

STROUD ON SCEPTICISM AND SUBJECTIVISM ABOUT VALUE*

SARAH STROUD

McGill University, Canada

Email: sarah.stroud@mcgill.ca

This paper takes up Barry Stroud's thoughts on a very different type of scepticism than the epistemological scepticism with which his work has most frequently engaged. For Barry has also written trenchantly about what J. L. Mackie called "moral scepticism"¹—or rather, to be precise, about a fully general version of that position which might be better called *global evaluative scepticism*. As I hope to show, Barry's intriguing arguments on this subject put serious pressure on the tenability of such a position. In response, however, I will press the difference between a full-throated evaluative *scepticism* of the Mackean variety, and a softer evaluative *subjectivism* which I think might be able to survive Barry's arguments.

But let us begin with Mackean moral scepticism. Mackie opens the first section of the first chapter of *Ethics*—a section entitled "Moral scepticism"—with "a bald statement of the thesis of this chapter" (1977, p. 15), to wit, "There are no objective values." To say that there are no objective values, Mackie holds, is to endorse a form of scepticism about ordinary moral beliefs, for "ordinary moral beliefs include a claim to objectivity, an assumption that there are objective values in just the sense in which I am concerned to deny this" (1977, p. 35). He continues, "the denial of objective values [must therefore] be put forward ... as an 'error theory', a theory that although most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to [objective values], *these claims are all false*. It is this that makes the name 'moral scepticism' appropriate" (1977, p. 35; emphasis added).

Mackie is clear that moral scepticism, as he intends the term, is not a first-order moral view. It is not, for instance, the view that conventional morality is all bunk and that the real moral truths lie elsewhere (1977, p. 16). That could be called moral scepticism, but it is not

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¹ Mackie (1977), esp. ch. 1.

Mackie's version thereof. Nor is Mackean moral scepticism a view about the *meaning* of ordinary moral judgements—that (say) they are really just subjective reports. As we have seen, Mackie thinks the contents of ordinary moral claims are robustly objective. Mackie's moral scepticism lies rather at the *metaphysical* level: it is at its heart a negative metaphysical verdict. "What I have called moral scepticism is an ontological thesis" (1977, p. 18), Mackie tells us; it is, moreover, "a negative doctrine ... : it says what there isn't" (1977, p. 17). It is because of what there isn't that all ordinary moral claims are false. Moral judgements presuppose or assume something that reality simply does not contain: something that is not, as Mackie often puts it, "part of the fabric [or "furniture"] of the world." For this reason, all moral judgements are false.

One interesting question about Mackean moral scepticism is whether it is supposed to apply only to specifically *moral* claims and values, or more broadly than this. Mackie is not very explicit on this point. On the one hand, on the first page of ch. 1 Mackie tells us that his thesis is meant to apply not only to moral goodness but also to other moral and evaluative concepts, such as rightness, wrongness, and beauty (1977, p. 15). But thereafter he seems to concentrate on the specifically moral values invoked in judgements about moral duties, moral obligations, and what one morally ought to or must do. For purposes of understanding Stroud, however, we need to understand Mackean "moral scepticism" as broad rather than narrow. We need to see it as a sceptical thesis about *all* evaluative judgement, not just moral judgement. If Mackean moral scepticism, or "error theory" in the narrow sense, is the position that all *moral* judgements are false, then what I shall call *global evaluative scepticism* holds, more broadly, that all *evaluative* judgements are false. Like Mackie, the proponent of global evaluative scepticism, as I understand him, reaches this position on metaphysical grounds. When he surveys the world from a detached, metaphysical vantage point, he finds no evaluative properties or relations instantiated there; viewed from that point of view, nothing genuinely possesses the property of being good, right, bad, evil, or better or worse than anything else.

We need to adopt this broader interpretation of the sceptical position in order to bring it into maximal contact with Barry's preoccupations. For the subject matter of Barry's work on value is evaluative judgement in general. I say "in general" in order to underline the extremely broad scope of the phenomenon with which Barry is concerned. Barry's subject matter is definitely not specifically *moral* judgement, but rather *evaluative thought* in the broadest possible sense: all thought to the effect that one thing or course of action is good, or bad, or better than another, or that a certain consideration furnishes a good reason for a belief or action. Just to

convey the flavour of this broad notion, a question like “would it better to go to the beach this afternoon, or to walk around town?” is an evaluative question in Barry’s broad sense, even if (as seems clear) it is not asking which of those two options is *morally* better. Moreover, the evaluative in this sense is not confined to the sphere of action: the question of whether one *belief* constitutes good grounds for another is also an evaluative question in this broad sense.

Barry’s target in this area is the person who holds (or professes to hold) a sceptical or subjectivist view of evaluative matters *in general*: the global evaluative sceptic, to whom I sought to introduce you a moment ago. Actually, it turns out to be questionable whether we really did meet such a character when I introduced him. For Barry urges us to examine much more closely what it means, or would mean, to be a thoroughgoing sceptic about matters evaluative. Barry’s overall strategy is to bring out and underline certain special features of evaluative judgement which he thinks make genuine endorsement of global evaluative scepticism or subjectivism impossible for us. If he is right, there are in fact no global evaluative sceptics among us. I do want to emphasize that Barry’s arresting thesis is that it is difficult or impossible for us to hold global evaluative scepticism. Global evaluative scepticism is not so much false, on Barry’s view, as literally un-tenable, in-credible, un-believable: it is a view we cannot hold or believe. Barry’s focus throughout, then, is not so much the truth or falsity of global evaluative scepticism or subjectivism, but the position of the person who would espouse it. Barry wants to show that that person is in an uncomfortable, even impossible, position.

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What are the special features of evaluative thought and judgement which make it impossible for any of us genuinely to believe that all such judgements are false, as the global evaluative “error theorist” claims to think? On my reconstruction, the three key features of evaluative thought on which Barry relies are:

- 1) *Cognitivism*: evaluative thoughts express propositions and can be true or false.
- 2) *Irreducibility*: we cannot spell out the content of those thoughts in non-evaluative terms.
- 3) *Indispensability*: evaluative thought is unavoidable or inescapable for us; we cannot abstain from evaluative thinking.

According to Barry, these three qualities of evaluative thought together make it impossible for us to reach a negative metaphysical verdict on the presence of value in the world.

I will not linger over the first feature, *Cognitivism*. As a general matter, Barry places great weight on the significance of *predicational thought* to our distinctively human way of life. And he seems to take for granted in his work on value in particular that evaluative thoughts are indeed thoughts in this sense. This is to reject a familiar kind of non-cognitivism about ethical or evaluative discourse. The traditional non-cognitivist holds that evaluative assertions do not express propositions that can be true or false; rather, they express *pro-* and *con-*attitudes which do not admit of truth or falsity. Evaluative “beliefs,” in turn, simply consist in the having of various *pro-* and *con-*attitudes; thus they cannot be true or false either. According to this kind of non-cognitivism, although evaluative judgments seem syntactically to attribute evaluative properties to things, this is a mere surface feature, and in reality they do not. Barry, by contrast, seems convinced that the appearance of predication in evaluative thought is genuine.

Irreducibility adds to this that there is no way to spell out the content of evaluative thoughts in non-evaluative terms. A denier of *Irreducibility* could agree with Barry that evaluative thoughts are propositional, truth-evaluable, and genuinely predicative in form; he would just add that *what it is* we are predicating of objects in evaluative thought can be fully spelled out or unpacked in non-evaluative terms. Barry, however, is convinced that this cannot be done. The “ingredients” of evaluative thought seem so distinctive that it is very difficult to see how even in principle they could be “built up” out of non-evaluative components.

Barry also makes an interesting objection to a prominent class of specifically subjectivist reductive views, those that might be called *dispositionalist response-dependent accounts*. These hold that evaluative thoughts can be understood as thoughts about our dispositions to have certain responses to objects, where the responses in question are purportedly free of any evaluative element. As against this proposal, Barry maintains not just that it distorts the content of our evaluative thoughts—it is simply not what we are predicating of something when we say it is good, or bad, or obligatory²—but also that such views do not in fact dispense with evaluative elements. A purported analysis of value in terms of dispositions to desire, for instance,³ does not

² Here we see a point of commonality with other domains Barry has written about. In *The Quest for Reality* Barry of course held—*contra* received opinion—that our color concepts are not dispositional or response-dependent in character; and in *Engagement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction* he says of causation that “an accurate account of our thought about causal dependence would show that we regard the causal connections we believe in as holding independently of us and our responses” (EMD, p. 31).

³ Lewis (2000) offers an account of this kind.

accomplish what it thinks it does, because the very notion of desiring already contains evaluation. If you want something, Barry maintains, then you *see something in favour* of your having it, or its coming to pass. “To want something ... is (at the very least) to assess positively the condition that would satisfy that want” (EMD, p. 108). Thus we do not escape evaluation by speaking of desires. We shall return to this point shortly.

I do want to linger on the important work done by Barry’s third premise, the *Indispensability* of evaluative thinking. Barry argues forcefully that we simply cannot excise evaluative thought from our lives. As is so often the case, abstinence in this area is simply not a realistic option: we inevitably, unavoidably, make evaluative judgments and hold evaluative beliefs. *Why* is evaluative thinking unavoidable for us? Barry’s reason for thinking that evaluative thought is inescapable for us is extremely novel and interesting. It is that without evaluative thought we lose the idea of intentional action altogether. Barry thinks that “making evaluative judgments is essential to intentional action” (EMD, p. 113): in acting intentionally, one necessarily “sees something in favour” of doing this rather than that (EMD, pp. 90-91). Similarly, interpreting another person’s behavior as intentional action requires attributing evaluative beliefs to him: “his action ... is explained as an intentional action only if the explanation implies that he took ... some characteristic or consequence of the action that he was in favour of or regarded as desirable, as reason to act as he did” (EMD, p. 108). Thus, if we did not make evaluative judgments ourselves, or if we did not understand other people as making them, we would be unable to see either ourselves or others as agents who act intentionally. This is a price we are not able to pay.

It is important to see that Barry’s point about the inevitability of evaluative judgement applies even to the would-be global sceptic about value. Our would-be sceptic could no more give up evaluative thinking than could any of the rest of us, even if he came to the “metaphysical” conclusion that there are really no values in the world. He thus inevitably holds evaluative beliefs just as we do. This is key to Barry’s argument that this kind of global scepticism about value is literally unbelievable for us.

Let us see how this goes. Like Barry, the global evaluative sceptic or error theorist endorses *Cognitivism* and *Irreducibility*. He thinks that evaluative thoughts express propositions—that to have such thoughts is not merely to have certain *pro-* and *con-*attitudes—and, moreover, that in thinking such thoughts we are genuinely attributing *sui generis* evaluative properties to objects and actions. This kind of error theory thus has the great merit, in Barry’s eyes, of

understanding or interpreting the content of evaluative beliefs in a non-distorted way—something non-cognitivist and dispositionalist views did not manage to do. On the other hand, as we have seen, the error theorist is also a metaphysical sceptic about value, because he finds no *sui generis* evaluative properties in Reality. The global evaluative sceptic thus holds all of the following:

- 1) Evaluative judgements assert or claim that some things have property P.
- 2) Nothing has property P in reality.

From these two claims it follows that

- 3) All evaluative judgments are false.

This is a coherent position, but it becomes incoherent when we throw *Indispensability* into the mix. According to *Indispensability*, everyone (even the would-be error theorist) has some evaluative beliefs, since such beliefs are inescapable for us. We can thus be confident that there is some evaluative proposition—call it E—which the error theorist believes. But as an error theorist, he also holds—as per 3) above—that all evaluative judgements are false. Therefore, he must think—since E is an evaluative judgement—that E is false. This, however, is impossible. It is impossible simultaneously to believe that *p* and to believe that it is false that *p*; to believe *is* to believe to be *true*. Our would-be sceptic, in short, has an impossible combination of doxastic attitudes toward E.

On the other hand, when *Indispensability* does *not* hold of a domain of thought K, it is possible to endorse an error theory about K-judgments without inconsistency. Replace “evaluative” in the argument above with “theological”: I can coherently hold that all religious or theological beliefs are false, provided I have none myself. But this escape route from the error theorist’s predicament is closed off in the case of value by the *Indispensability* of evaluative thinking and belief. Even if the global evaluative sceptic succeeded in ridding himself of his belief in E now that he has deduced that E is false, he would inevitably form new evaluative beliefs, to which the same problem would apply. He cannot simply abstain from all evaluative belief, as I can abstain from theological belief. Given *Indispensability*, it is either impossible or, at best,

inconsistent for anyone to hold that all evaluative beliefs are false, that “we are never right or correct in any of our evaluative beliefs” (EMD, p. 116).

I think Barry is on extremely strong ground here. Assuming *Indispensability*, such a global error theory is an incoherent position, one which we cannot occupy. Although it may be true that all evaluative thoughts and beliefs are false, this is not something we can think, if *Indispensability* is true. It would follow that there are in fact no genuine global evaluative sceptics. (I note in passing that this point, on which Barry and I agree, is highly contrarian in the context of today’s meta-ethics. “Error theory” is enjoying a resurgence, with some extremely smart and able philosophers having recently written book-length defences of it.⁴ They express great exasperation if one doubts whether they really hold error theory.)

Let us take stock. The aforementioned features of evaluative thought make metaphysical reflection on evaluative matters very difficult. As Barry sees it, metaphysical reflection involves detachment from our quotidian ways of thinking. It proceeds by standing back from and (temporarily) bracketing our ordinary beliefs in order to consider what Reality is really like. One points disengagedly, as it were, to a body of beliefs out there and asks what, if anything, in Reality those beliefs correspond to. Barry’s point about *Indispensability*, however, is that our ability to disengage in this way from our evaluative beliefs is very limited. *Full* detachment, in the form of total abstention from forming or holding evaluative beliefs, is simply not an option for us; and this dramatically constrains the would-be metaphysician’s room for maneuver. As we have seen, any such detached assessment of our evaluative judgement had better not issue in the conclusion that all such judgements are false: for any of us to draw that conclusion would be immediately to fall into inconsistency, given *Indispensability*. The only metaphysical conclusions we can draw about evaluative matters are those consistent with our evaluative beliefs: not necessarily with our current set thereof (for our present evaluative beliefs are not immutable), but at least with some evaluative beliefs or other, since it is inevitable that we will hold some. Global evaluative scepticism or error theory does not meet this condition.

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So much for moral *scepticism*. Let us now turn, though, to moral *subjectivism*, which requires a separate treatment; for one can be a subjectivist about a given domain without being

⁴ See for instance Olson (2014).

a sceptic. Let us characterize the *subjectivist* about a domain K as someone who maintains that there are no K-properties in the world *as it is independent of us*. Scepticism would then be a subcategory of subjectivism: the sceptic maintains that there are no K-properties in the world, period, and thus that all K-judgements are false. Even if this kind of error theory is now off the table in the case of evaluation, other broadly subjectivist views may yet remain.

Consider the following properties:

being popular

being a celebrity

being fashionable

being a top-40 song

being illegal in Utah

Some kind of subjectivism about *these* properties, I would venture, seems correct. The characterization I just offered of subjectivism in general seems true of these properties: none of them, it seems, is or would be instantiated in the world as it is independent of us. Nothing would be fashionable, or illegal in Utah, in a world without us—without, in particular, human choices, actions, and responses. In such a world, there would be no top-40 songs, or celebrities; no one would be popular or unpopular. That is because the having of such properties is *not* independent of human choices, actions, and responses. Indeed, the having of such properties seems precisely to be constituted by—or constructed out of—human choices, actions, and responses. To say these things is to offer a comment on the *nature* of these properties, not to cast aspersions on their presence in the world. In particular, to say these things is *not* to maintain, as the sceptic does, that all statements attributing these properties to things in the world are false. Subjectivism in general holds that there are no K-properties in the world *as it is independent of us*, *not* that there are no K-properties in the world. With respect to the properties mentioned above, the idea is not that nothing “really possesses” the property of being a top-40 song, or that there are in reality no celebrities. Such claims would be false: alas, there really are top-40 songs, and celebrities. Moreover, there seems to be no inconsistency in holding both that there are such properties in the world *and* that there are no such properties in the world as it is independent of us. After all, the world contains *us*; so of course it also contains lots of things we’ve constructed, including properties “constructed” out of our attitudes and actions. But the qualities so constructed are not

instantiated in the world *as it is independent of us*. Some things (many things, actually) really are illegal in Utah. Some people really are popular (or unpopular). But that something is fashionable, or illegal in Utah, could not hold in complete independence of human reactions and choices. Moreover, we could add that this seems clear even on the surface of these concepts: no abstruse metaphysical reflection seems to be required in order to reach the conclusion that (precisely because the property of being popular is not independent of human reactions and choices) there is no *robustly independent* property of being popular which some people possess and other people lack.

In that respect the properties mentioned above contrast notably with (for example) the property of containing sodium. That something contains sodium *does* hold in complete independence of human reactions and choices. Things contained sodium before we were here, and would still have contained sodium even if we had never existed or had never had any reactions to anything. Claims like these, however, do not fit the properties I mentioned earlier. Nothing was a top-40 song, or illegal in Utah, before we arrived. Absent us and our psychological responses, no one would be popular or a celebrity (and not just because, without any people around, there would be no *subjects* for such attributions). We do not think that certain clothes would have been fashionable and others unfashionable even if we had never been here. We might draw a general contrast here between two broad types or classes of property. One category—the “robustly independent” properties, we might term them—includes “contains sodium” and its like. Properties like “is illegal in Utah” and “is fashionable” fall however into the second broad category. These latter properties exhibit what we might call a *constitutive dependence on us*.

Suppose we ask which of these two classes moral and other evaluative properties belong to. Is “is wrong” or “is desirable” more like “contains sodium” on the one hand, or “is illegal in Utah” on the other, with respect to the distinction we just drew? I want to make two points about the idea that moral and evaluative properties fall into the *second* class. First, I would like to point out that many ordinary people would find it obvious that “is wrong” and “is desirable” should be classified with “is illegal in Utah” rather than with “contains sodium”; and indeed that they would regard this as obviously true. Were certain things *wrong* before there were any conscious beings? Would various things still have been *desirable* even if we had never existed? Would what we now take to be the moral and evaluative facts still have held if there had never been any psychological facts at all? Many people, I think, would answer “no” to these questions. Such people seem already to hold one kind of subjectivist view of value, in that they take value properties to constitutively

depend on us. They would spontaneously put evaluative properties in the second class, arguably without relying on any abstruse metaphysical reflection.

Are they making a mistake, or professing an untenable position? I would like to question whether the possibility of maintaining that evaluative properties fall into the second class is closed off by Barry's arguments in the way global evaluative scepticism was. I am not sure here, but I think it is not. Classifying value properties as broadly subjectivist in this sense does not run afoul of *Cognitivism*; and unlike global evaluative error theory, it does not violate *Indispensability* either, since the subjectivist can continue to predicate evaluative properties of things in the world. That leaves *Irreducibility*. Is the idea that evaluative properties belong in the second class inherently reductionist? Perhaps Barry holds that it is; but to maintain that evaluative properties constitutively depend on us is certainly not to offer any *particular* reductive account. I don't even see why it commits one to the *existence* of a correct reductive account. So I don't yet see why this kind of position is ruled out, if it is.

I have brought up subjectivism in this broader sense because Barry has tended in his work on value to bring out the inconsistency involved in a harder Mackean scepticism which holds that all evaluative judgements are false, or that nothing really possesses any evaluative feature, or that there are no evaluative properties in the world. Here, as I have said, I think he is on very strong ground, and his arguments ought to make any would-be moral sceptic or error theorist very uncomfortable. Barry does not pay as much explicit attention to the more modest form of subjectivism I have described, one which does not cast aspersions on the reality of evaluative properties or on their genuine presence in the world but instead offers a broadly subjectivist characterization of their *nature*. I suspect that this kind of subjectivism about value is the most plausible, so I wish we heard more from Barry about it. In concentrating as he does on the consequences of maintaining that value is "nothing in the world," Barry perhaps misses the chance—even if he succeeds masterfully at dismantling *that* position—to take aim at subjectivism where it is strongest. It would be most interesting to see Barry take on this latter style of subjectivism more directly.

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