



The Magnetism of the Good and Ethical Realism

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ABSTRACT: Ethical antirealists believe the words ‘good’ and ‘bad’, and ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, do not signify properties that objects and actions have or might have. They believe that when a person calls pain or any other event ‘bad’ and adultery or any other action ‘wrong’, he does not report some fact about that object or action. J. L. Mackie defends ethical anti-realism in part by appealing to an *ontological queerness* he believes value properties would have if they existed. "If there were objective values," Mackie writes, "they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe." (1) Goodness would have a queer magnetic power. "Something's being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it. An objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it," Mackie says. If there were a property of the sort we conceive of good as being, it would be a queer property—one we cannot reasonably believe exists, Mackie argues.

"Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim." Aristotle

"To the rational animal the same act is according to nature and according to reason." Marcus Aurelius

In this paper I address and overturn the above argument from ontological queerness against value-realism that Mackie uses in the quoted passage. I argue as follows: though good objects do—under certain circumstances—dispose people to want and seek those objects, and bad objects dispose us to dislike and avoid them, their having this impact on us does hinge on a particular property of a person's constitution—a property that diverse people share. When we recognize a feature of what it is for an object to be good or bad, and a certain property of people, we can understand why good and bad motivate us as they do. When we understand this we see there is nothing unbelievably queer in good and bad motivating us as they do. Thus, to explain why that which is good attracts people, and why that which is bad repels people, I identify both a property *in the good (or bad) object* and a property *in our constitution*. The property in the good object I specify in Part I below; the property in our constitution I specify in Part II. I defend a form of ‘ethical rationalism’, the view that the good prompts us to desire and seek what is good by way of *reason*.

Part I: A property in a good object that disposes people to seek the object

Goodness and reasons for action

We identify a property in an object's being good or bad that is responsible for the object's consequences on human motivation by identifying a connection between an object's being good or bad and that object's having a property that provides *reasons for action* and *reasons for desire*.

Suppose a woman is contemplating which of two careers to pursue. When she contemplates the pros and cons for each of the career options, she lists what are both good and bad properties of each career *and* properties of the careers that provide reasons for and against choosing that career. There is a *correlation* between those properties of an object that are good and those properties that provides reasons for choosing and seeking that object. This is not a correlation between two distinct, contingently associated kinds of properties. An object's having good properties *consists*, in part, in its having properties that provide agents sound reason to seek that object.

When saying good objects have properties that give sentient beings 'reason' to desire and seek those objects, the word 'reason' has the same meaning it has when we say some state of affairs gives someone 'reason' to believe a storm is approaching. In both contexts 'reason' signifies a justification or ground.

A good object provides reason for a person to want and seek the object when the person regards the object as attainable, and he is aware of what is good in the object.

I have not said exactly *who* has reason to seek a particular good. A corresponding nonspecific character infects Mackie's claim about the magnetism of the good. (Formulations of internalists other than Macike are similarly unspecific.) Mackie does not specify *exactly* the circumstances in which a good objects dispose people to seek them. He says only, "An objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it." People do not seek, and are not disposed to seek, *all* good objects they are acquainted with *at all times*. Two or more goods may compete so that selecting one rules out selecting others. A particular good may be so expensive for a person that it would be irrational for him to pursue it. The following principle will suffice for my needs in this paper: In those cases in which a person pursues an object because the object is good, the object has a property that provides at least *this agent* reason to pursue the object.

Desire and reason

If the good is connected to desire in the way I say it is, that which is good provides people reason for desiring good objects. For the good to provide people reason to desire good objects, it must be *possible* for there to be reason to desire an object. However, some people think there cannot be reason to desire an object. Some people think a desire, like a sensation, is *a-rational*—a type of mental state that can neither accord with, nor conflict with, reason.

We often wonder why a person wants a particular object, e.g., why Jerry wants a new car, why Mary wants to be at a game an hour before it begins, why Susan wants to marry Fred. Often when we wonder why a person wants an object, we are wondering what the person's (justifying) reasons are for wanting that object.

Recently, I wanted a new notebook computer. My computer was broken. New notebooks were smaller, lighter, and faster than my old laptop; they had brighter screens and larger memories. These good features of notebooks gave me reasons to want a new notebook

computer. They were among *my* reasons for wanting a new computer. Many desires people have are like this in that for these desires it is easy to identify reasons people have for desiring that which they desire.

Part II: That feature in a person's construction that is directly responsible for his seeking what is good and avoiding what is bad. An intelligent nature disposes people to be guided by reason when they form desires and decide how to act

As Mackie portrays goodness, an object would, by being good, make people seek that object. Queerly, its having this direct, uniform effect on people would not hinge on any properties humans happen to have. "An objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it," Mackie writes.

Goodness would be a queer sort of property if it both regularly prodded people into seeking objects that have this property and its having this uniform impact did not hinge on *any* properties people have. However, the specific impact goodness regularly has on human motivation and behavior does hinge on a particular property of a human being's constitution.

Mackie says goodness would dispose *persons* to act in certain ways. In thinking of how *persons* would react to what is good Mackie is thinking of a particular kind of object and about how that kind of object would respond to goodness. A person is different from a cabbage or a rock. People have brains: we have a degree of intelligence, and we use reason. Our having these attributes is fundamental to our being 'persons'. Our brains both enable us to have beliefs and desires, and they determine the conditions in which we form beliefs and desires. Our inborn intelligence consists not in innate knowledge or innate desires but in dispositions to form beliefs and desires in certain conditions. Our intelligence consists in part in a disposition to be guided by reason in the formation of beliefs and desires. We are disposed to form beliefs and desires for that which we have reason to believe and desire. We have an inborn disposition to use reason when deciding what to do.

We infer. We use deduction and induction; we use syllogisms and *modus tollens*. We rest beliefs on evidence. We have reasons for desiring what we desire; we act for reasons. By nature, we tend to form particular beliefs and desires upon the presentation of grounds for those beliefs and desires. We are disposed to form desires for objects when, in certain conditions, we are aware of qualities in those objects which there is reason to desire.

A person's beliefs do not normally arise randomly, independently of what there is (justifying) reason to believe and of what he has reason to believe. My oldest daughter believes she is a girl, that her name is 'Rachel', that she has two cats and a guinea pig as pets, and that she lives in North America. She does not believe she is a frog or a construction worker, that her name is 'Helmut', that the year is 1066, that America is at war with Holland, that she lives in a castle, or that she owns a car. There is more than a random correlation between what Rachel and other people believe and what is so. People—intelligent sentient beings—are constructed in such a way that the presentation of evidence or proof often leads us to form a belief or a conclusion.

As is true of beliefs, there is more than a random correlation between what a person has reason to desire and that which he in fact desires. Like a person's beliefs, his desires do not normally arise blindly, independently of what he has reason to desire. When I recently began to desire a new computer, I did not also begin to desire a new sundress, tractor, or chain saw. I had many reasons to want a new computer and no substantial reason to want a

sundress, tractor or chain saw. This desire was typical of acquired desires in that people ordinarily have reasons for wanting what they want.

Non-deliberative reason

We are not ordinarily introspectively aware of reason guiding us in the formation of desires. We should not infer from this that our desires are not guided by reason. Reason continually guides people without them being aware of its guidance.

When we *reason* or *think* about the merits of an object, we are regularly directly aware of doing so. To reason or think is to *act* in a particular way, and a person is normally aware of what he is doing. However, the use of reason is not limited to occasions in which people think or reason; it is not limited to purposeful, deliberative cognitive activity. Using reason does not in itself require performing an action. People use reason when they rest beliefs on evidence. Evidence that *p* is reason to believe *p*. When people rest beliefs on evidence, they usually do not ponder the evidence. Most people who use telephones believe they have ears. Though this belief is founded in evidence and so guided by reason, few people contemplate the evidence for their having ears. Few telephone users ‘reason about’ whether they have ears. ‘Non-deliberative reason’—reason without deliberation—guides their belief. Not all of a person’s beliefs are themselves conclusions of other reasoning. Some beliefs, including some people use as premises when reasoning, are ‘basic’, not conclusions of reasoning. Though basic beliefs are not conclusions of reasoning, we do not ordinarily accept these beliefs arbitrarily—with no support. Rather, non-deliberative reason ordinarily directs our acceptance of basic beliefs. Most basic beliefs are grounded directly in evidence our sensory experience provides.

Though a person often knows directly, through direct awareness, when he is pondering the merits of an object, ordinarily a person does not know directly, through direct awareness or introspection, that nondeliberative reason has guided him in the formation of a belief or desire. Being guided by nondeliberative reason is not an action a person performs; it is not an introspectable event.

Many desires follow lengthy deliberation. A musician may deliberate long and hard before he begins to desire to have surgeons reshape his nose. However, as with beliefs, nondeliberative reason regularly guides desires. (Hence, a person can begin to desire an object he did not previously desire without wanting to deliberate about that object.) Upon being bitten by mosquitoes in the woods I may desire to leave the woods. There is reason for me to want not to walk in a mosquito-infested area, and my desire causally hinges on this reason, though I may not contemplate the merits of walking in the woods.

Even Hume accepts that insofar as the desire for health is instrumental (a means to feeling better), that desire is guided by reason. He does not merely assume that a person has reason to seek that which is a means to something he desires. He assumes that in cases when we desire an object because that object is a means to an object we desires, the desire for the instrumental object is due to reason’s guidance. However, few people are aware of being guided by reason in forming a desire for good health. Few of us even know when we form that desire. Reason’s guidance in the formation of most other desires is equally silent.

To say desires are guided by reason is not to say desires are chosen or that they are caused by an action that is chosen. When *actions* are guided by *reasoning*, both the action and the reasoning are chosen. However, desires, like beliefs, normally are not chosen. When non-deliberative reason guides belief, neither the belief nor the guidance of reason is chosen. Similarly, when non-deliberative reason guides desire, neither the desire nor the use of reason is chosen.

It is possible, in principle, for there to be collections of sentient beings that have beliefs and desires not guided by reason; a sentient being of this sort might not believe what it has reason to believe. It is possible, in principle, for there to be a sentient being that looks like my daughter Rachel, which has a physical environment similar to Rachel's, but which believes it is a frog, that its name is 'Helmut', that it has no animals as pets, etc. It is also possible, in principle, for there to be a sentient being indifferent to its own well-being and to the well-being of others. Such a sentient being might never desire or seek what is good and what it has reason to desire and seek. It might be indifferent to pleasure, pain, mutilation, and death. That which is judged to be good or bad would be motivationally inert to it.

Though it is possible in principle for there to be sentient beings whose beliefs and desires are not guided by reason, there is a biological advantage in having beliefs and desires guided by reason. Evolution has a role in explaining how there came to be human beings having brains which endow them with a degree of intelligence. So evolution has a role in explaining why human beings tend to have reason for believing what they believe and for desiring what they desire. Intelligence has survival value.

It is the nature of an object's being *good* that when we are aware of good properties in good types of objects, there is, under certain circumstances, reason for us to seek and choose objects of those types. A component of a person's intelligence is a disposition to form desires for objects when he is aware of qualities in those objects which there is reason to desire. Thus, the tendency people have to desire and pursue good objects when we are acquainted with good properties of those objects *is* contingent on some fact about the nature of people.

Thus there are two parts to the explanation of why people want and seek pleasure and other goods. First, it is the nature of an object's being *good* that the object has a property which, when people are aware of it, provides them, in certain circumstances, reason to desire, seek and choose that object. Second, members of intelligent species are disposed by nature to form desires in response to reason and to act for reasons. A person's intelligence consists in part in a disposition to form desires for, and to seek, objects that have properties that provide him with reason to desire and seek that object. A person's intelligence directs him toward what there is reason to desire.

Notes

(1) *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977) p. 38.