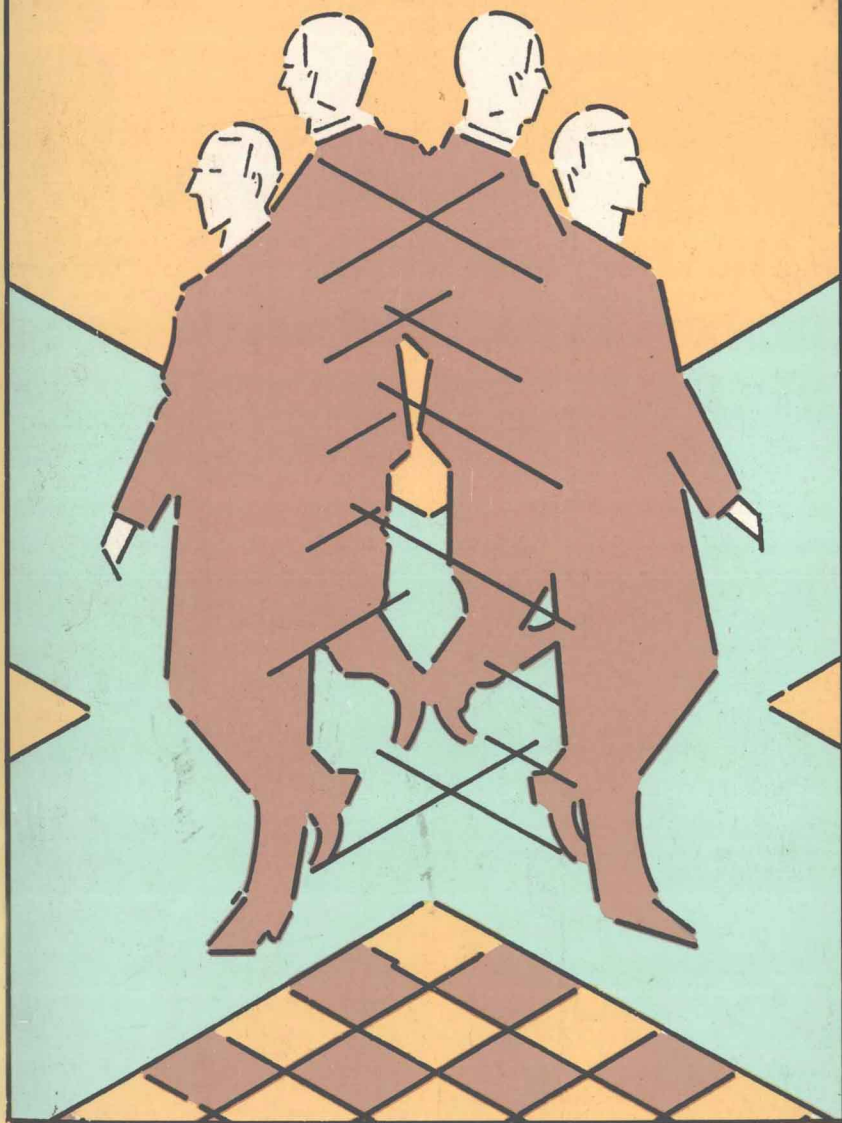


ETHICS

INVENTING RIGHT AND WRONG

J. L. MACKIE



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Philosophy

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ETHICS

John Mackie was born in Sydney, Australia, in 1917 and graduated from Sydney University in 1938. Awarded the Wentworth Travelling Fellowship, he was at Oriel College, Oxford, from 1938 to 1940, graduating with a First in Greats. After serving in the army during the Second World War, he became a lecturer and then a senior lecturer in Moral and Political Philosophy at Sydney University (1946–54). He was Professor of Philosophy at Otago University, Dunedin, New Zealand (1955–9), at Sydney University (1959–63) and at the University of York, England (1963–7). From 1967 until his death in 1981 he was a Fellow of University College, Oxford, and became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1974.

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J. L. Mackie

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Preface

A moral or ethical statement may assert that some particular action is right or wrong; or that actions of certain kinds are so; it may offer a distinction between good and bad characters or dispositions; or it may propound some broad principle from which many more detailed judgements of these sorts might be inferred – for example, that we ought always to aim at the greatest general happiness, or try to minimize the total suffering of all sentient beings, or devote ourselves wholly to the service of God, or that it is right and proper for everyone to look after himself. All such statements express first order ethical judgements of different degrees of generality. By contrast with all these, a second order statement would say what is going on when someone makes a first order statement, in particular, whether such a statement expresses a discovery or a decision, or it may make some point about how we think and reason about moral matters, or put forward a view about the meanings of various ethical terms.

I am concerned in this book with both first and second order topics, with both the content and the status of ethics. In our ordinary experience we first encounter first order statements about particular actions; in discussing these, we may go on to frame, or dispute, more general first order principles; and only after that are we likely to reflect on second order issues. But in putting forward my opinions in a fairly systematic way I have had to reverse this order, to try to settle what is going on in first order ethical discussion before making my own contribution to it. The natural order of exposition is the opposite of the natural order of acquaintance. Part I, therefore, is about the status of ethics; Part II is mainly about its content, though Chapter 5 is really transitional between the two. Part III deals, only briefly,

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with what I call the frontiers of ethics, that is, with various ways in which psychology and metaphysics and theology and law and political theory bear upon ethics, or in which ethics bears upon one or other of these.

An unavoidable consequence of this order of treatment is that the driest and most difficult and abstract discussions come first: someone who has not read much philosophical ethics may find Chapter 1 hard going. My advice to such a reader is not, indeed, to skip Chapter 1 or the rest of Part I, but to be content with a fairly superficial first reading of it, to try to pick up the main ideas of Part I but not to worry about obscure details or difficult arguments. He may be able to make more of these if he comes back to them after seeing the use that I make in Parts II and III of the conclusions reached and defended in Part I.

I would like to thank Mrs E. Hinkes not only for typing the book but for retyping changed versions of several chapters. Among colleagues whose comments have helped me I would particularly like to thank Derek Parfit, who read the whole of the first version of Parts I and II and suggested a great many improvements and corrections.

References to works quoted and to authors whose opinions are mentioned in the text are given not in footnotes but (grouped chapter by chapter) at the end of the book. Very detailed references seem unnecessary, since I am nowhere mainly concerned to refute any individual writer. I believe that all those to whom I have referred, even those with whom I disagree most strongly, have contributed significantly to our understanding of ethics: where I have quoted their actual words, it is because they have presented views or arguments more clearly or more forcefully than I could put them myself.

I have drawn freely on the ideas both of contemporary writers and of such classical moral philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Hume, Kant, and Sidgwick. But perhaps the truest teachers of moral philosophy are the outlaws and thieves who, as Locke says, keep faith and rules of justice with one another, but practise these as rules of convenience without

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which they cannot hold together, with no pretence of receiving them as innate laws of nature. I hope that the explanation of this paradox will become clear in the course of the book.

January 1976

J.L.M.

Part I : The Status of Ethics

Chapter 1 The Subjectivity of Values

1. Moral scepticism

There are no objective values. This is a bald statement of the thesis of this chapter, but before arguing for it I shall try to clarify and restrict it in ways that may meet some objections and prevent some misunderstanding.

The statement of this thesis is liable to provoke one of three very different reactions. Some will think it not merely false but pernicious; they will see it as a threat to morality and to everything else that is worthwhile, and they will find the presenting of such a thesis in what purports to be a book on ethics paradoxical or even outrageous. Others will regard it as a trivial truth, almost too obvious to be worth mentioning, and certainly too plain to be worth much argument. Others again will say that it is meaningless or empty, that no real issue is raised by the question whether values are or are not part of the fabric of the world. But, precisely because there can be these three different reactions, much more needs to be said.

The claim that values are not objective, are not part of the fabric of the world, is meant to include not only moral goodness, which might be most naturally equated with moral value, but also other things that could be more loosely called moral values or disvalues – rightness and wrongness, duty, obligation, an action's being rotten and contemptible, and so on. It also includes non-moral values, notably aesthetic ones, beauty and various kinds of artistic merit. I shall not discuss these explicitly, but clearly much the same considerations apply to aesthetic and to moral values, and there would be at least some initial implausibility in a view that gave the one a different status from the other.

Since it is with moral values that I am primarily concerned, the view I am adopting may be called moral scepticism. But this name is likely to be misunderstood: 'moral scepticism' might also be used as a name for either of two first order views, or perhaps for an incoherent mixture of the two. A moral sceptic might be the sort of person who says 'All this talk of morality is tripe,' who rejects morality and will take no notice of it. Such a person may be literally rejecting all moral judgements; he is more likely to be making moral judgements of his own, expressing a positive moral condemnation of all that conventionally passes for morality; or he may be confusing these two logically incompatible views, and saying that he rejects all morality, while he is in fact rejecting only a particular morality that is current in the society in which he has grown up. But I am not at present concerned with the merits or faults of such a position. These are first order moral views, positive or negative: the person who adopts either of them is taking a certain practical, normative, stand. By contrast, what I am discussing is a second order view, a view about the status of moral values and the nature of moral valuing, about where and how they fit into the world. These first and second order views are not merely distinct but completely independent: one could be a second order moral sceptic without being a first order one, or again the other way round. A man could hold strong moral views, and indeed ones whose content was thoroughly conventional, while believing that they were simply attitudes and policies with regard to conduct that he and other people held. Conversely, a man could reject all established morality while believing it to be an objective truth that it was evil or corrupt.

With another sort of misunderstanding moral scepticism would seem not so much pernicious as absurd. How could anyone deny that there is a difference between a kind action and a cruel one, or that a coward and a brave man behave differently in the face of danger? Of course, this is undeniable; but it is not to the point. The kinds of behaviour to which moral values and disvalues are ascribed are indeed part of the furniture of the world, and so are the natural, descriptive, differences