

A Study of the Consequences of Secular Morality With Emphasis on Mackie's Perspective

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Abstract

Secular morality is perhaps one of the most important approaches in the philosophy of morality, which one of the most prominent proponents of it is John Mackie. By arguing any value as subjective, he considers moral precepts independent of God's existence. The purpose of this article is to examine and evaluate Mackie's secular morality approach and then to show its consequences. The method of this research is a library-based theoretical analysis and argumentation, which is done by studying, examining and analysing Mackie's concepts, propositions and arguments in his works. In this article, it will be argued that considering morality rules and values as subjective, as well as assuming the atheist claim that God does not exist as true, morality will lose its meaning, rationality and comprehensiveness. Secondly, any moral practice and, consequently, morality is deprived of any rational basis. Thirdly, an atheist cannot adhere to morality throughout his life in all circumstances. Given the critiques and challenges that Mackie's theory faces, it follows that the secular morality does not provide the necessary commitment to human morality.

Keywords: secular morality, Mackie, subjectivity, moral values, atheism.

1. Introduction

The relationship between religion and morality, or the existence of God and the existence of morality, is a topic with a long history, and various debates and opinions have been raised about it. In general, the encounters of philosophers and thinkers with this issue can be divided into two groups. The first group are the proponents of religious morality, who believe

that morality depends on religious teachings and that if God does not exist, morality will lose its meaning and rationality. The second group believes in non-religious or secular morality, which believes that morality is transcendental and its meaning and rationality do not depend on the existence of God. Meanwhile, John Mackie (1917-1981), one of the most prominent critics of theism, denies the dependence of morality on the existence of God. He strives to do so by rejecting the objectivity of moral values and emphasizing the subjectivity of any value, including moral values.

Among the critics of secular morality are John Edmund Hare and Richard Swinburne, who in turn have examined the consequences of secular ethics. (Swinburne 2008, 7-15). However, it seems that the criticisms made by them are not comprehensive and complete, as more cases can be included in their list. The purpose of this article first is to describe the secularist approach to morality, relying on Mackie's theories and claims, to show the consequences of this approach and to examine the criticisms and challenges ahead.

In this paper it will be argued that if, according to Mackie's view, we consider moral judgments and values to be merely the manifestation of emotions and dependent on the mind, and do not consider them to have any objective or external basis, morality will lose its meaning, rationality, and comprehensiveness. If there is no God and moral judgments are merely a reflection of human emotions throughout history, every human being can question these judgments and define a new morality commensurate with his or her emotions. If there is no God in the universe, according to what rational reason or reasons should a person keep his commitment to morality in critical and difficult living situations and go beyond his own benefit for the benefit of others? On the other hand, if sentimentalism is true and also if there is no God, what rational justification is there for concepts such as devotion, sacrifice, and martyrdom? Such concepts in an atheist belief system are devoid of any meaning or rationality.

2. Mackie's secular approach to morality

Mackie believes that we cannot consider the human race in unity as one. Also that, it is meaningless and absurd to believe in unity between human choices and actions. Hence, he considers man to be pluralistic and diverse. From this explicit multiplicity and diversity in the history of mankind, Mackie concludes that, first, the unnatural laws of the universe are man-made, and second, that there are no single, absolute laws about human beings. On the other hand, he believes that this multiplicity explicitly calls into question the objectivity of moral values. Because moral laws can be objective if they are not plural (Mackie 1977, 122). In other words, he considers the necessary condition for the objectivity of moral values to be the unity of those values and their lack of diversity and plurality. With unity being clearly in question, believing in the subjectivity of moral values seems to be the most rational path. Now, does the objectivity of having moral values on the one hand and the existence of God on the other, have anything to do with the meaningfulness and rationality of moral judgments or not?

In his various works, Mackie questions the existence of God and makes arguments against belief in God. This is while he repeatedly insists that "there is no objective value" (Mackie 1977, 15). Nevertheless, he not only considers the existence of morality in atheistic societies to be possible, but also considers the morality of these societies to be quite meaningful and rational. To enact moral laws in society, he suggests that people should reach and follow a united morality for their community in a collective and universal decision (Mackie 1977, 147). But before that, it is necessary to consider his main claims about morality, as well as the chief basis for his arguments, which we will consider below.

In his renowned book on morality, entitled *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977), Mackie's main claim puts emphasis on the point that since there is no God and so (in a sense), there is no objective value; firstly the discovery of moral values will be meaningless because of their objectivity, and secondly, any kind of value to this approach becomes subjective. As a result, instead of discovering values, they should be

invented and validated. He uses a number of arguments to prove his claim.

Generally, Mackie's arguments on morality can be divided into two categories. The first category is his counter-arguments, which mainly focus on the proposition that "there is no objective value" (Mackie 1977, 15). In this statement, he addresses all the values in the world and discusses each in details. But in this paper, we will only analyse and examine moral values.

To reject the objectivity of moral values, Mackie uses five arguments:

“... (1) Relativity, (2) queerness, (3) supervenience, (4) knowledge of the supervenience relation, and (5) patterns of objectification in our language ...”. (Mackie 1977, 49)

Among the most important of these are the "relativity" and "queerness" arguments. The aim of every one of these arguments is to deny the objectivity of moral values. For example, the relativity argument, is based on the fact that in the world, there are different moral rules and values in different societies, times and even different social classes. It may often be the case that a single deed have different values in different societies. It may be moral in a society at a particular time, but not moral in another society or time. An act could be regarded as moral in the royal class but would be regarded as a normal act in the middle class. Mackie argues that this multiplicity and diversity of moral precepts contradicts the objectivity of values. Because the requirement for a value to be objective is its unity (Mackie 1977, 36).

Furthermore, on his queerness argument, Mackie argues that if we consider moral values to be independent of the mind and give them an external existence, it will require the acceptance of metaphysical and epistemological queerness. In other words, to consider moral values as objective is to believe in unknown beings that cannot be recognized by human cognitive powers. And so it follows that the objectivity of moral values can be equated with the unrecognizability of those values (Mackie 1977, 38). The detailed discussion of these arguments is beyond the scope of this article.

The second category of Mackie's arguments for morality is devoted to positive arguments which considers any value to be subjective, and accordingly, morality being one of the existing values, will be subjective too. He considers morality to be a matter of the subject, so he does not inherently give identity to the moral act, but assigns the originality of the matter to the agent of the act. In other words, moral values are nothing but the desires, tendencies, and emotions of human beings, which throughout history have been known as morality after corrections and advances by human beings (Mackie 1977, 231).

If we take such an approach in analysing and interpreting moral rules and values, naturally "good and bad" and "good and evil" will not be a feature of those actions, but it is the agent of moral action that relates to good or evil. Mackie claims good and evil will be a product of the agent's action, rather than the intrinsic feature of the action itself, in the sense that value is a subjective concept. In examples such as "lying is wrong", "torture for pleasure is undesirable", or "Respect for others is desirable" not all are real and describe a feature of the universe, but are entirely dependent on the human thought; independent of the mind, they are devoid of any value, whether positive or negative.

Morrison has elaborated on a similar view to Mackie in his paper "God, and the basis of cosmological morality" published in 2011. He believes that morality is nothing but responding to the social and biological pressures of man throughout history, which have been shaped by man himself. This view is somehow called "Evolution Theory of Morality". Evolution Theory has been dominated over many aspects of our lives, including morality. In particular, this view affects morality in three domains: 1) descriptive ethics, 2) normative ethics and, 3) metaethics. According to the third one, which is related to our concern, although evolution theory doesn't entail moral anti-realism or subjectivism about moral values, but many philosophers maintain that this view can provide some evidence against the existence of objective moral values and so this view is more compatible with subjectivism (Street 2006). On the other side, there are some philosophers claiming that moral objectivism is compatible with the evolution theory of

morality. So we can believe in the evolution theory of morality and moral objectivism at the same time (FitzPatrick 2017). This debate is beyond the scope of this article. However, the main point here for us is that if we accept the evolution theory of morality shows the truth of moral subjectivism or at least provides some evidence for it, then it seems that all the following consequences also will apply to someone who holds “God doesn’t exist” and “evolution theory of morality is true”. This is because the core idea of this essay focuses on two propositions: first, “objective moral values do not exist”, and second, “God doesn’t exist”. Hence, for our purpose, the way we want to argue for the first proposition doesn’t matter. It is worth mentioning to say that some of the following consequences would be applicable even we accept moral objectivism. Later, we will back to this point.

3. Consequences of Mackie’s secular morality

As already mentioned, the basis for Mackie's claims are two propositions: 1. God does not exist, 2. Moral values are subjective. Each of the consequences that will be discussed below, can be associated to one or both of Mackie’s claims. In other words, the aim in this section is to evaluate the merit of Mackie’s secular morality.

3-1. The first consequence

One of the most important consequences of Mackie's view of morality is that it is not comprehensive enough to account for the whole human life. In other words, an atheist will not have a reason to be moral in many situations. An example can better illustrate this point:

Suppose Saeed is the procurement administrator in a company. The CEO of the company is Karim who is also Saeed’s brother-in-law and so they are closely related. As Karim’s fully trusts Saeed, he does not demand an invoice or receipt for each of the purchases for the company. One day, Karim asks the procurement administrator which is Saeed, to buy a piece of equipment, and allocates Fifteen thousand dollars as the initial budget, so that he can buy the required piece as soon as

possible at the lowest price available in the market. The next day, Saeed acts according to the request, to find the price of the goods to be exactly Fifteen thousand dollars in the market. Before the purchase is made, Saeed accidentally encounters a person who sells exactly the same product with the same desirable quality at a price of twelve thousand dollars due to the urgent need for cash. Saeed also seizes the opportunity and buys the piece at a price of twelve thousand dollars, thus three thousand dollars out of the Fifteen thousand dollars given to him will remain. We all know that morally, Saeed should inform his boss about this and return the extra money to him.

Incidentally, Saeed had a debt of three thousand dollars to a person, and by the weekend was his last chance to repay his debt, otherwise legal action will be taken and he could be sent to jail and he will lose reputation. On the other hand, there is no other source for him to get his hand on such money and pay his debt. Saeed is completely aware of the fact that taking this money without the CEO's permission is an act of theft and clearly an immoral act. The other aspect of this situation is that he is confident that it will not be possible for anyone, including Karim, to be informed about this issue.

Saeed is a person who is known for being rational among those around him, and it is rare for him to close the door to logic in his decisions under the influence of emotions. Accordingly, he is convinced that if he takes the money that covers his debt without others knowing, he wouldn't feel any guilt. At the very least, this is how he thinks before removing this amount (apart from the fact that it may be something else, and ultimately, in the post-operative position, the torment of conscience will take hold of him). To completely consider the aspects to this example, Saeed does not believe in God and afterlife, and has based his life solely on existence in this world.

Keeping in mind the descriptions and assumptions Saeed's features and belief mechanism, that there is no God, the most important question raised here is that whether returning the three thousand dollars is logical or not? And what decision would he make in this situation? Let us review the important parameters of the given example:

A) Saeed is desperate for three thousand dollars.

B) Should Saeed use this money to repay his debt, no one has a way of knowing.

C) Saeed thinks that taking this money would bring him no feelings of guilt in the future.

D) Saeed knows that this act is immoral.

E) Saeed is an atheist.

The question that arises here is why Saeed should not take the money he needs with all the above-mentioned conditions and why should he tell the truth to Karim? What is the reason or reasons for Saeed to be honest in this situation and to choose a moral act appropriate to this situation, i.e. to return the remaining money to the CEO and tell the truth?

It should be noted that to appropriately answer these questions is to question this claim of the article in this part that there is no reason to always be moral for an atheist especially when it comes to some special circumstances. We now need to examine and analyse these conditions.

"Why might an atheist commit a moral act?" This question is to be answered in this section, and any comprehensive answer to this question is to be examined in the context of the above example. If none of the answers to this question apply to Saeed's situation, it will be proved that Saeed has no reason to stay morally bound in the specific circumstances mentioned. Obviously, if this is proven, it will be argued that the atheist will not be moral in certain circumstances. Now it is time to mention and explain the possible answers to this question:

A) Self-satisfaction or avoiding the feeling of guilt: this means that the atheist individual, under the influence of the society's dominant culture, believes an act like theft to be far from human dignity and so avoid committing the act. In other words, if he steals, he would feel undignified and guilty afterwards, and so he would not commit the act. In many European societies, for example, moral practices such as honesty in practice have been institutionalized, so many people are committed to honesty in their actions.

B) Moral reciprocal expectation: In the sense that a person is morally oriented on the basis that in return for his moral

actions towards others, those around him are also morally bound to respect his rights.

C) Fear of social punishment: This point is also clear, because a person may be morally inclined not to fall into the trap of legal punishment.

D) Taking advantage for other purposes: an atheist might commit the moral act in order to gain some other kind of profits. Take an electoral candidate as an example; he might do a moral act like building a hospital in order to gain votes.

E) Establishing social order: meaning an individual who seeks a serene life under the implementation of a social order, would avoid non-moral acts in order to prevent any disruptions to this order to maintain peace himself and others.

Here are a few things to keep in mind: Firstly, committing a moral act by an atheist may not solely be for a single reason, but as a result of more than one or even all of the reasons mentioned above. And so, we are not trying to say every committed moral act corresponds to only one of the above reasons. Secondly, if we take a comprehensive view towards the above mentioned reasons, we can associate them all in some way to "peace of mind" or better yet to "selfishness" (not in the negative sense of the word). But the distinctions made above will facilitate our analysis for a better examination of the current situation. And lastly, the above reasons are not exclusive to atheists and it is possible to relate every one of them to a theist as well. But in our opinion, the theist will have more reasons than these five factors. It is relevant to proceed with the mentioned example and study each of the factors in Saeed's special situation. As mentioned earlier, if these morality reasons, are comprehensive enough to include individuals that it claims, but none of them apply to Saeed's situation; it can logically be concluded that this is a rational action for Saeed in those circumstances to deduct the company's carried-forward budget without CEO's awareness to pay his own debts.

The first of the five reasons mentioned above cannot be true for Saeed in persuading him to carry out the moral act of returning the remaining money. Since, according to what we

know from our example, he is not an emotional person and that his rationality dominates his emotions; and as such, emotion or the fear of guilt is likely to be ineffective on his decision. Before taking the money, he would contemplate that such a move will certainly not bring about feelings of remorse or guilt. According to what has been mentioned before, it's possible that after stealing, Saeed would be caught by guilty conscience feelings. But should be noted that here the discussion is essentially about the moment before the act; accordingly, since before doing the deed, he contemplates no feelings of guilt, the element of self-satisfaction or guilt avoidance, would not work for him.

The second reason which could prevent Saeed to commit theft is moral reciprocity. But obviously such an issue has no place on this situation as no other individual is observing his behavior and basically he has the belief that no one will ever find out about his actions.

The third factor was the fear of social punishment. But as mentioned in the case of Saeed, it is quite certain that no one will ever become aware a certain amount of money has been taken.

The fourth motivating factor for the atheist to perform a moral act was to use it for some other purpose, which still does not apply to Saeed here. As we know, his benefit is in not doing a moral act, rather than staying moral, so returning three thousand dollars to the CEO will not be of much benefit to him.

The last reason is to maintain the social order which obviously has nothing to do with Saeed's situation. By taking away three thousand dollars, he will not be interfering with the social order that is in place. We must certainly bear in mind that this option is only meaningful if he is a proponent of social orders.

Considering the five factors that motivates the atheist to perform a moral act, the example above helped us demonstrate a situation where none of the factors could prevent the atheist from doing something immoral. Hence, we revisit the main question: "What is the reason for Saeed to be moralist in these circumstances?" Mackie argues that God does not exist, and that morality is a reflection of human emotions, and is therefore entirely subjective. According to Maki's definition of

morality, as well as the analysis of the above five factors in Saeed's situation, no reason will be there to stop him from taking the three thousand dollars.

If the above argument is true, an atheist will not be moral in many similar situations. But this is against the purpose of social morality. One of the most important features of social morality should be its comprehensiveness, so that it covers the individual in all situations, both social and individual. But as we have seen, the atheist may not adhere to morality in many circumstances.

3-2. The second consequence

If we do not consider morality to be anything but a reflection of human emotions and desires according to Mackie's view, actions will not be different from each other. Hence, the distinction between deeds will depend solely on the distinction between the emotions of the subject. Considering this, if a person enjoys torturing others, it is not immoral for him to be tortured (Gansler 1998, 25).

William Lane Craig (1949-) criticized the secularist approach to morality in his interview which was held at Massachusetts University on 2008. He used the following example to illustrate the point:

We have seen many instances of a cat finding a rat, playing with it so much and clawing it to the other side every now and then until the rat dies of injuries and suffering. Here he argues that if there are no differences between man and animal, and both are merely combinations of molecules and atoms, what difference could possibly be there between a cat torturing a rat and a human torturing another human which leads to suffering and eventually to his death?

Morrison responds to this criticism by saying that for humans, what makes the act of torturing against morality, is the "pain and suffering" and that "enduring unnecessary pain and suffering is an incorrect affair." But animals are unable to comprehend this proposition, and therefore, such an act is not wrong for them (Morrison 2011, 26).

In critique of Morrison's argument, propositions such as "it is wrong to tolerate unnecessary suffering" are moral

precepts that will not be absolute at all, assuming there is no God and no objective morality (Mackie's two main assumptions). For example, it is true that the statement "it is wrong for me to endure unnecessary suffering" is also true and perhaps absolute. But such a proposition in relation to others will not have this feature. It is easy to say that I never want to endure unnecessary pain and suffering. But this proposition about others will depend solely on my emotions. It may be fun for me to endure the pain and suffering of others and it could give pleasant feelings to me. According to Mackie, as well as Morriston's definition of morality, a person who suffers from unnecessary suffering and is pleased with it should not have done anything immoral.

The important point here is that if God does not exist and morality is not objective, different actions such as "torturing others for pleasure" and "drinking tea to quench thirst" are actually invariant deeds. According to Mackie, deeds in themselves have neither positive nor negative value, but are essentially devoid of any value. Therefore, if a person enjoys torturing others (and how many times we have seen that in the outside world, there are examples of this statement) and sentimentalism is true, we should not consider torturing him immoral. Unless we define, by convention, what morality is and according to that, his or her work is not moral. It is important to say that the key element here is that there is no objective moral values. So if someone who do not believe in God but holds moral value as objective, this critique doesn't applicable for him.

John Edmund Hare (1949-) argues in his book *God and Morality* that if God does not exist, we would have no value or judgment to guide our lives. He considers God to be the only meaningful factor in human life and believes that it is beyond this meaning that values such as morality emerge. If there is no God, there will be no (objective) value, and if there is no value, morality will be devoid of rational meaning. It is according to this particular way of interpretation that Dostoevsky (1881-1821) in his famous novel *Crime and Punishment* says: "If there is no God, everything is permissible." Tabatabai (1904-1981) also has a similar view. He considers moral rules and values to

be among the credits of the soul. Credits in Tabatabai's intellectual system are of the type of secondary philosophical concepts that have no external concrete aspects, but the source of its abstraction is the outside world. He believes that there is a direct relationship between religious abstraction and mental abstraction, and since the abstractions of religion is brought to guide the abstractions of the soul, the abstractions of the soul is guided by the abstractions of religion, and morality is one of these abstractions (Tabatabai 1987, 47).

3-3. The third consequence

According to Mackie, morality is equal to human emotions, which have been gradually formed by them throughout history. Considering this point, just as human emotions can be very different and even contradictory, morality must be pluralistic according to Mackie's view, and therefore we must use the plural form of the word "moralities" instead of the word morality. But that will have many consequences. If we proceed with such an approach, everyone should create their own morality based on their emotions, and this would not lead us anywhere but to a chaos.

Perhaps someone wants to say that human being has a particular "moral sense" which produce and hold particular moral values, the values we all know and perform in our lives (Radcliffe 2014, 17). This claim can be true just in one sense. There are many persons in history that have been killed and tortured by other people just for some inadequate reasons and even just for pleasure. How we can believe that those people had (and for now have) moral sense and something like benevolent? So it seems that we can say that those people have this sense just in this meaning that they have this sense for people they love, not for all. And this is obvious that this restricted sense of moral sense will not help us to maintain that all people really do have such moral sense, because those who have this restricted sense of moral sense just act and do on their pleasure, not moral sense. Since killing and torturing the people they love do not make them happy, they don't want them to be killed or be tortured.

3-4. The fourth consequence

Rationally, in different circumstances, an atheist's commitment to morality is meaningless. It is because, in many circumstances, his material gain will be risked and this will be inconsistent to his materialistic worldview. Concepts like sacrifice, devotion, martyrdom and other acts which have material disadvantages, will have no rational support in the materialistic worldview. If there is no God, and human beings will cease to exist in any form after death and have no afterlife, then what rational factor could there be for them to overlook their own life or belongings for their peers? One can argue that certainly there are cases where atheists may act that way and make sacrifices in favor of their peers. We can say that these people do moral acts because they do have a moral sense and benevolence. Maybe an atheist can scarify his or her life for an unfamiliar person, and we know there are such people. However, it seems that such an action can be considered as rationally contrary to their worldview. If this world is the only opportunity for a person to live, and if nothing is behind this world to receive the list of deeds at the end of the day, what rational reason is there for a human being to give up his own benefit for the benefit of another? Any loss, material or spiritual, for an atheist is a loss that cannot be compensated and at no time will that have a positive outcome for him.

Perhaps 'Commitment' is one of the significant factors of a moral living in that it is more difficult to live morally than to be immoral. The heart is the place of commitment, and the human heart does not accommodate things that it does not believe in and does not accept from the heart and has no convincing reasons for. Having said all that, what assurance and basically what rational support is there for an atheist to remain committed to moral principles when a critical and emergency situation puts his life or gains at risk while non-morality will have no social or material disadvantages for him? Perhaps to be bound by morality in normal situations is not difficult (although it is), but being bound to follow morality in difficult situations like war, famine and etc. requires a fundamental and reasonable commitment. Therefore, the most important thing that can obligate a person to be moral in all

sorts of situations is commitment; and this not only seems more rational and justifiable for faithful and the theist, but also much more accessible to the believer and God-worshiper.

Two important points here must be addressed. First, one can say sentimentalism could be rational in doing moral acts (Radcliffe, 2014). We, also, believe that a sentimentalist could be rational in doing according to moral values. But our concern here is about a person who believes in atheism not merely sentimentalism. The first and fourth consequences emphasize only the second proposition Mackie holds, namely atheism. So, if someone is a sentimentalist and believes in God, we do think that he or she could be rational in doing according to moral values in all situations and his or her morality would be comprehensive. However, if someone is an atheist, whether he is sentimentalist or not, he or she would not be rational in many circumstances to be moral (see sections 3-1 and 3-4).

Second, one can say in a difficult situation, the situation depicted in consequence 3-1 and 3-4, although non-transcendental obligation for atheist will be failed, transcendental obligation for theist will be failed also (Gaskin 1978, 28). In other words, in those situations, the weakness of our will cause our failures for being moral. However, this response is completely misleading. We are not talking about our will and its power to perform moral actions here. Instead, we are talking about our theory about morality just “in principle”. It is more rational and appropriate for an atheist, according to section 3-1 and 3-4, to be immoral in many circumstances. So, his or her view about morality, *in principle*, doesn't comprehensive. But a theist, who believe in God and afterlife, could in principle be moral in all situation, even those depicted in section 3-1 and 3-4.

4. Conclusion

From all the criticisms and challenges raised about Mackie's point of view, the following conclusions could be drawn:

1. An atheist has no reason to be a moralist in numerous life situations. This causes secular morality to fail having the

required comprehensibility to cover all the different kind of situations and circumstances.

2. According to Mackie, there is no objective value and all values are subjective. The consequence of this is nothing but the relativity of morality. If we believe in the relativity of morality, it is necessary not to consider any action immoral, because morality will no longer have a single and absolute meaning.

3. According to Mackie's claim that moral values are subjective, it is not possible to distinguish actions in terms of value, so their differences should be considered only on the basis of differences in the subject.

4. If there is no objective distinction between actions, then there will be no objective criterion for evaluating actions. Hence, moral concepts cannot be considered as righteous deeds.

5. According to Mackie's approach to morality, the nature of moral matters will depend entirely on human emotions. As a result any individual or faction can create a particular moral system to themselves and according to their own emotions. It is obvious that this will bring about nothing but chaos.

If according to Mackie's theory we do not consider morality as anything other than human emotions and desires, there will be no rational justification for moral living. Because the basis of morality is emotion, and emotional matters cannot be examined on the basis of rational and logical criteria. As a result, firstly, there will be no rational obligation to be morally oriented, and secondly, any rational support for morality and associated rules and values will be taken away.

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