

Patterns of objectification

Richard Joyce

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John Mackie thinks that the “objective prescriptivity” with which our moral discourse is essentially but so fatally imbued is the result of our “tendency to read our feelings into their objects” (1977, p. 42). He invokes Hume’s famous projectivist image of the human mind’s “great propensity to spread itself on external objects,” and, indeed, it is in his book-length analysis of Hume’s moral theory (Mackie 1980) that the topic receives a more careful discussion than in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. In both books he musters some considerations in favor of the objectification thesis, and reveals to us that he thinks that “it is very largely correct” (1980, p. 72).

But what is the relation between Mackie’s objectification thesis and his thesis of moral skepticism? Is the error theory a premise in an argument to establish the objectification thesis? Or vice versa? Or are they logically unrelated? On the face of it, the objectification thesis appears to entail the error theory, leading one to wonder why, in his 1977 book, this thesis is described straight *after* the argument from queerness, for if Mackie took himself to have some arguments in favor of moral objectification, then might it not have been strategically viable for him to *start out* establishing the thesis of objectification and then by implication argue for the moral error theory?

Wondering whether Mackie might have chosen to establish his moral error theory on the basis of the thesis of objectification is just my dialectical point of departure. My principal goal in this paper is to try to get a firmer handle on just what the thesis of objectification really is, and to investigate what evidence might support it and what conclusions may follow from it. I will disambiguate two forms of the thesis. One does trivially imply moral skepticism but cannot be established independently of that skepticism, whereas the other may well be substantiated on independent grounds but is neutral on the matter of moral skepticism.

First, some terminological clarifications. I will use “moral skepticism” and “moral error theory” interchangeably, reflecting Mackie’s own practice. I will also interchangeably use the verbs “objectify” and “project”—and the associated nouns “objectification” and “projection,” and “the thesis of moral objectification” and “moral projectivism.” Mackie does this himself, in both his 1977 and 1980 books.¹ In this terminological vein, let us start by distinguishing “objectification” from some similar notions.

Hypostatization (a.k.a. *reification*) is the practice of taking something abstract and speaking of it (or thinking of it, or treating it) as if it were concrete (e.g., “Religion was his guiding light,” “Justice is blind”). As a literary device or simply as a metaphorical manner of speaking, there is obviously nothing objectionable about the tendency; we do it constantly. If, however, one began to accept such propositions literally, at face value, then that would be a kind of error. Sometimes, though, it may be the subject of dispute whether an instance of this is an error. When philosophers try to provide a concrete explication of a seemingly abstract concept—like *number* or

¹ The disjunctive phrase “projection or objectification” appears on p. 42 of Mackie 1977, and twice on p. 72 of Mackie 1980.

set—then some will treat this as an admirable extension of the naturalistic program while others will consider it a misguided blunder.

Anthropomorphism is often said to be a special type of hypostatization, wherein aspects of the inanimate world are imbued with human qualities. This taxonomy cannot be quite correct, however, since the subject of anthropomorphism need not be abstract. “Nature abhors a vacuum” attributes a human quality (abhorrence) to an abstract entity (nature), whereas “That stretch of road is treacherous” attributes a human quality (treachery) to a concrete entity (the road). As before, there is nothing wrong with anthropomorphism as a literary device or figure of speech, but one commits a kind of straightforward error if one really believes, of something incapable of human qualities, that it has such qualities. And, as before, there are areas of dispute, such as what kind of mental attributions can be made to animals or computers.

In *Modern Painters*, John Ruskin gave the name “*the pathetic fallacy*” (from “pathos”) to a certain anthropomorphic tendency in writers and poets. He derided tired and uninspired anthropomorphic devices (“it is only the basest writer who cannot speak of the sea without talking of ‘raging waves,’ ‘remorseless floods,’ ‘ravenous billows,’ etc.” (Ruskin 1856 / 1908, p. 65)), but thought that some anthropomorphisms may be aesthetically justified when they reveal something genuine about the emotional life of the poet, despite being packaged with a false surface expression. (Still, Ruskin thought that the very best poets should be able to do away with such devices altogether.) Ruskin’s anachronistic ruminations on aesthetics need not detain us; I mention the pathetic fallacy here because Mackie explicitly refers to it himself. He says that his thesis of moral objectification *is analogous to* the pathetic fallacy (1977, p. 42).

It is not obvious in what sense, exactly, the two are supposed to be analogous, but it is certainly important to observe a disanalogy. Witness what Mackie goes on to say immediately following, supposedly explaining the pathetic fallacy: “If a fungus, say, fills us with disgust, we may be inclined to ascribe to the fungus itself a non-natural quality of foulness” (ibid.; he uses the same example in his 1946 article). This is actually not a good example of the pathetic fallacy (though it may be a good example of what Mackie is really driving at). The pathetic fallacy proper would occur if one ascribed to the fungus the human trait of *being disgusted*—which one would do, obviously, only in the context of speaking metaphorically or jokingly. By contrast, to attribute to the fungus the quality of foulness (irrespective of whether that property is non-natural or non-existent) is not a piece of anthropomorphism at all. In this example, a certain feeling—disgust—has caused the person to experience the world as containing a certain quality—foulness. It seems pretty clear from context that Mackie will say that this foulness is not a real quality of the fungus; we think that it is only because our disgust somehow leads us to experience matters this way. Thus, to the extent that the fungus-foulness example exemplifies Mackie’s notion of objectification (which I think it does), objectification is not an instance of anthropomorphism. Contrary to the quote given in the opening paragraph, the process of objectification is *not* one by which we “read our feelings into their objects”—we do not see the inanimate world as being disgusted, being angry, being sad, (the waves as raging, the floods as ravenous), and so forth.² Rather, the process is one by which our feelings

² Cf. Barry Stroud’s discussion of Humean projectivism: “We do not think that the sequence of events on the billiards table—the one ball’s striking the others and the second ball’s moving—itself has a feeling or impression like the feeling Hume says we humans get when we observe it. ... Nor do we think that an act of willful murder itself has a feeling of disgust or disapprobation, any more than we think that a painting on a wall has a sentiment of pleasure or awe” (Stroud 2000, p. 22).

cause us to read into their objects qualities that we would not otherwise judge them to have—that (it is tempting to say) they do not really have at all, that nothing has. In his 1980 book, Mackie uses the vague but more accurate phrase: that we “read *some sort of image of* [our] sentiments” into the actions and characters that arouse them (p. 71): the foulness is “some sort of image” of our disgust; the wrongness is “some sort of image” of our disapproval; and so on. In his much earlier 1946 article, Mackie writes that “in objectifying our feelings we are also turning them inside out ... The feeling and the supposed quality are related as a seal or stamp and its impression” (pp. 81-82).

Note that the characterization of objectification just given has several components. First, there’s a complicated claim about our experience of the world and what has caused that experience (a claim I will attempt to make more precise in due course); second, there’s a metaphysical claim that the quality we are experiencing the world to have is not really instantiated at all.

One might think that if this is objectification, then the error theory would indeed follow by implication. But that is not quite so, for the characterization just given does not exclude a *noncognitivist* interpretation of the matter. Let noncognitivism be the metaethical view that moral utterances are not assertions. The characterization of objectification says nothing, nor implies anything, about the nature of the speech acts that one might use to communicate one’s experience. Suppose, for example, that we experience Xs as having the property Q, but in fact nothing instantiates Q—our experience is brought about by some emotional mental state E. This characterization is neutral regarding what is going on when we utter the sentence “X is Q.” Perhaps we are asserting that X is Q (in which case an error theory holds) or perhaps we are merely expressing the emotion E (in which case noncognitivism holds). Thus, in order to have a characterization of objectification that implies an error theory, we would have to add a further clause: that our utterances about the subject matter in question are assertions (or that they are false, or that they are erroneous, or something else along such lines).

It is possible that Mackie did have in mind such a complex account of objectification, though it is difficult to say with confidence. He several times states that the qualities that are projected “are fictitious” (1980, p. 71), but one cannot tell whether he intends this to be a defining component of objectification itself, or just an additional point that follows from other things that he has argued. (I suspect the matter was not precisely demarcated in his thinking.) The point to which I should like to draw attention is this: If one does have in mind the complex account of moral objectification—the one that does imply the moral error theory—the one that consists of (i) a complicated claim about our experience of the world and what causes that experience, (ii) the metaphysical claim that the quality we are experiencing the world to have is not really instantiated at all, and (iii) the cognitivist claim that our associated utterances are assertions—then whatever arguments one employed to establish this thesis would already be entirely sufficient to establish moral skepticism. The moral error theoretic position, after all, just *is* the conjunction of components (ii) and (iii). Therefore, if we are using this complex account of objectification, then the argumentative strategy mentioned at the start of this paper—of establishing the moral error theory on the basis of the thesis of objectification—turns out not to be dialectically viable, after all.

Suppose, alternatively, that we worked with a less complicated version of objectification. Suppose we stripped away both the cognitivist subthesis (iii) and the metaphysical claim (ii), leaving just (i) a claim about our experience of the world and what causes that experience. Elsewhere (Joyce 2009a) I have called this remaining

theory “minimal projectivism”; here, in line with Mackie’s preferred terminology, let us call it “minimal objectification.” Would it be viable to argue for moral skepticism on the basis of minimal objectification? In order for a positive answer, minimal objectification must imply moral skepticism, but it must do so non-trivially—it cannot be that making the case for minimal objectification would require first making the case for moral skepticism.

Before proceeding, we must be more precise regarding this “claim about our experience of the world and what causes that experience.” This claim is the heart of objectification; it is the part that is supposed to capture, in literal terms, the whole idea of something mental being *projected* onto the world. It is not my intention here to offer a *general* account of objectification, for that poses a number of complications that are surprisingly challenging to overcome and the effort is not necessary on this occasion. I am satisfied to sketch an account of a pertinent proper subset of objectification: minimal *affective objectification*.³

S’s experience of X as P is an instance of minimal affective objectification if and only if: (1) S experiences P as an objective feature of X, and (2) this experience has its immediate causal origin in some affective attitude (e.g., the emotion of disapproval) rather than a perceptual faculty.

Call (1) the *phenomenological thesis* and (2) the *causal thesis*.⁴

We experience the fungus as objectively foul, but this experience is the immediate result not of perceiving the property of foulness, but rather of our emotion of disgust. Naturally, perception is involved prior to our feeling disgust: we *see* the fungus, we *smell* the fungus, and so forth. It is in acknowledgement of this prior engagement of perceptual faculties that the causal thesis claims that the experience (e.g., of foulness)

³ For the curious, I will quickly outline the difficulties of providing a general account of minimal objectification (or “projectivism” as I will call it in this footnote, since I will relate it to subjects for which the latter term is more familiar). An adequate general account of projectivism should cover at least the following cases: (1) moral projectivism, (2) causal projectivism, (3) psychopathological projectivism, and (4) color projectivism. In the interests of illustrating the difficulties of achieving a general account, let me sketch, in the most provisional terms, what these four theories might look like. In moral projectivism, something in the world prompts one to feel disapproval (say), which leads one to experience the thing in the world as forbidden. In causal projectivism, a regularity in the world prompts one to have an expectation, which leads one to experience the world as containing a causal relation. I am not confident that I can give a general account of all forms of psychopathological projectivism, but examples are not hard to come by: A person’s poor self-image leads her to interpret her parents as being overly critical or demanding. So far we have three mental states that serve as “intermediaries” between the world and one’s experience of the world: disapproval, expectation, and a poor self-image. Yet it is hard to come up with an over-arching category for these three that will not end up capturing too much. And in the case of color projectivism, it is challenging even to come up with an analogous intermediary mental state. The idea is (roughly) that one’s visual experience of color owes its quality to the nature of one’s sensory apparatus rather than to the real nature of objects’ surfaces (even though the sensory apparatus is sensitive to real properties of surfaces). It is not obvious what mental activity is supposed to be getting projected in the creation of one’s visual color field. (Visual qualia?) My hunch is that color projectivism can be articulated only as a metaphysical (non-minimal) thesis. It is in light of these kinds of complications that I have sidestepped the delicate task of trying to unify this family of stock examples (and others besides) with a general account, though I confess to harboring the hope of yet doing so in the future. Perhaps in the end there is no entirely satisfactory general account of minimal projection in the offing.

⁴ See Joyce 2009, where some features of this account (e.g., what might be meant by “objective”) are discussed in more detail.

has its *immediate* origin in an affective attitude rather than a perceptual faculty. (That this is a vague and potentially problematic qualification does not escape me.) This appearance of “immediate” is designed also to exclude non-projection cases where some affective state, such as emotional arousal, guides subsequent perceptual processes, such as focusing one’s attention on aspects of the world that might otherwise escape notice. An intensely jealous person, for example, might notice something in the body language of another that she otherwise would not have seen. Let us say that the body language is real: The other person really is (say) sitting with uncrossed legs. And the jealous party experiences this body language as an objective aspect of the world (thus satisfying the phenomenological thesis). And were she not jealous, she would not have noticed it. However, her experience is not an instance of minimal affective projection because it does not flow *immediately* from the affective attitude of jealousy: rather, the jealousy has guided the subsequent engagement of her perceptual faculties. In the case of foul fungus, by comparison, the disgust does not lead one to see the fungus as foul via channeling one’s perceptual attention to aspects of the fungus (though it may incidentally direct perceptual attention as well); the relation between the disgust and the foulness—the relation that Mackie described as the latter being “some sort of image of” the former—is more direct than that.

In order to articulate the thesis of minimal *moral* affective objectification we need do nothing more than stipulate that “P” (as in “...experiences X as P”) denotes a moral adjective. I cannot think of a theory of moral projectivism for which the mental state putatively “projected” in the creation of moral experience is claimed to be anything other than an affective attitude (e.g., disapproval, subscription to a normative framework, etc.), so in what follows I shall drop the “affective” qualification. Clarity requires, however, that we keep the “minimal.” I do not suppose that every philosopher who has spoken of “moral projectivism” or “moral objectification” over the years has really had in mind, even tacitly, the minimal variety.

Both the phenomenological thesis and the causal thesis appear to be psychological claims. Quite how we would go about empirically testing them for the case of morality (or any other case) is a nice question (into which I won’t delve on this occasion), but it seems pretty clear that, on the face of it, whatever methods of empirical psychology we employed would not require us first to establish that moral properties do not exist, or that moral judgments are uttered with assertoric force. Therefore one desideratum of the strategy of arguing for moral skepticism on the basis of minimal objectification appears to be satisfied: The latter does not imply the former *trivially*.

The other desideratum, however, is not satisfied. Minimal moral objectification does not imply moral skepticism *at all*, for it is metaethically neutral. Not only is it silent on the cognitivist/noncognitivist debate, it is also silent on the metaphysical debate over the existence or non-existence of moral properties. It is, therefore, compatible with moral realism and thus does not imply moral skepticism. Let me explain. Note, first, that there is a *prima facie* pressure in favor of maintaining this compatibility, based simply on the observation that were the phenomenological and causal theses to be confirmed by empirical inquiry (as they very well might be), it would surely be astonishing if the moral realist were to roll over and concede the game to the skeptic. It may nevertheless clarify matters to explore this compatibility in more specific terms. A simple example will suffice to get the compatibility on the table, and then I will develop a more satisfactory example for the moral case.

Consider an everyday usage of the notion of *projection*. Suppose that a person tends to experience others she encounters in social situations as critical and

reproachful; but in fact this is due to her own meek and self-doubting nature. It would not be at all peculiar for us to describe this person as *projecting* her sense of her own inadequacy onto others. Now suppose that on a given occasion this person encounters a man who really is unusually critical and reproachful. Let it be stipulated that he has not yet indicated to the woman, even in the most subtle fashion, that he has such a personality; she simply assumes that he does, just like she does with everyone else that she meets. The woman's judgment "This man is critical and reproachful of me" is just as much a projection on this occasion as ever it is; and this conclusion is not undermined by the fact that the judgment happens this time to be true. Even if the woman *often* encountered critical and reproachful persons, her subsequent negative judgments about them (which will now *often* be true) might nevertheless remain instances of her projecting her sense of inadequacy, so long as we specify that she would have formed these same judgments even if these critical and reproachful persons' personalities had been otherwise.

An analogous situation in the case of moral judgment would suffice to show the compatibility of minimal moral objectification and moral realism. We can imagine a scenario in which, on the one hand, moral judgments are acts of minimal objectification/projection, while, on the other hand, these judgments (when uttered) are assertions that are often true. According to one influential view, satisfying the latter conditions suffices for moral realism (Sayre-McCord 1986). Some would prefer to add a further clause to moral realism: that the assertions in question are true in virtue of some objective state of affairs. (See Joyce 2007 for discussion of the definition of "moral realism.") Let it be so; imagining the scenario in such a way that this additional clause is also satisfied will not spoil the example by undermining the projectivist stipulation.

But one may remain unsatisfied with this demonstration of compatibility, for the example had the projection-derived judgments turning out true *by coincidence*. The example shows minimal objectification and moral realism to be compatible according to the letter of the law, but perhaps not the spirit. Can we eliminate this aspect of accidentality from the demonstration of compatibility?

I believe that we can. Return to Mackie's example of foul fungus. Assume the minimal affective objectification account holds true: A person experiences the fungus as having an objective quality of foulness, and this experience has its immediate origin in the person's disgust. Now let us see whether realism about *foulness* might also hold true. There is certainly nothing to exclude us holding that when the person makes public her judgment via the utterance "That fungus is foul!" she is making an assertion. It is the other realist elements that might be deemed troublesome: that the assertion (A) is true, (B) is true in virtue of an objective fact, and (C) is non-accidentally true—i.e., is made in a way dependent on the truth-rendering fact. (Whether (B) is really a necessary aspect of realism is moot, and that (C) is a necessary part of realism seems doubtful, but let us add these components for the sake of argument.)

Consider a response-dependent account of the property of foulness. (See Casati and Tappolet 1998; Johnston 1989, 1992, 1993; Wright 1988.) Foulness, on this account, is a disposition to produce a certain kind of psychological response R in a certain kind of subject S in a certain kind of circumstance C. It would be no challenge to specify these variables R, S, and C in such a way that certain items in the actual world—such as bits of fungus—have this disposition, thus rendering assertions of the form "X is foul" true. The account can also claim to satisfy an important kind of objectivity. (See Pettit 1991.) The disposition in question will be understood in modal terms, such that

the fungus *would* prompt R if apprehended by S in C. Thus the fungus may have the disposition even if no Ss have ever been in C, even if no Ss have ever experienced R, even if no Ss ever have existed or ever will exist. Thus the disposition does not depend on the *existence* of any particular psychological state, or even the existence of psychological states generally. (One might point out that the disposition is nevertheless *conceptually* mind-dependent—since it cannot be adequately described without reference being made to psychological state R—but it is not at all obvious that realism requires “conceptual mind-independence.” It certainly doesn’t require every form of mind-independence. One would like to be a realist about domesticated dogs, despite the fact that they are *causally* mind-dependent entities: existing only because of generations of *intentional* behavior on the part of humans.)

In order to emphasize the fact that satisfying these realist conditions has not undermined the projectivist assumptions that we started with, let us specify R in such a way that the psychological response in question is in fact an act of objectification. In other words, suppose that foulness is the disposition *to prompt Ss (when in C) to feel disgust and to objectify this disgust in their experience of the world*. This appears to build the satisfaction of the minimal objectification thesis (i.e., the satisfaction of the phenomenological and the causal theses) into the response dependent account. We are thus in a position to see that the judgment that is derived from a process of objectification—“That fungus is foul!”—does indeed manifest a dependence relation on the truth-supplying fact; it is not merely coincidentally true: Were the fungus not to have been foul, the observer would not have made the judgment.⁵

One might worry that in striving to satisfy the dependence relation the account has undermined the causal thesis. If there is this dependence relation in place—if the counterfactual that ends the last paragraph holds true—then isn’t the person’s experience of the foulness (the foulness that we are here supposing to objectively exist) a case of *perception*, after all? And if so, then the causal thesis is undermined, in which case my attempt to show the compatibility of minimal moral objectification and realism will have failed.

I respond not by offering a full account of perception (which I have neither the space nor the expertise to do), but by observing that the counterfactual dependence mentioned is certainly not a sufficient condition for perception. A couple of simple examples will suffice. Consider learning something from reading a book: Suppose one learns for the first time that Napoleon lost Waterloo. The book, we are supposing, is an accurate one, in the sense that had Napoleon not lost Waterloo, the book would not have contained the claim that he did lose. And we will also suppose that the reader judges that Napoleon lost Waterloo solely on the basis of reading this reliable history book. This judgment thus manifests the appropriate counterfactual relationship with the relevant fact, but we would not on this basis conclude that the reader *perceives* Napoleon losing Waterloo. The second example concerns someone judging that a

⁵ Needless to say, Mackie himself won’t buy the response-dependent account of moral properties. He criticizes such views in general terms in his 1980 book (chapter 5); and in his 1973 book (chapter 4) he doubts even the existence of dispositional properties. It is also doubtful that Hume’s multifarious uses of the projectivist metaphor are supposed to be compatible with realism. Stroud (2000) emphasizes how, in Hume’s account, the content of projectivist experience—be it causal connection, beauty, color, or virtue—is something that could not even be *intelligibly* predicated of items in the world. Immediately following the famous *Treatise* projectivist image of the mind’s “great propensity to spread itself on external objects,” Hume declares that sounds and smells “really exist no where” (Hume 1739-40, 1.3.14.24 / 1978, p. 167)—and context makes it reasonable to think that he will say the same of color and necessary connection. I discuss the error theoretic commitments lying behind Hume’s views in Joyce 2010.

certain object instantiates a dispositional property. Suppose someone works out that a vase is fragile by some means other than breaking it. Perhaps she smashes a lot of similar vases, or perhaps she asks some authoritative people. We will suppose that whatever means she employs is reliable, in the sense that had the vase not had the disposition, she would not have come to make the judgment about its fragility that she does make. But, though her true judgment (“The vase is fragile”) manifests a dependence relation on the truth-rendering fact (the vase’s being fragile), we would not say that she has literally *perceived* this vase’s fragility.

Thus, in striving to come up with a realistic account of foulness that satisfies the desideratum of the judgment being dependent on the truth-supplying fact (along with satisfying all the other realist criteria, too), we have not undercut our starting projectivist assumption that the experience has its immediate origin in an affective attitude *rather than a perceptual faculty*. And what goes for foulness here can go for moral qualities, too. I conclude, therefore, that minimal moral objectification is compatible with moral realism—even a fairly robust version of moral realism.⁶

Whatever may seem surprising or counter-intuitive about this conclusion probably stems from the fact that *non*-minimal versions of objectification are more familiar to us, both in vernacular settings and in the philosophy classroom. We are more likely to describe the case of psychopathological projection in terms such as: “Her sense of her own inadequacy makes her see others as criticizing her *when really they’re not*.”⁷ We are more likely to describe moral objectification in terms such as “Our feelings of disapproval and aversion lead us to see the world as containing moral qualities *that it does not really contain*.” It is not my intention to condemn such non-minimal, metaphysically-committed uses of objectification; they may, indeed, be the more natural and useful formulations in most circumstances. My point has been, rather, to show that in order to establish the truth of any such metaphysically-committed objectification thesis one would need to have *already* shown that the quality in question does not exist, and so the strategy of supporting moral skepticism by means of first establishing a metaphysically-committed version of moral objectification is unworkable. We have also seen that the strategy of supporting moral skepticism solely on the basis of establishing a *minimal* version of moral objectification is also unworkable, for the minimal version is silent on the debate between the moral realist and the moral skeptic.

As to this last claim, one might object that *of course* minimal objectification should be silent about these metaethical claims, for the whole point, after all, is that it should not imply moral skepticism *trivially*; it should imply it only in conjunction with some other premises. Minimal objectification may well be consistent with moral realism, but perhaps these other premises will serve to narrow the range of possibilities so as to exclude realism along with every other theoretical possibility bar the error theory. One or more of these additional premises may function to knock noncognitivism out of the running. (Mackie does, recall, develop several arguments against the noncognitivist in both his 1977 and 1980 books.) Other additional premises may serve to establish the non-existence of moral properties. Perhaps when we add up all of these premises we end up with an argumentative route from minimal objectification to the moral error theory.

⁶ There is precedence for seeing projectivism and realism as compatible in the Humean literature. See Craig 2000; Sainsbury 1998.

⁷ Freud, remember, categorized this sort of projection as a kind of *delusion*—indicating an antirealist construal.

At first blush, the problem with this objection appears obvious. The additional premises adverted to would appear to be *sufficient* to establish the moral error theory; they would be doing *all* the work, and the thesis of minimal objectification would be entirely superfluous in this argument. Therefore, we seem to see once more that the strategy of establishing the moral error theory on the basis of the thesis of minimal objectification turns out not to be viable.

On closer inspection, however, the objection has more merit. Consider the passage with which Mackie introduces the topic of objectification, immediately after presenting his arguments from relativity and queerness:

Considerations of these kinds suggest that it is in the end less paradoxical to reject than to retain the common-sense belief in the objectivity of moral values, provided that we can explain how this belief, if it is false, has become established and is so resistant to criticisms. (1977, p. 42)

The thesis of objectification is supposed to satisfy this “proviso.” In other words, Mackie has exposed a theoretical option: We can either “reject ... the common-sense belief in the objectivity of moral values” or we can “retain” it. The thesis of objectification is evidently supposed to function as the tie-breaker, making rejection the reasonable choice. We are forced to conclude that (Mackie thinks that) without the thesis of objectification, retaining the commonsense belief would remain a live option. Objectification functions as an explanation of where the massive error embodied in morality comes from, in such a way that *without that explanation there remains doubt that it is an error at all*.

There is a tempting alternative reading of Mackie, which accords the thesis of objectification a lesser role. According to this alternative, by the end of the section in which he presents the argument from queerness (section 9, chapter 1) Mackie has established the moral error theory to his own satisfaction. A reader might at that point accept the moral error theory but then be naturally *curious* to know where this widespread systematic human error has come from, and the thesis of moral objectification is supposed to satisfy this curiosity. According to this reading, the thesis of moral objectification does not function to satisfy a proviso, but is, rather, a supplement to the completed skeptical argument: an interesting explanation but strictly dispensable in establishing the case for moral skepticism. The above-quoted passage, however, indicates that this alternative reading is incorrect. The case for moral skepticism (embodied in the arguments from relativity and queerness) is plainly considered incomplete until the thesis of objectification is put forward. But what role precisely does the thesis of objectification play in Mackie’s case for moral skepticism?

The answer, I believe, lies in Mackie’s almost-tacit acceptance of some kind of epistemological conservatism. Just prior to presenting the arguments from relativity and queerness, he has admitted that since moral skepticism “goes against assumptions ingrained in our thought and built into some of the ways in which language is used, since it conflicts with what is sometimes called common sense, it needs very solid support” (1977, p. 35). Mackie appears to be acknowledging that the counter-intuitiveness of moral skepticism in itself represents a burden of proof that the error theorist must strive to overcome—that the error theorist’s arguments need to be even more convincing than those of his opponent if he is to win the day.

That Mackie is an epistemological conservative may seem an unexpected conclusion, considering how accustomed we have grown to seeing the moral realist reach for the principle of epistemological conservatism as one the main weapons in

the anti-skepticism arsenal. (See, e.g., Huemer 2005; Brink 1989, pp. 23-4; Dancy 1986, p. 172.⁸ See Loeb, this volume, for discussion.) But it is apparent that Mackie does indeed consider the “intuitiveness” of a philosophical thesis a valid consideration in deciding whether to endorse it. All else being equal, an intuitive theory is to be preferred over a counter-intuitive one; in other words, the very fact that a belief is held supplies it with a certain *prima facie* epistemological justification. And that there *are* intuitions in favor of morality is hardly to be denied; any error theory worth arguing about is, *ex hypothesi*, counter-intuitive.

Mackie’s arguments in favor of moral skepticism, then, must overcome these standing intuitions. The vital role of the thesis of objectification is to *explain away* the content of these pro-morality intuitions by providing an account of their origin that does not imply or presuppose their truth. Such a genealogical explanation serves to defeat or block whatever *prima facie* justification these intuitions might otherwise have been granted. The skeptic does not deny or doubt the principle of conservatism; he takes it seriously. In particular, the skeptic attends to the principle’s “all else being equal” clause. “When are things *not* equal?” the skeptic wonders. When are intuitions defeated, and under what conditions might they not even be accorded *prima facie* epistemic status? One answer (among many, no doubt) is that things are not equal if one has a plausible, or even empirically confirmed, theory of where the intuitions in question come from that is consistent with their being false.

The moral skeptic, then, needs two lines of reasoning. The first attempts to show that there is something fishy about moral facts. (For Mackie, this is achieved by the conjunction of the arguments from relativity and queerness.) But the conclusion of this reasoning is, all parties agree, counter-intuitive. A principle of epistemological conservatism threatens to allow these pro-morality intuitions to override the skeptic’s case. So the skeptic offers a second body of evidence: explaining away the content of those pro-morality intuitions by revealing them to be the product of an unreliable process of formation. The second move aims to show “how even if there were no such objective values people not only might have come to suppose that there are but also persist firmly in that belief” (1977, p. 49). The skeptic thus discharges the burden of proof with which he is lumbered—not by bolstering his initial argument (presenting more evidence in support of premises, devising new argumentative moves, etc.), but by casting into a doubtful light those very intuitions that promised to give the conservative principle traction. (Moreover, nor can these same pro-morality intuitions be raised as a consideration against the argument for objectification, since it is a corollary of the objectification thesis that such intuitions will be in place.)

My claim that the intent of Mackie’s two skeptical arguments (relativity and queerness) is merely to show that there is something “fishy” about morality might itself seem fishy; surely, one might object, these arguments are supposed to be more decisive than that. If these are sound arguments (the objection continues), then they need no extra argument to act as a tie-breaker; and if they are not sound arguments, then why should we pay them any attention? However, I think this dilemma does not succeed in undermining the interpretation being offered. Let us briefly consider Mackie’s two skeptical arguments in turn.

The argument from relativity takes the form of a competition between two hypotheses: the phenomenon of moral disagreement may be explained either by the supposition that some parties have privileged epistemic access to the realm of moral

⁸ I offer some criticisms of this line of argument—and of Michael Huemer’s version of it in particular—in Joyce 2009b.

facts (the realist's hypothesis) or by the supposition that there are no moral facts at all (the skeptic's hypothesis). Among the many criteria that we might employ in deciding between these two hypotheses, a comparison of their levels of mesh with our intuitions may well figure. Certainly the epistemological conservative allows it to figure. Therefore putting forward evidence (such as the thesis of objectification) that *explains away* the content of intuitions in favor of one hypothesis is both strategically permissible and potentially determinative.

The same point is slightly less obvious in the case of the argument from queerness, for here, it might seem, we have an argument that purports to stand soundly on its own: Premise 1 is a piece of conceptual analysis (that moral discourse is centrally committed to the existence of objective prescriptions) and premise 2 is an ontological claim (that there exist no objective prescriptions). However, it is, I think, slightly naive to suppose that Mackie considers the argument from queerness to be a sound argument with demonstrably true premises. It is more realistic to think of it as providing a firm consideration in favor of moral skepticism, its premises having the status of hypotheses on whose acceptability many factors may have a bearing. There may, for example, be considerations to be raised in support of the claim that there exist no objective prescriptions, but also considerations to be raised in support of the claim that there do exist objective prescriptions. No impartial spectator who has been paying attention to the debate could seriously doubt this; it is a complex and nuanced discussion that leaves plenty of wriggle room for competing interpretations of key elements (as some of the contributions to this volume demonstrate). The epistemological conservative allows that if there are standing intuitions in favor of view that objective prescriptions exist (as it seems reasonable to suspect), then these may be accorded a role in weighting the debate against premise 2 and thus against the argument from queerness. Therefore, again, the strategy of raising evidence (such as the thesis of objectification) that casts into doubt those very intuitions that speak against the argument from queerness—showing that they arise from a potentially unreliable source—is entirely legitimate and may very well swing the argument the skeptic's way.

We have seen, then, that the two lines of reasoning need each other. The case for moral skepticism is not achieved by the arguments from relativity and queerness alone; evidence to explain away the counter-intuitiveness of the conclusion (or individual premises) is also required in order to overcome the challenge from epistemological conservatism. And the thesis of objectification alone will not provide a skeptical conclusion. The minimal version of the thesis is metaethically neutral, and to employ a metaphysically-committed version to this end would simply beg the question.

Thus far I have been concerned entirely with the role that the objectification thesis plays in Mackie's overall strategy for establishing moral skepticism, but we have not yet examined any of the arguments he provides to convince us that the thesis is actually plausible. I will close by giving attention to this matter.⁹

In the interests of clarifying the structure of the argument we should first acknowledge that it was open to Mackie to eschew the task of mustering evidence in favor of the objectification thesis, and instead simply present the thesis as a coherent and possible hypothesis of the genealogy of moral judgment according to which these

⁹ Space does not permit an examination of Mackie's arguments for moral objectification found in his 1946 paper. I do not think any of the arguments found there are superior to those problematic ones which I shall discuss.

judgments are not, or might not be, true. But it is evident that this is not Mackie's attitude towards the thesis—and it is as well that it is not, for this strategy would place the objectification thesis in the same category as a host of other skeptical hypotheses that lack any real plausibility but which have the (dubious) virtue of thwarting all attempts at falsification. (Brains in vats and deceiving demons spring to mind.) The objectification thesis plainly isn't supposed to function in this disappointing way—merely as a skeptical hypothesis that *might*, for all we can prove to the contrary, hold true. It is supposed, rather, to be a serious hypothesis for which we can marshal solid evidence.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, Mackie misses much of the opportunity to establish the plausibility of the thesis by looking for supportive evidence in the wrong places. The few pages devoted to this in his 1977 book (pp. 43-48) are uncharacteristically somewhat obscure. In particular, he does not do an adequate job, in my opinion, of distinguishing between the thesis that moral experience is the result of our having objectified affective attitudes (feelings, wants, and demands are mentioned by him) and the thesis that we simply have false beliefs about the objective status of moral properties. That we should recognize such a distinction seems highly desirable. Consider something that we would ordinarily consider a non-objective matter—say, what counts as polite behavior at meal times. A person might foolishly believe that the propriety of keeping one's elbows off the table is an utterly mind-independent affair, and that all those other cultures that allow alternative rules of etiquette are simply mistaken. This person has a false belief about the objectivity of something. But must it be an instance of *objectification*? It might be, of course, but it also seems reasonable to suppose that it might not be. Objectification essentially involves a certain sort of psychological *operation* that leads to belief (or, speaking more carefully, that leads to a certain quality of experience). “Objectify” is a transitive verb; there must be something that gets objectified. The aforementioned causal thesis—which is a blunt attempt to capture that operation—leaves no grounds for thinking that such beliefs about objectivity will always be the result of such a process.

Mackie begins by pointing out that a widespread belief in objective moral properties might fulfill certain human needs: Such properties (if they existed) would have a kind of practical authority over human affairs such that a widespread belief in their instantiation would regulate interpersonal relations in an effective way. This is a complex but broadly plausible claim. Yet it doesn't obviously provide any evidence in favor of the objectification thesis as opposed to the “false-beliefs-about-objectivity” thesis. And even as evidence for the latter it is weak: The consideration merely shows that we might have a motive for believing in objective moral properties, which falls short of demonstrating that we *do* so believe. One might try to wring from this some (proportionally weak) support for the objectification thesis by pointing out that if we have a *motive* for believing in an objective morality, and this motive does lead us to belief, then we have *objectified* that motive, thus satisfying the criteria of the objectification thesis. But this is a problematic line of argument. What it is to “have a motive” is a complicated and indeterminate matter. On one weak reading it means that there is a reason to do something, even if one is unaware of this fact. (“The Romans had a motive for ceasing to line their aqueducts with lead.”) A more robust reading requires making reference to an agent's desire. (“Romeo had a motive for climbing to Juliet's balcony.”) This indeterminacy creates a fatal dilemma for the argument under consideration.

Suppose, first, that when we say that humans “have a motive” for believing in an objective morality, we are using “motive” in something like the former sense, to mean

that, as a matter of fact, things will go better for us (each of us, let's say) if we all have this belief. This, however, may be true while we all remain utterly ignorant of the fact, showing that such a motive might not exist in our psychological profile in any sense, and therefore is not *there* to be objectified. The fact which we are calling "the motive" might nevertheless have causal powers. That fact that things go better for organisms with X than organisms without X can lead to change—through a process of natural selection, for example. I admitted that it is broadly plausible that things will go better for groups of humans if they believe in an objective morality, and we can thus imagine this belief becoming fixed in a population through some process of cultural (or biological) evolution. All this would make it permissible to claim: "Humans have a motive for believing in an objective morality, and this motive brings it about that they do so believe." But at no point need we maintain that the "motive" in question is psychologically represented by/to humans—let alone as an affective attitude—and therefore the criteria for objectification are not satisfied.

Alternatively, we could understand "motive" in the latter sense, to mean that humans (generally) do desire to believe in an objective morality, and this desire brings it about that they do so believe. This would satisfy the criteria of the objectification thesis, but only at the cost of being a fantastic empirical claim. Bearing in mind that we are using "desire" in the sense of *occurrent, affective attitude* (something that has causal powers within an individual's psychological economy), it is wildly implausible that humans typically desire to believe that moral properties are objective.

I conclude, therefore, that while it might be true that humans "have a motive" for believing in an objective morality, and that this fact might have had (and continue to have) an important causal role in bringing it about that we do so believe, this does not provide grounds for claiming that this belief is the product of our having *objectified* that motive.

Mackie goes on (1977, pp. 43-44) to give some specific examples of moral objectification, which he designates "patterns of objectification." Sometimes we desire something for perfectly sound (non-moral) reasons, but then we "confuse" these grounds for our desire (the item's "subjective value") for the idea that the item in question has objective value. Sometimes we think that someone ought to do something for instrumental reasons, but then we suppress the instrumental conditional clause and claim that she ought do it *simpliciter*. We might do this because it is more likely to lead to compliance. Later (p. 47), another kind of confusion is mentioned: when we muddle a descriptive and objective sense of the goal of humans (as in what we in fact pursue, or what posited goal will confer sense upon our actual actions) with a normative but subjective sense of that goal (as in what we *ought* to be pursuing).

These might very well be cases of objectification, and it is not at all implausible to suppose that Mackie is accurately describing some real human phenomena. But if his goal is to provide evidence that human moral judgment is *typically* (always?) the product of a process of objectification, then these examples hardly count as strong evidence. After all, I doubt that anyone (apart from some philosophers who worry in their characteristic manner about the details of the thesis of projectivism) will deny that moral judgment is *sometimes* the product of projected desires, emotions, and moods. Therefore, exposing some cases of moral objectification does not suffice to explain how the (putatively) false intuitions in favor of morality have "become established" and are "so resistant to criticisms" (p. 42). By analogy, suppose one were to doubt the existence of human character traits, and sought to explain away those strong intuitions we seem to have that such traits do indeed exist. One potential explanation would be the projectivist one: Our tendency to see others as instantiating

stable character traits is the result of our projecting aspects of our own mental lives onto them. In providing evidence for this projectivist thesis, it would clearly not suffice to point out some instances of this kind of projectivism—such as the example I employed earlier of someone’s sense of her own inadequacy leading her to see others as critical and reproachful. All parties (we can suppose) accept the existence of the phenomenon of psychopathological projection; much more evidence would be needed to show that this phenomenon somehow generalizes in unexpected ways. By referring in the plural to “patterns of objectification,” Mackie might hope to give the impression of a systematic and widespread tendency here (as in “There is a pattern emerging!”), but in reality he has not provided evidence sufficient for his purposes.

A further strand in Mackie’s case for the objectification thesis is broadly historical. Once upon a time a lot of our moral language was embedded in an ontological framework that included an all-powerful, all-seeing, loving deity doling out rewards and punishments. Mackie concedes that if “this theological doctrine could be defended, a kind of objective ethical prescriptivity could be introduced” (p. 48).¹⁰ He looks with some sympathy upon Elizabeth’s Anscombe’s conjecture that “modern moral philosophy” (à la mid-twentieth century) consists of trying to make sense of a family of normative concepts “outside the framework of thought that made [them] really intelligible” (Anscombe 1958, p. 6). However plausible this “conceptual residue theory” may be (and I agree with Mackie that there is surely something to it), it nevertheless seems to have little to do with the psychological process of objectification. Anscombe may have explained the origin of a widespread but false belief in the objectivity of morality (and therefore does provide resources upon which Mackie can draw), but the hypothesis does not fit with the desired model of this belief being the result of our having “spread” our wants and demands onto “external objects.”

We find a more structured and clear argument for the objectification thesis in 1980’s *Hume’s Moral Theory*. There Mackie claims that it is the only theory that can properly make sense of three phenomena: (i) that the evidence seems to favor metaethical cognitivism, (ii) that moral statements are taken to be intrinsically action-guiding (i.e., not to rely on subjects’ ends and goals for their legitimacy), and (iii) that “the essential fact of the matter, which underlies moral judgments ..., is that people have various sentiments” (1980, p. 72). Though the last is stated rather clumsily, it is apparent to what Mackie is referring. In the preceding chapter he has identified nine arguments used by Hume to press the negative view that moral judgments are not the product of reason, and then he has provided a number of well-known passages from Hume variously stating the positive “plain hypothesis”: “that morality is determined by sentiment” (Hume 1751, appendix 1.10 / 2006 p. 160). Mackie has been assessing various specifications of this positive hypothesis—one of which is the objectification thesis—and it is precisely because he wants to characterize the sentimentalist hypothesis in a way that leaves open a range of theoretical options that he words (iii) so formlessly.

Mackie thinks that (i)-(iii) jointly knock out all rivals to the objectification thesis as follows (very roughly): Noncognitivist offerings fail to satisfy (i). Versions of “subjectivism” according to which moral utterances make reference *descriptively* to some real or hypothetical agent’s emotions (such as the ideal observer theory) fail to

¹⁰ Incidentally, this comment reveals that Mackie believes that so long as there exists some possible world at which the requisite kind of supernatural being is real, then the error in morality is but a contingent matter. In his forceful case for atheism in his 1982 book, Mackie repeatedly declares the existence of God to be “improbable” (pp. 100, 130, 252-3)—not impossible.

satisfy (ii). Various forms of moral rationalism, intuitionism, and naturalistic realism—theories that do not accord emotion a central role in our apprehension of moral truths—fail to satisfy (iii). By contrast, the objectification thesis is supposed to pass the test. Moral judgment begins with humans responding to certain actions and characters in the world with affective attitudes (thus satisfying (iii)), which we then project onto our experience of the world, reading “some sort of image” of the attitude into the item that prompted it, seeing (for example) the action as categorically required (thus satisfying (ii)); and we are, by and large, fooled by this operation into thinking that the normative property really is instantiated, in which case our language for discussing it is, naturally, assertoric and propositional (thus satisfying (i)).

To assess this argument for the objectification thesis would require a comprehensive metaethical investigation. We would have to evaluate whether all these rivals do indeed fail to satisfy the desiderata that Mackie claims they fail; we would have to assess whether the objectification thesis really does satisfy the three desiderata; we would have to consider whether any theory other than the objectification thesis promises to satisfy the three desiderata; we would need to investigate whether these three desiderata really *are* that (that a theory’s failure to satisfy one of these criteria really does represent a reason for rejecting the theory); and we would need to reflect on whether there might exist additional desiderata (ones, perhaps, that the objectification thesis fails to satisfy). Needless to say, such an assessment is not going to be attempted here. The point I want to observe is the general one that here Mackie is seeking to establish the objectification thesis via a metaethical route—and a long and controversial metaethical route at that. This argument for objectification is not independent of pivotal elements of his other arguments for moral skepticism.

For example, it is a central plank of the argument from queerness that moral judgments are imbued with “objective prescriptivity”—“something that involves a call for action or for the refraining from action, and one that is absolute, not contingent on any desire or preference or policy or choice” (1977, p. 33). But note that this premise in the argument from queerness is really nothing more or less than desideratum (ii) employed in the argument for the objectification thesis. Many critics of the argument from queerness complain that moral discourse is committed to nothing so extravagant, and if they are correct then the argument will clearly collapse. Whatever grounds these critics of the argument from queerness have for their view are grounds for denying that (ii) is a criterion of theory acceptance. Another class of critic of the argument from queerness will maintain that this quality of “objective prescriptivity” can indeed be satisfied by (clusters of) naturalistic properties. But saying this is nothing more or less than denying Mackie’s claim that moral naturalism cannot satisfy (ii).

That Mackie’s argument for the objectification thesis shares central premises with the argument from queerness is not a problem in the context of his 1980 book, for the objectification thesis is not there functioning to satisfy a proviso to another argument. But it does mean that we cannot lift the argument for the objectification thesis found in the 1980 book and use it to help establish the objectification thesis in the context of the 1977 argument. My earlier interpretation of the 1977 dialectic had acceptance of the arguments from relativity and queerness held in abeyance until the objectivity thesis steps in as a tie-breaker, rendering it “less paradoxical to reject than to retain the common-sense belief in the objectivity of moral values” (1977, p. 42). But this strategy plainly will not work if whatever doubt hangs over the arguments for moral skepticism also hangs over the argument that would convince us of the thesis that would to satisfy the proviso.

I conclude that Mackie's use of the objectification thesis in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* is a reasonable idea that is poorly executed. The general strategy of overcoming epistemic conservatism by showing moral intuitions to be the product of an unreliable process of formation is a sound one. Seeing moral experience as the product of an operation of projection or objectification is one prominent example of this strategy (among others) that might very well succeed. But the objectification thesis necessary and sufficient for the job is the minimal psychological thesis, to be established (if at all) by empirical investigation independent of any metaethical arguments. By muddling up psychological hypotheses with metaphysical commitments (whereby objectification involves "false belief in the fictitious features" (1980, p. 72)), Mackie makes it impossible for himself to use the objectification thesis in support of moral skepticism in a non-question-begging way.

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