TONY CHADWICK ESSAY PRIZE 2004 WINNER

ARE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES WHOLLY SUBJECTIVE, FOUNDED SIMPLY ON EMOTION?

by Frank Brierley

No philosopher, however subjectivist, should give an unqualified 'yes' to this question, having a duty to explain (or explain away) what is meant by moral reasoning, and to justify how the whole superstructure of ethical language might rest on an emotional foundation. My own answer is a qualified 'no', because, despite a large element of intersubjective agreement that characterises moral (and all) language/thinking, the strong implication of objectivity in such sentences as 'The book is on the table' and 'Jesus was a good man', for both of which good (and appropriate) evidence can be supplied, carries more weight for me than the arguments of those who would liken moral judgements to 'Hurrah' and 'Boo'.

Evolutionary psychology can provide an (ethological) account of the phenomenon of morality which, as far as I can tell, is deficient only to the extent that more work needs to be done by psychologists to amplify and consolidate their theories. In his book, *Religion Explained* [1.], the philosopher and anthropologist, Pascal Boyer, gives many examples of the psychological mechanisms that explain human social interaction as adaptive behaviour. These include the psychology of selfless behaviours that appear altruistic (op. cit. pp.206-214); the recognition by children as young as 3 and 4 of the distinction between moral and conventional rules (based on research by Eliot Turiel[2.] and Michael Siegal[3.]); and most interestingly what Boyer says about moral intuitions because it ties in with my own philosophical views on 'good'. Having made a convincing case for the evolution of *irrational* feelings like guilt, gratitude and pride as far more effective agents for human co-operation than rationality would be, he goes on to say (p214):

> This detour through the evolution and psychology of moral intuitions may help make sense of very general properties of human morality. Our evolved dispositions connect specific emotional states to specific situations of social interaction. This is why specific moral prescriptions vary a lot from culture to culture, but their connection to social interaction does not. Many cues tell us whether people are on the whole good co-operators or not, but these cues are often related to particular ways of life.

In other words, there is a good explanation in evolutionary psychology for the development of moralities that reflect both constancy (of human nature) and cultural variability.

However, even after recognising this, and even if we accept that there are good evolutionary (i.e. biological) reasons why human beings possess an inner sense that includes conscience as a guide to right and wrong behaviour and what is good and bad, and feelings of obligation, that still leaves open the philosophical question whether moral rules are 'merely' subjective or whether they relate to something 'out there' in the world that human beings are recognising and adapting to.

Plato and Hobbes faced up to just that question, and both came up with different versions of an objectivity of moral values.

John Mackie points out in his *Ethics*[4.] that in his 'Protagoras' Plato described how Zeus 'sent Hermes to give men *aidos* (which perhaps we can translate as "moral sense") and *dike* (law and justice) to be the ordering principles of cities and the bonds of friendship.' In the Socratic dialogues and 'The Republic' we read how men use these faculties to recognise the Forms of the Good and Justice both as paradigms and as compellers (motivating forces) of good and citizen-like behaviour. Such an objectivist, indeed absolutist, account of ethics meets two of the main requirements of any ethical theory: that it should explain both the normative and universalising aspects of moral language. However, Plato's theory shares the weakness of most, if not all, metaphysical theories that it relies on metaphysical entities, the Forms, for whose existence no evidence can be offered except that they provide a solution to a problem. Hypotheses for the existence of new fundamental particles may begin this way, but they are never accepted until independent empirical evidence is found for them.

Hobbes[5.] adopted a more scientific approach, adducing men's actual behaviour as evidence of what he called the (moral) laws of nature. This is as oddly a subjective-objective concept as taking the evolutionary psychologists' theories as a full explanation of morality. Hobbes saw mankind (as a result of 'evolution') as competitive and likely to inflict harm, one man upon another. He therefore posited basic moral rules, his 'laws of nature', that limited competitive claims – such rules as to keep agreements, to show gratitude in return for benefits, to pardon past offences. But he also thought that there was the need for an enforcing agency, a sovereign government or dictator, to provide a fear motive in addition to a rationality, for keeping to the moral code, the mutual agreement to comply with the laws of nature. This sovereignty stipulation somewhat undermines Hobbes' naturalistic explanation of ethics' objectivity as something vested in human nature, endowing it with no less mythical a claim to reality than Plato's Protagoran one; and it takes Hume to suggest
a) 'It is only from the selfishness and confined generosity of man, along with the scanty provision nature has made for his wants, that justice derives its origin'[6.], and
b) 'It is only the concurrence of mankind, in a general scheme or system of action, which is advantageous.'

Hume's additions to the Hobbesian explanation put morality firmly back in the (still subjective-objective) arena of a natural phenomenon that is man-based – we might say 'hard-wired', and he usefully relates man's tendency to be moral (i.e. morally good) to an emotion, sympathy, being 'a natural tendency to share the feelings of those who are directly affected, that makes us extend what are initially interested approval and disapproval to cases remote from our interests.'

However, there is still something unsatisfactory about such naturalistic explanations of morality. Despite Hume's alliance of moral feeling to sympathy (too weak), and Plato's 'moral sense' (unconvincing because too mythical), the foregoing accounts of morality do not seem to explain sufficiently the normative, obliging nature of moral language that produces, in J L Mackie's words, a 'notion of obligation, of an invisible and indeed fictitious tie or bond, whether this takes the form of a general requirement to keep whatever agreements one makes or of various specific duties like those of military honour or of loyalty to comrades …' Plato, Kant[7.] and G E Moore[8.] all felt that 'good' derived from, or was something more objective than, a product of the nature of mankind. Unfortunately each of their absolutist solutions went beyond nature *tout court* into regions, in one way or another, indefinable, while en route dropping valuable clues as to where to locate morality and moral language on the subjective-

objective continuum. [‘Continuum’ may be the wrong word. I plead its looseness does not matter here!]

Plato’s solution, as we have seen, was overtly transcendental/ metaphysical. Ultimately Kant’s ‘good will’ derives from a ‘Kingdom of Ends’ that is only accessible through a transcendent (and therefore inexplicable, or at least unreachable) aspect of the mind’s operation. And Moore was explicit that the good is indefinable.

However, part of Moore’s usefulness is to expose the ‘naturalistic fallacy’, the identification of the good, as opposed to goods, with some particular good thing, such as pleasure/lack of pain – of which we can still ask sensibly ‘but is it really good?’ and to draw our attention to the fact that when we say of an action or a person that it/he/she is (morally) good we mean more than ‘I approve’ or ‘I equate its/his/her quality to x’, where x is some natural quality such as ‘pleasure producing’, ‘harmony producing’, ‘naturally evolved’, etc.

And two of Kant’s major contributions to the puzzle are as follows. First, he recognised a hierarchy of maxims, as moral principles, categorising some as prudential or practical, and thereby tying in his explanation of morality to actual human behaviour in his acknowledgement of the relationship between moral acts and individuals’ interests, and acknowledging also that human beings habitually (as Aristotle[9] recognised) act in accordance with principles of behaviour rather than by fully thinking out all the consequences of their every action. This allows for a multiplicity of behavioural codes – which accords with reality. Secondly, his derivation of the variety of maxims (moral and prudential principles) from hypothetical imperatives represented a major service to the analysis of moral language, to which I shall return shortly. I pause only to criticise Kant’s various formulations of the categorical imperative, each of which purports to derive its authority from a naturalistic claim that it is an *a priori* product of reason. It is a seductive claim because its acceptance satisfies both the normative aspects of moral language and its appeal to universal application, but its reliance on the ‘good will’ as representing the sole good falls foul of Moore’s naturalistic fallacy, and the derivation of that good from a ‘Kingdom of Ends’ – while it secures Moore’s approval for the indefinability of ‘good’ – is Platonically unhelpful in its invention of a transcendent concept to solve a philosophical problem.

To return to the hypothetical imperative, Kant showed that ‘ought’ is used morally and non-morally, and roughly speaking the two senses correspond to a moral and non-moral sense of ‘right’ in the tautologous sentence ‘One ought to do what is right’. But right for what? Right to achieve an often unstated end. If the end is merely practical, it will probably be right (hypothetical imperative) to take an umbrella if one wishes to keep dry when rain is forecast. If the objective is to perform a morally good act, it will be morally right to help a fellow human being in distress, if one wishes to comply with a moral code that lays it down as a requirement always to do so. The second ‘if’ clause elaborates generally what is meant by ‘morally good act’, without specifying what moral code is relevant: implying that is the agent’s choice, but not thereby suggesting morality is subjective or otherwise. This is only a look at the logic of moral language. Anyone deriving their morality from Kant, would look to the Kingdom of Ends as source, or for justification, of the universalisable maxim which the action needed to satisfy. A utilitarian would be guided by consequential considerations of maximising happiness.

> Bearing in mind that moral justification needs to take account of the characteristic of universalisability – that the moral judgement must have application to more than just

this instance (or it loses all normative authority, any reason to be respected by the community) – I see two explicatory and probably complementary options, both denying 'pure subjectivity' to ethical principles.

The first option combines a relationship between, on the one hand, 'good' and good things suggested (or at least it was so taken by Donald Davidson[10.]) by G.E.Moore, that of supervenience, and, on the other hand, the concept of the word 'good' as a 'modifier' as per Paul Ziff's semantic analysis[11.], itself an elaboration of J.L.Mackie's discussion of 'good' as a (logically) 'attributive' adjective. Davidson, in his paper, 'Thinking Causes'[10.], writes

> 'Moore's idea seemed clear enough: something is good only because it has properties that can be specified in descriptive terms, but goodness can't be reduced to a descriptive property.'

In other words, what is called 'good', the good thing or person, can be described non-evaluatively, but 'good' is only applicable because of some supervenient quality that the mere description does not capture. This *is* very Moorean, redolent of the Platonic, the creation of some indefinable abstraction floating above all good things. Ziff prevents the useful concept of supervenience from misleading us into a world of mysterious entities by his explanation of what I want to call the supervenience relationship of good to goods as a constant 'modifying' relationship, containing always elements of *interested endorsement* and *context-dependant description*, irrespective of the particular situation or who uses the word. This 'constant modifying relationship' describes the use of 'good' in any language, and gives this central moral word (when used morally) its universality, but also allows for disagreement, parallel to non-moral use when, for example, it is claimed that this is a good motor car or this is a good act. The reasons we can give for this not being a good car are factual: say that it takes too long to go from zero to 60mph. If I am not *interested* in that feature, that will not affect my *endorsement* of the car, which is largely based on its comfort and low fuel consumption. I can have a similar argument about a purportedly good act, alleging that it was self-serving, while you do not dispute that but point out in defence of your claim that a lot of good came of it and it took considerable courage. Hence the explanation of a) the continuity of the grammar of 'good' in moral and non-moral usage, and b) the possibility of moral argument and moral reasoning.

If this still appears subjective, if not 'purely subjective', I invoke my second 'option' to support the objectivity of 'good' and all moral terms, starting with a quotation from Mackie, viz: '… I think they [some moral views Mackie has just expressed] should be considered neither in terms of slogans … nor in terms of an attempt to calculate the effects of actions on the total general happiness, but more concretely in terms of the values, rights, and dispositions involved, our understanding of these being taken over from more normal and less controversial cases.' (op. cit. p197) In other words, moral questions **can** be settled, and argued about, in the same way as other matters of fact, adducing evidence from areas where there is no dispute, and providing opportunities for agreement and identification of the particulars of disagreement between individuals of widely differing moral outlooks, all using the same moral language factually, unemotionally, unambiguously. This proposal is quite Wittgensteinian. Part of the family resemblances argument[12.] points to the pool of family features that each family face draws on. Argument as to whether this is person has the family face, and argument whether this was a good act, are similarly conducted *objectively* by pointing out the features that are definitely the same or definitely different from undoubted specimens of the family or of a good act.

Thus, by pointing out the similarities moral language and thinking have with non-moral, undoubtedly objective language (e.g. 'The book is on the table'), and by explaining the logical grammar of normative language along the lines of Kant's hypothetical imperative, which effectively shows how an 'ought' can be derived from an 'is', I hope to have staked out a reasonable claim for grounding morality nearer the land of the objective than the territory of the subjective and simply emotional.

References

1. Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained*, William Heinnemann, London, (2001)
2. E. Turiel, *The Development of Social Knowledge, Morality and Convention*, CUP, Cambridge, (1983)
3. 'Day care and children's conceptions of moral and social rules', *Child Development*, 56(4), pp 1001-8
4. J L Mackie, p.108, *Ethics*, Penguin, Harmonsworth, (1977)
5. See especially Hobbes' *Leviathan* chapters 13 – 17.
6. David Hume, Quotations from *A Treatise of Human Nature* Book 3, Part 2, (1738)
7. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, (1788)
8. G E Moore, *Principia Ethica*, CUP, Cambridge, (1903)
9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*,
10. 'Thinking Causes' in *Mental Causation*, edd. John Heil & Alfred Mele, OUP, Oxford (1993)
11. Paul Ziff, *Semantic Analysis*, Cornell Press/OUP (1960)
12. See especially §67. of *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Blackwell, Oxford (1958)