more especially women, to be chaste. It was invented in order to compel women to be faithful to their husbands. (It is less necessary for men to be faithful to their wives, for

a woman will almost always be prepared to bring up children she knows to be hers, while a man will know that his wife's children are his only if she has been compelled, against her inclinations, to be chaste.) Mackie suggests that a Humean explanation of rules about chastity can be given by treating them as being like property rules. Since men are the dominant sex, it is women, not men, who are the property.

In his chapter on the natural virtues, Mackie points out that, according to Hume, we approve of the natural virtues because sympathy with their usefulness and agreeableness to oneself or to others cause us to love them in others (love others for their having them) and be proud of them in ourselves (be proud of ourselves for having them?). (It again follows, though Mackie does not notice this, that detecting approval by a sociological or psychological investigation is discovering that something is a virtue, not discovering just that it is commonly regarded as being one). Mackie's main criticism of Hume is that, though Hume tended (I think rightly) to regard the artificial virtues as ('partly') natural because our tendency to approve of them is natural, in fact he should have regarded the 'natural' virtues as being artificial, because they are supported by a steady and general system of approval which is interpersonal and impartial. (I do not quite understand what this means.) But there is some truth in the contention that the natural virtues are 'partly' artificial. A factory, for example, will have rules (which would be a minor species of Hume's rules of justice) enforcing a certain degree of industry upon its workers, and the industry of all will be lost if industry is not the rule rather than the exception. On the other hand industry, which, unlike justice is not defined in terms of rules, can both exist and be useful in a society that has no rules, and where hardly anybody is industrious. Mackie ends this chapter with the somewhat antiquated and commonplace

criticism that Hume should not have lumped the virtues together with the natural abilities, as the former are voluntary, the latter not. If Mackie has ever had the experience of trying to improve his ability and his virtue he would have found that the difference in the difficulty of these two tasks is greatly exaggerated. It is a mistake to think that Hume's account of the freedom of the will entails that the virtues and the natural abilities are equally involuntary. Hume's determinism is 'soft' enough to have no such entailment. The section on the natural virtues is, I think, the weakest in the book. If, as Mackie does, you divide Hume's moral theory into his moral psychology, his moral epistemology, his theory of justice, and his account of the natural virtues, Mackie has fewer ideas about the last of these than about any of the first three of them (ten pages in Mackie to six sections in Hume, as opposed, for example, to forty-three pages in Mackie to twelve sections in Hume on the artificial virtues). Inadequate attention is paid to Book II. Reading Mackie's comprehensive list of the natural virtues brought home to me for the first time the important fact that, though Hume regarded justice as an artificial virtue, he regarded equity as a natural virtue.

Mackie's penultimate chapter is on some of Hume's successors. Mackie's conclusion, from a survey of three of them, is that moral judgements are indeed judgements - as is pretty obvious, really, despite the modern fashion for saying that they are not - and that they purport to attribute to actions 'objective' but illusory characteristics, which actions cannot really have. Morality, roughly speaking, cannot lie in the actions to which we attribute morality. It must, therefore, have something to do with the sentiments by which we react to the actions judged, and since it cannot be a statement asserting the existence of these sentiments, it must be a false projection of these on to the object. Mackie is so confident in the

correctness of his own analysis that he does not feel any qualms about the logical conclusion that all moral judgments must in fact be wrong.

In his final chapter, after a discussion of some ground that has already been covered, and another of the question to what extent Hume was a utilitarian, Mackie goes on to consider, finally, the question of whether morality is a good thing. He makes the following points against it. It will be easier to reach a compromise between competing parties if rights are left entirely out of the matter. (Does Mackie mean that morality makes the conflict worse because each party will think he has right on his side? But only one of the parties, at most, can be right about this, and so it is not morality, but what men erroneously believe to be morality, that causes the conflict.) Morality will tend to perpetuate inequality, by adding right to the already excessive advantages possessed by the stronger. (Again, does Mackie think that true morality favours the stronger, or that people's false moral beliefs - perhaps false moral beliefs fostered by the stronger themselves - favour the stronger? It is hardly fair to saddle 'morality' with every wicked and foolish moral belief that has been held by mankind. But I suppose that Mackie, as he thinks that moral beliefs all assert the existence of false projection of our sentiments, must think that (provided they are impartial, etc.) there is nothing to choose between one and another, which is why he criticises morality, rather than mistaken beliefs about morality. Again, Mackie thinks that morality may be a bad thing because it favours allegiance to those who may have, by exploiting an initially strong position, gained too much superiority in the first place, and because one of its tenets enjoins patriotism, without which war would not be possible. But again, why does Mackie criticise morality on these grounds, instead of condemning erroneous moral beliefs which sanction obedience to a jealous tyrant or demand that men waste their

lives in a disastrous war? Indeed, to parody a remark of Bentham, it is difficult to criticise morality unless one has another morality from which to get purchase on it. Even the statement that patriotism is not a duty is a moral judgement, though a negative one. Mackie thinks we might have the advantages of morality without its disadvantages if we understood it, and saw through its claim to absolute and objective authority. It is true that, if we see that it is one vast false projection, we will be able to see through any claims that men may make that we do things that are trivial and useless, like abstaining from eating pork or beans, or disastrous, like leading one's country into a religious war. The trouble is, however, that we would also have to see through any claims it might appear to make that we honour our debts, or do an honest day's work for our wages, or do not exploit those over whom we have power. Mackie's way of removing the disadvantages of morality is rather like chopping off one's leg to cure a limp. And though his suggestion that we regard certain demands morality makes on us as subject to qualification (e.g., as demanding that we sometimes keep our promises instead of that we always do) why should it be a criticism of morality in the first place that some inflexible people think they have a duty to do something always which in fact they have a duty to do only usually? True morality, like God, is logically immune to criticism, because a practice that has more disadvantages than advantages is not truly moral. I feel that a love of the novel and arresting here, as in some other places, leads Mackie to put some perfectly sensible points in a needlessly paradoxical way

Mackie's book is concise, on the whole clear, frequently penetrating, stimulating, and productive of many useful insights. It is not, like many books on moral philosophy, wet. In some ways it would have been easier to read if it had been a longer and less congested book. It could be that he has not devoted enough time to the

topic of moral philosophy to iron out some difficulties in his own positive views. But he has given us an illuminating, concise and on the whole accurate account of Hume's moral philosophy, containing some important morals - odd though it may be that it is Mackie who draws them - and it deserves to be read with attention by undergraduates, professional philosophers and the general reader alike.

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