

## OBJECTIVITY IN ETHICS; TWO DIFFICULTIES, TWO RESPONSES

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### *Abstract*

The paper, based on the H.L.A. Hart Memorial Lecture in Jurisprudence and Moral Philosophy, delivered in Oxford on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2004, sets out to answer two difficulties which the late J. L. Mackie proposed (in his book *Ethics: Inventing Right & Wrong*) against the idea of objectivity in ethics. These were (1) the metaphysical peculiarity ('queerness') of values and obligations and (2) the 'well known variation in moral codes from one society to another' ('relativity'). It is argued that the true import of Mackie's two difficulties is that they are a challenge to us to study with closer attention the dialectical and conceptual resources of ethical thinking. In the answer to the second difficulty, the ethic of globalism is revealed as a gross misunderstanding of true internationalism.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Among Herbert Hart's many interests and preoccupations in the period of the early eighties when I came to know him best, namely in University College in the nineteen eighties, moral philosophy was a source of pleasure that was intense, direct and unalloyed by any call to respond to critics. In the summer of 1981, reacting in some excitement and incertitude to a weekly seminar John McDowell and I had been giving, Hart wrote me a letter strenuously defending John Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* against something that I had been saying about 'objective' and 'subjective' not being the antonyms they are taken for. On the basis of that letter, it was agreed that the four of us should meet and talk the matter through. This ought to have been easy to arrange. But John Mackie fell mortally ill. Scarcely a year after the death of our other philosophical colleague at University College, Gareth Evans, Mackie was lost to us and to philosophy at the early age of sixty four. Then, by 1982, Hart himself was increasingly taken up in the long and sinister sequence of events that culminated in his having in 1983 to issue a writ for defamation against a national newspaper.

If our meeting had taken place, then in the presence of pleas and counterpleas, his own formulations and my counterformulations, Hart would have been at his most acute and marvellous best, eager to see the outcome and eager to follow it through, whatever it was. Against all that I do not think the counterformulations could have prevailed. Here, however, twenty three years later, is a further and (I hope) better attempt, afforded with things I learned (even if I cannot now separate them out) from the class, or from McDowell's and my conversations. I have widened the discussion to match the chapter of John Mackie's book which was a starting point for so many of our discussions. There are further debts and acknowledgements, to Wesley Williams (see note 15), to John Cottingham, to Gareth Jenkins and to Anthony Price, John Finnis and John Tasioulas, who drew my attention, each in his own way, to an important incompleteness in the versions of sections IX, X, XI, XII that figured in the original lecture.

*A more heartening fact about the cultures of man  
Is their appalling stubbornness. The sea  
Is always calm ten fathoms down. The gigan-  
-tic anthropological circus riotously  
Holds open all its booths.*

WILLIAM EMPSON, *Sonnet*

## I

In *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*,<sup>2</sup> John Mackie subsumed the difficulties he claimed to see in the idea of ethical objectivity under two heads. First there was the metaphysical peculiarity of such things as values or obligations,<sup>3</sup> this peculiarity importing the need to postulate a faculty of moral intuition for the detection of obligations and the value-properties G. E. Moore called non-natural properties. Secondly there was the ‘variability of some important starting points of moral thinking and their apparent dependence on actual ways of life’ (49) – ‘the well known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the difference in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community’ (36). These difficulties are sharply stated and still on the record. Under the names Mackie gave them of *queerness* and *relativity*, they are still at work in philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

## II

For the response to queerness, let us look first where Mackie himself looked when he sought to compensate us for that which

I am indebted to the Leverhulme Trust for the Emeritus Fellowship I held from the Trust at the time of preparing and delivering the lecture. The lecture will appear in another form, in a book of lectures on moral philosophy to be published in 2005/6 by Penguin Press and Harvard University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> ‘If there were objective values then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from an ordinary way of knowing everything else. These points were recognized by Moore when he spoke of non-natural qualities, and by the intuitionists in their talk about moral intuition’ (p. 38).

<sup>4</sup> Compare, from the other side of the argument, Hilary Putnam in *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003): ‘The positions that are still defended by the proponents of a fact/value dichotomy are variants of non-cognitivism and of relativism’ (p. 42).

his Chapter One seemed to sweep away. In the place of the outlook of moral objectivism, Mackie proposed a form of moral constructivism. In the tradition instituted (he said) by Protagoras, the Athenian sophist, this was to be built up from the idea that morality was a device, 'a system of a particular sort of constraints on conduct – ones whose central task is to protect the interests of persons other than the agent and which present themselves to an agent as checks on his natural inclinations or spontaneous tendencies to act' (p. 106). Morality was to be 'a device for counteracting limited sympathies' and alleviating in ways prefigured by G. J. Warnock,<sup>5</sup> the inveterate tendency for things to go very badly. It was to be addressed to the standing causes of that tendency.

When Mackie drew closer to the actual business of implementing the construction and looking for ways to offset the narrowness of men's sympathies, rationality, intelligence, and information, he set out with telling and interesting examples various 'Prisoners' Dilemma' situations. He brought to the constructional task all sorts of insights of Darwin,<sup>6</sup> Hobbes and Hume. He was never tempted though to try to contrive the whole core of first order morality from games theoretical or evolutionary ideas. Remarking on the inadequacy of prudence and long term self-interest to sustain the construction that he had in mind, he said:

there can be no doubt that many real-life situations contain, as at least part of their causally relevant structure, patterns of relationship of which various simple 'games' are an illuminating description . . . Such simplified analyses . . . show . . . how the combined outcome of several intentional actions, even of well-informed and rational agents, may be something no one of the agents has intended or would intend. But from our point of view the game theory approach merely reinforces the lessons that we have extracted from the arguments of Protagoras, Hobbes, Hume, and Warnock. The main moral [we have already extracted from them] is the practical value of the notion of obligation, of an invisible and indeed fictitious tie or

<sup>5</sup> G. J. Warnock, *The Object of Morality* (London: Macmillan, 1971).

<sup>6</sup> For the case of Darwin, compare Mackie's p. 113 and Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871), p. 166, a position whose reputability is refurbished by Mackie himself in 'The Law of the Jungle', *Philosophy*, vol. 53, 1978 and further by E. Sober and D. W. Wilson, *Unto Others* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998).

bond, whether this takes the form of a general requirement to keep whatever agreements one makes or of various specific duties like those of military honour or of loyalty to comrades or to an organization . . .

. . . The real weakness of the Hobbesian solution lies not in anything that the games theory models show but in what, just by being models, they leave out . . . The Hobbesian solution is . . . like a house of cards . . . and it is inflexible in the same way. A structure is more likely to be able to bend in response to changing forces without collapsing if it is held together by ties of which some are less conditional than those of prudence (119–120).

I shall quarrel shortly with the claim of fictitiousness, but the wisdom that is manifest in everything else that is here prefigures the vigilance and unerring insight that distinguish Mackie's efforts elsewhere in the book to supply what he calls 'the content of the device' which he has announced that he will take morality to be. Not only (as Mackie says) is self-interest a needlessly narrow resource from which to draw palliatives for prisoners' dilemma predicaments and their variants or for state-of-nature situations. It gradually becomes evident, even though Mackie never quite says so, that there is no real possibility of specifying in advance *the one objective* that the morality device is to encompass. It is true that, at one point (p. 193), Mackie mentions the 'well-being of active intelligent participants in a partly competitive life'; but the occasion for this formulation is Mackie's remarking on its unsatisfactoriness as an overall objective. Nor is he preparing at this point to identify, either inaccurately (by his standard) or else too hopelessly vaguely for most constructive purposes, an even larger or more inclusive objective – 'the flourishing of human life', for instance, or 'general human well-being' – in relation to which he can propose to us an ethic of consequentialism. Indeed, when it comes to it, Mackie rejects consequentialism.

By what method then does the construction proceed? Mackie's real method is this. As he moves from topic to topic and question to question, he draws constantly upon the reservoir of implicit knowledge that we all have, but make explicit only piecemeal and in given contexts, of what matters in this or that sphere of activity. At need, Mackie draws freely upon this reservoir. From hence,

of course, and from his power to interpret the point of what he finds, his rare judgment and good sense.<sup>7</sup>

Mackie might find this a disappointing description. But I should reply that he ought not to complain. For this is the *right* method. The fact that he needs to follow it only mirrors the oft-repeated failure of moral philosophy, well documented by Mackie himself, to settle peacefully for any utilitarian aim, or deontological aim or other specific aim as 'the (overall) aim of morality'. In truth, the inner or enactable aim of morality, the real aim of morality, is inseparable from the everyday meaning of everyday life and its everyday extensions and elaborations. It is something practically apparent but apparent only within the business of life itself. There is everything to be said for starting, as Warnock and Mackie do, with some foundational purpose or purposes (countering the narrowness of human sympathies, say). But there is no question of advancing from these to the specification of an overall end that would be required for purposes of reconceiving morality as a means to that end. It begins to appear that the idea that morality is a *device* (or a means to an end) is either, as literally understood, false – or else, as charitably understood, uncomfortably close to vacuous.<sup>8</sup>

### III

If something you think you hoped for is lost by your concurring in this last contention, well, something else can be gained by reflection upon this reservoir which Mackie draws upon, of practical or implicit knowledge. The thing we gain is a vivid reminder of the possibility of inward ends or purposes or concerns which, in the business of their life at a given place and time, participants in a first order ethic will steadfastly adhere to as if by second nature, distinguishing readily, however essentially contestably, between these concerns and other concerns that *can* be abandoned and may have to be. Is it not here, in the sphere of unfor-

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Mackie's temperate and sensible treatment, which stands out among others offered by authors of an empiricist outlook, of the Principle of Double Effect (pp. 160–168).

<sup>8</sup> I expect that something analogous has already been said about analogous proposals to conceive of law as an economic device.

sakeable, that we can find the true source of the deontological ideas and categorical requirements that Mackie insists upon our retaining in first order morality?<sup>9</sup> If we allow that it can, then how can we concur in Mackie's redescribing a categorical requirement as an appeal to an 'invisible and fictitious tie or bond' of obligation or as depending for its force on mysterious 'intrinsically prescriptive entities' which he says that 'ought' and 'must' purport to invoke? What need is there for these mysteries?

This remark leads on to yet another thought Mackie never meant us to have. Is Mackie looking in the right place for truth and objectivity? Aren't truth and objectivity best looked for in the difference between good and bad first order thinking within the subject-matter that Mackie's book reintroduces to us – and that it vindicates for us by displaying it to us as, piece by piece, *not pointless* but more or less indispensable to us? This is a subject-matter we need no longer see as littered with the nuts and bolts of the constructivist, but as provided with the purport and density proper to a mode of thinking that is fully fledged and engaged with all sorts of other purposes by reference to which it is constantly proved and tested.

First order morality is very unlike elementary arithmetic. But that does not forbid a comparison under one chosen aspect. Consider here the efforts of a philosopher of arithmetic who reconstructs arithmetic from the first of the indefinitely many needs that this subject is to subserve, namely that of counting. Just as we can see the achieved satisfaction of that first need as sustaining, well enough, the ontology of natural numbers and the corresponding ideology (conceptual apparatus) of their properties, can we not see the inward or lived aim of ethical thinking as sustaining the proper ontology and ideology of first order ethics? If so, why should not the distinction that ordinary agents make between good and bad thinking about what to say about such and such an act (or such and such a character, or such and such a situation) instantiate the *general* distinction between true and false? If ethical thinking about such things is in good shape, cannot ethical properties and value properties be as distinctive as you like, provided that it serves an ethical aim for them to be thus or so? On the view I am trying to make visible, an assertion invoking ethical properties will not aspire to a different kind of status

<sup>9</sup> Here I make response to a point Mackie notes at page 27.

from a factual assertion; and there need not be any *dichotomy*, between getting it right in matters of ethics, however distinctive that is, and getting it right in matters of fact.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV

Here it seems necessary to explain a little more carefully what there is to mean by such claims as this, as well as to indicate what it would take to justify them. What shall we mean?

By 'ethics' we can mean something we know how to explain copiously by examples, examples that are dead centre. 'Matter of fact' will be harder, however. It is instructive to remember in this connexion the logical positivists' repeated efforts and repeated failures to say what a factual predicate was.<sup>11</sup> Almost anything we think we can simply assume here will beg the question against some reputable opinion. But let us go by another way.

Look at some of our strongest cases of simple plain truth among judgments, any true judgments that you like. This is my suggestion. Then study what in such cases is to be expected of the property of truth. In this way, excogitate the Fregean marks of the concept *true*.<sup>12</sup> Then, with these in mind, look carefully at real life

<sup>10</sup> For 'dichotomy', cf. Putnam, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> The reasons for their failure are vividly illustrated by the remarkable short history of these endeavours which Putnam provides at his page 21.

<sup>12</sup> For marks of truth, see my *Needs, Values, Truth*, pp. 115, 147–152. Let me mention here a mark that seems crucial to the cognitive aspiration of morality. If it is true that *p*, then where the proposition that *p* lies within a surveyable subject matter (such as ethics is conceived to be), a thinker can come to believe that *p* precisely because *p*. What do I mean by 'he believes that *p* because *p*' or 'because *p*, he believes that *p*'? General, not specifically ethical, answer: Someone believes that *p* precisely because *p* *only if* the best full explanation of their coming to believe that *p* requires as a premiss either the very fact that *p* or something which leaves the explainer no room to deny that *p*. This is to say that the explanation conforms to one of the following forms: 'Look, the cat is on the mat. So, given John's perceptual capacities and his presence near the cat, no wonder he believes the cat is on the mat.' (This explanation answers the question: 'why does John believe the cat is on the mat?') Or again (in reply to the question 'why does Peter believe  $7 + 5 = 12$ ?') consider an explanation that runs on the following pattern: 'Look,  $7 + 5 = 12$ ; the calculating rule leaves room for no other answer. [Explainer shows this.] So no wonder Peter, who understands the calculating rule which leaves us no room for any other answer, believes that  $7 + 5 = 12$ .'

Let us call such an explanation for the existence of a belief a *vindictory explanation* of that belief. Then Ethical Objectivism, whatever else it says, must surely say that the subject matter of morality admits vindictory explanations of (at least some) moral beliefs. An example might run as follows: 'Look, slavery is wrong, it's wrong because . . . [here are given many, many considerations, fully spelled out, appealing to what someone already knows if he knows what slavery is and what 'wrong' means, and working together to leave

ethical reasoning or persuasion at its best and most convincing. Discover what judgments it can even endorse as prompted to us by there being (for one who grasps fully the sense and reference of the sentence expressing the judgement) nothing else to think but that so-and-so. (Not nothing else *for us* or *here* or *now* to think. That is too weak.) Then ask yourself how narrowly to conceive the idea of there being nothing else to think. Surely it does not need to be confined to the realm of the necessary or confined to that which we reach by deduction. Before you decide about that, listen to Charles Sanders Peirce on the subject of thinking and the idea, as he advances it, that thinking is not to be conceived to 'form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link', but as 'a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected'. C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers* (V, 265). Finally, when you have made up your mind about all that, spell out your remaining reason for supposing that ethical judgments could never enjoy the properties corresponding to the marks of plain truth. If this reason has to do with their remoteness from perception, well ask yourself whether, from scratch, you could establish any special status for perception itself without recourse to modes of thinking that only the Peircean conception will certify as genuine argument.

On this kind of approach, there will be no instant answer to the question whether ethical findings are or are not matters of fact. There will be no instant answer, but, *in so far as* first order ethical thinking seems to muster powers of persuasion and criticism that are rooted in a genuine subject matter, and *in so far as* the cognitivist thinks he can answer Mackie's argument from relativity, how should he characterize the non-dichotomy of fact and value? Like this I suggest: the concept *factual judgment* or *judgment with a truth-value* and the concept *ethical judgement* will be different concepts – such a distinction is there to be made, just as the concept *mouse* and the concept *mammal* are different concepts

nothing else to think but that slavery is wrong]; so no wonder twentieth century Europeans, who would accept that . . . and whose beliefs are so many of them downwind of such considerations as . . . , believe that slavery is wrong. They believe that it is wrong for just the reasons why it is wrong.'

Ethical Objectivism, so characterised, represents a strongly but not crudely cognitivist conception of the subject matter of morals. It ought to be obvious that it is far from obvious whether the position is correct, or to what extent it is. We do not know for sure whether or how often we can put together considerations ' . . . ' that will combine to leave nothing else to think. See David Wiggins, 'Moral Cognitivism, Moral Relativism, and Motivating Moral Belief', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 91, 1990–91.

– but this distinctness does not preclude a judgment's being both a factual and an ethical judgment. Compare the way in which the distinct concepts *mouse* and *mammal* will each collect any particular mouse you please, Timmy Willy or Johnny Townmouse or whichever, within their extensions. Ethical judgments could be a subset of judgments-with-a-truth-value even if they were an utterly special and essentially contestable subset. In this way, we can have a clear *difference* between the ethical-as-such and the truth-evaluable-as-such without any dichotomy between their proper provinces. The hope of making good some claim of this sort is the characteristic hope of ethical objectivism or moral cognitivism.

## V

However programmatically, do these explications, dispositions and proposals complete the response to the argument from queerness? Not quite. We have deprecated Mackie's mockery of certain curious things he claims to find, and which we might refuse to find, within the ontology or ideology of the working portion of our own first order ethical system. But we have not yet engaged with Mackie's charge that objectivism needs to postulate a curious faculty of intuition by which human beings can detect the presence of valuational and other non-natural properties.

The first point that needs to be made here is that a non-natural property is something less strange than Mackie seems to suppose. A non-natural property is simply a property that does not conform to Moore's first characterization of 'nature' and 'natural'. (See *Principia Ethica*, p. 41.) I paraphrase and adapt that characterization as follows. A predicate stands for a natural property if it is indispensable to the exposition or development of some natural science (or to some similarly strictly empirical-cum-explanatory mode of investigation). A non-natural property is simply one that is *not* like that. It is a myth and the opposite of the truth that our grasp of properties that are natural in this sense is better than our grasp of the non-natural.

Is there not something queer though about the epistemology of the non-natural properties that are value-properties? Here I shall refer to Hilary Putnam's *The Collapse of the Fact-Value Dichotomy* (pages 102–3):

How could there be 'value facts'? After all, we have no sense organ for detecting them? . . . Consider the parallel question: 'How could we come to tell that people are *elated*? After all, we have no sense organ for detecting elation' . . . [Answer:] Once I have acquired the concept of elation, I can see that someone is elated . . . Perception is not innocent; it is an exercise of our concepts.

This is to say that once you have the concept of elation, you know what to look for. In looking for that, you can use any kind of perception or any mode of investigation that suits the case. Similarly then consider the ethical predicate 'considerate'. That which marks out or delimits or describes or discriminates the property of considerateness in acts or attitudes or human characters is an essentially ethical interest, in pursuit of which we can deploy any kind of perception or any mode of investigation or any associated concept that suits the case.<sup>13</sup> The presence of *such* properties, that is of value properties, is ascertained by all the multifarious means that are called for by the exercise of our grasp of this or that ethical concept. Such properties are to be conceived *in the light of what it takes to exercise that grasp* – not vice versa. A particular ethical property, we might say, is to be identified or singled out as the property which the reasonable exercise of the grasp of such and such a concept, as regulated by criticism, hunts down. Only at his peril can Mackie's moral sceptic deny that there is such a quarry to hunt down or deny that there is such a property. Just as it is at his own peril that a metaphysical naturalist will deny, if we are looking for a prime between 5 and 13, that there are primes. The objectivity of the reasonable exercise of the grasp of an ethical concept is not established by reference to the product of some *independent* understanding of the property. (Why should it need to be?) It is established by those who exercise it and engage fairly with fair first-order criticism.

Something tells me this is the moment to close down on the argument from queerness. Yet something else prevents. For I hear Protagoras and Mackie protesting in these terms: You have denied that a first order ethic is a device, but not that it is a human invention. If man is the measure, then how can man himself treat ethical judgments as objectively true or false? How can man treat

<sup>13</sup> Confronted with the argument from queerness and the mockery of 'intuition', Aristotle could have given a similar gloss on his own use in ethical contexts of the word *aisthesis*.

an ethical assertion as recording how things are out there independently of him or her who makes the assertion? I reply: Does 'man is the measure' mean that it is a matter of stipulation what to say about (say) this or that action by NN? That is implausible and it does not follow from morality's being an invention. (Nor does it follow from morality's being an invention that just any invented ethos will count as a morality – or that one is just as good as another.) Or does 'man is the measure' mean that to discover or decide about the moral quality of this or that act or character must regard, either directly or indirectly, the nature of man or the expectations or aspirations of man? Does it mean that the act or character has to be measured on some *human* scale of values, the scale of values that human beings themselves have arrived at? That is more plausible, but it does not imply that, when we subject things to that scale, it is going to be up to us, who are human beings, which concept, whether *admirable* (say) or *execrable*, the action in question falls under. For someone to jump to that conclusion is analogous to a confusion of sense and reference, the confusion of the significance of a sentence – which, if you insist, you can call stipulation or invention – and its truth value, which cannot be stipulated.

All right, someone may say. 'I will guard against that confusion. But do you want to allow sense to just any old supposed subject-matter that someone may propose, however apparently vacuous or nonsensical?' Answer: No, I don't. The candidate subject matter must have a point, however inward and imperfectly articulate this may be, and it must engage in a proper multiplicity of ways with things that we can find out about or pursue or care about in the rest of life. But the subject-matter of ethics does manifestly do all these things – as Mackie himself took pains to show. Not only that. If we think about this matter from the inside then we shall discover within us a wealth of further knowledge, however inexplicit, about the inner aim that animates the whole business, and regulates it critically. Morality is not just one among numerous possible ways of thinking about how we are impinged upon from without. It is our response to things which, in the light of certain distinctive unforsakeable concerns, matter distinctively.

## VI

The second difficulty Mackie brought against objectivity in ethics was the relativity of morals. Someone might say this: your answer

to the objection from queerness will pass muster if first order ethical thinking has the kind of soundness the objectivist postulates; but in reality human beings at large *fail to converge* in their findings about the presence or absence in given objects or situations of ethical properties. If ethical questions were on all fours with questions of fact, then those who understand an ethical question ought under favourable condition to start to agree on an answer to it – or else be eager to discover what obstructs the way to agreement. Where is this agreement or this eagerness?

For determined objectivists, there has been a temptation to try to flatten this objection once and for all, as often as not by ignoring the link Mackie saw between the difficulty that he called relativity and the difficulty he called queerness. Crediting Mackie and others who raise this question with a genuine curiosity about the nature of ethical thinking itself, I shall proceed much more circuitously, starting from a famous essay by Montaigne called ‘On the Cannibals’. The essay’s claim to our attention, let me say, does not depend on its counting as an early work of empirical ethnography. Its claim depends on the resource and canny enterprise that the author demonstrates in the practicality of the confrontation with cultural difference. It gives the lie to the automatic assumption that the ethical cannot be a subject matter where critical agreement will accumulate.

## VII

In La France Antartique or (as we should say) Brazil, a ‘seemingly boundless territory’, there live (discovered, as Montaigne intimates, not very long before the moment of writing) a people with customs very different from our own. Despite the gap between them and the French or the Spanish or the Portuguese . . . , there are things we can learn from them. Montaigne says that such peoples as these will appear barbarous. But they are

. . . barbarous only in that they have been hardly fashioned by the mind of man, still remaining close neighbours to their original state of nature . . . [These] people have no trade of any kind, no acquaintance with writing, no knowledge of numbers, no terms for governor or political superior, no practice of subordination or of riches or poverty, no contracts, no inheritances, no divided estates, no occupation but leisure, no

concern for kinship – no clothing, no agriculture, no metals, no use of wine or corn. Among them you hear no words for treachery, lying, cheating, avarice, envy, backbiting or forgiveness . . .

They dwell along the sea-shore, shut in to landwards by great lofty mountains, on a stretch of land some hundred leagues in width. They have fish and flesh in abundance which bear no resemblance to ours; these they eat simply cooked . . . They get up at sunrise and have their meal for the day as soon as they do so; they have no other meal but that one . . . They spend the whole day dancing; the younger men go off hunting with bow and arrow . . . In the morning, before their meal, one of their elders walks from one end of the building to the other, addressing the whole barnful of them . . . He preaches two things only: bravery before their enemies and love for their wives . . . They believe in the immortality of the soul: souls which deserve well of the gods dwell in the sky where the sun rises; souls which are accursed dwell where it sets.<sup>14</sup>

So far, so good. However utterly different the lives may be that these people lead, however many of our virtues or vices they fail to cultivate, the virtues that they do practise are instantly recognizable to us. Such people might even seem to us to represent a golden age. They might. But now we learn a little more about the battles in which they are constantly schooled to be resolute. Montaigne continues:

These peoples have their wars against others further inland beyond their mountains. They go forth naked, with no other arms but their bows and their wooden swords sharpened to a point like the blades of our pig-stickers. Their steadfastness in battle is astonishing and always ends in killing and bloodshed. They do not even know the meaning of fear or flight . . . For a long period they treat captives well and provide them with all the comforts which they can devise. Afterwards the master of each captive summons a great assembly of his acquaintances. He ties a rope to one of the arms of his prisoner and holds him by it, standing a few feet away for fear of being caught in the blows, and allows his dearest friend to hold the prisoner the

<sup>14</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. and ed. M.A. Screech (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp. 231 ff.

same way by the other arm. Then, before the whole assembly, they both hack at him with their swords and kill him. This done, they roast him and make a common meal of him, sending chunks of his flesh to absent friends.

The brave warriors already have plenty of wholesome food to eat. Why then, we may wonder, do they eat their enemies?

This is not, as some think, done for food – as the Scythians used to do in antiquity – but to symbolize ultimate revenge. As a proof of this [mark the following]: [when some of our natives] noted that the Portuguese, who were allied to their enemies, practised a different kind of execution of [those they took] prisoner [and] were greater masters than they were of every kind of revenge . . . they began to abandon their ancient method and adopted that one.

This change in the customs of primitive people is the occasion for Montaigne to make one simple and entirely deliberate comparison between what he knows of sixteenth century Brazil before the arrival of the Portuguese and sixteenth century France:

[I am not dismayed] that we should note the horrible barbarity in a practice such as theirs [the Brazilians]; what [does dismay me] is that while judging correctly of their wrongdoings, we should be so blind to our own. I think there is more barbarity . . . in lacerating by rack and torture a body still able to feel things, in roasting him little by little and having him bruised and bitten by pigs and dogs (as we have . . . seen in recent memory . . . among our fellow citizens and neighbours – and, what is worse, in the name of duty and religion) than in roasting him and eating him after his death . . . We can indeed call those folk barbarians by the rules of reason, but not in comparison with ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarism. Their warfare is entirely noble and magnanimous. It has as much justification and beauty as that human malady allows . . . They require no other ransom from their prisoners-of-war than that they should admit and acknowledge their defeat. Yet . . . you cannot find one who does not prefer to be killed and eaten than merely to ask to be spared.

Finally, contemplating the imminent future of these people and his European countrymen's constantly creeping corruption of them, Montaigne relates that

Three such natives, unaware of what price in peace and happiness they would have to pay to buy a knowledge of our corruptions, and unaware that such commerce would lead to their downfall – which I suspect to be already far advanced –, pitifully allowing themselves to be cheated by their desire for novelty and leaving the gentleness of their regions to come and see ours, were at Rouen at the same time as King Charles IX. The King had a long interview with them: they were shown our manners, our ceremonial and the layout of a fair city. Then someone asked them what they thought of all this and wanted to know what they had been most amazed by. They made three points; I am very annoyed with myself for forgetting the third, but I still remember two of them. In the first place they said (probably referring to the Swiss Guard) that they found it very odd that all those full-grown bearded men, strong and bearing arms in the King's entourage, should consent to obey a boy rather than choosing one of themselves as a Commander; secondly – since they have an idiom in their language which calls all men 'halves' of one another – [they said] that they had noticed that there were among us men fully bloated with all sorts of comforts while their halves were begging at their doors, emaciated with poverty and hunger: they found it odd that those destitute halves should put up with such injustice and did not take the others by the throat or set fire to their houses.

These people are cannibals, Montaigne has told us. They have not perceived what a malady warfare really is. They have not found their way beyond vendetta towards any law- or custom-based resolution of blood-feuds (we can confidently surmise). So their preoccupation with virtue is much taken up with military forms of courage. But the chief thought Montaigne prompts us to have about them is that their charity (agape), their asceticism and their unconcern for the merely material far excels that of any European. In so far as these primitive peoples strive for anything beyond the perfecting of their personal merit, they effortlessly surpass any European in the innocence of their amusements, their dignity, and their capacity to live in contentment.

### VIII

Montaigne was a thinker deeply influenced by Pyrrhonism and doubt, especially doubt of philosophical systems. Yet, despite the

restraint and gentle indirection for which Montaigne is so justly celebrated – his fully considered thoughts about unperverted nature are not deducible from the opening passage, for instance –, this particular essay appears to carry a cargo of moral commentary that is disarmingly positive and direct. If there are specifically philosophical problems to be found here, maybe the chief among them is not his but ours – for us to ensure that our own supposedly rigorous methods of describing and classifying ethical positions and metaethical positions should not close off a space that ought to be held open for the sort of response to moral diversity that Montaigne exhibits for us. His aim is to recruit anyone anywhere who will listen.

Or so I assert. Yet someone might say this: Yes, Montaigne seeks to recruit anyone anywhere who will listen. But that is a very weak claim. For Montaigne is clearly a relativist. It is in that capacity that he calls for tolerance towards the cannibalism of these people. His appeal is for us to judge the cannibalism of these Brazilians *by their standard*. The one great objection that is ready and waiting for him to urge it against the Christians of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe – if only he would deploy it – is that constantly, in all sorts of ways, these Christians act against their own professed standard. But then (the critic will say), with everything so arranged, Montaigne spoils the whole thing. For he seems to judge Christians *and* cannibals from a standard that is neither 16<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian nor simply 16<sup>th</sup> century Christian. He wants to look at things from the point of view of *both* – or else of neither. This is more humane (the critic says) than it is justifiable or consistent with his own suggestion that we should not try to look beyond the laws of our own country.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Here the relativist interlocutor surely makes reference to the ninth/tenth paragraph of 'On the Cannibals', where English translations have given the impression that Montaigne asserts that we have no other criterion of truth or right reason than the example and form of the opinions and customs of our own country. The French text of the relevant sentences reads as follows: 'Or je trouve, pour revenir à mon propos, qu'il n'y a rien de barbare et de sauvage en cette nation, à ce qu'on m'en a rapporté, sinon que chacun appelle barbarie ce qui n'est pas de son usage; comme de vrai, il semble que nous n'avons autre mire de la vérité et de la raison que l'exemple et idée des opinions et usances du pays où nous sommes. Là est toujours la parfaite religion, la parfaite police, parfait et accompli usage de toutes choses.' The following seems to be a fairly literal translation: 'I find that there is nothing barbarous or savage in this people judging by what I have been told – except that [except in so far as] everyone will call barbarous that which is at variance with his own customs or habits. For indeed it seems that we have no other target for truth-seeking and reasoning than the example or stereotype of [represented by] the beliefs and customs of the country to which we belong. It is there, in that country, that we have

The critic is imaginary. But if there is such a critic, I say his stricture is multiply mistaken. Montaigne does not condone cannibalism or vengeance at all. He does not praise perpetual warfare as the ideally admirable mode of being for the Brazilians. He does not even say that these goings on are all very well when judged by the relevant local standard. Out of his own mouth, he says explicitly that war is a malady and cannibalism an evil. He also insists, however, and this of course is the chief thing, that cannibalism is *less* bad than 16<sup>th</sup> century European modes of behaviour towards convicted criminals or convicted heretics. It is one thing to roast someone after they're dead, another to roast them alive and so on. The criticisms Montaigne conveys of his countrymen are criticisms not of inconsistency between their acts and their own professed beliefs but of inhumanity, inhumanity that Christians should be ashamed of. The stance in which he is sustained by the comparison of Brazilian and Christian morals is a stance not so much of relativism as of outright *engagement*, engagement presumably in the cause of the creation of a world in which human beings may dwell in a security and peace unwonted in Montaigne's own lifetime.

## IX

To say this much is not to position Montaigne with respect to Mackie, whose engagement, in its own way, is not less than Montaigne's. The contrast is with other positions that take their cue from the phenomenon to which Mackie gives the name of relativity.

One such position inserts into the content of a moral judgement an implicit reference to a moral code. Thus (the position says) the act of eating one's enemies satisfies the predicate 'right-

the perfect religion, the perfect constitution, the best way of doing anything!'. The last sentence is clearly ironical. It surely looks forward to the last paragraph of the whole essay, as well as backward to the first. These first and last paragraphs dramatize Montaigne's insistence on our liability to mistakes and misapprehensions in findings of barbarity. If so much is correct, then we can surely take seriously and give due weight to the 'il semble que'. We can also allow more weight to that which *precedes* the 'sinon que' ('except in so far as') than to that which follows it. After 'sinon que', Montaigne is only reporting that he has the same difficulty as everyone else in fighting free of parochial misconceptions. I am indebted here to my colleague Dr Wesley Williams – not only for his help with these particular sentences but also for his generous encouragement and friendly reassurance in the matter of understanding Montaigne.

for-16<sup>th</sup> century Brazil'; and this same act also satisfies the predicate 'wrong-for-16<sup>th</sup> century France'. Speaking in the twenty first century, we must say that cannibalism is wrong-by-our-system and cannibalism was not wrong-by-the-Brazilian-system. Such relativity might suggest that it is pointless to sit in judgment on the verdicts of another system or to insist on one's own. But, whoever else may think in this way, Montaigne does not. 'On the Cannibals' begins in strongly conciliatory fashion with the life of these people, then provokes us to a strongly adverse judgment upon the native Brazilians, then conciliates us afresh and equally strongly in their favour. The essay treats disagreement and our condemnation of cannibalism first *as a fact*, but then as a challenge to Montaigne's best powers of persuasion. It is by his deployment of those powers that Montaigne's readers are to be brought round to see the native Brazilians as much better than they (his readers) are – something his readers did not expect.<sup>16</sup> There is no trace here of the idea that moral judgment appeals to a standard that is purely local to time, place or culture or is answerable only to some local say-so. The claim that he and his readers surpass the Brazilians in every kind of barbarism appeals to something Montaigne aspires to make it compulsory for everyone to think; and they are to think this with reference to all of a range of acts that the 16<sup>th</sup> century French do and that the Brazilians do, each set of acts being understood *for what these acts are, in their context*.

Here is a second attempt at relativism. It has sometimes been maintained that, as predicated of moral judgments, the properties of truth and falsehood are really relative to a system of moral assessment, so that the sentences 'eating people is wrong' and 'harming one's enemies is wrong' could be true relative to Christian morality of 16<sup>th</sup> century France (however little heed may have been paid there to the second precept) and false relative to 16<sup>th</sup> century native Brazilian morality. This relativism shifts its attentions from the content of the judgment (that was the first variety) to the verdict on that content. But careful reflection will find nothing at all for the words 'relative to Brazilian morality' to mean in the combination 'false relative to Brazilian morality', except 'false *according to* Brazilian morality'. And then, in that construal, all that is being said is that, *according to Brazilian morality*, eating one's enemies is right whereas, *according to* (some) *Christian moral-*

<sup>16</sup> 'Nous les pouvons donc bien appeler barbares, eu égard aux règles de la raison, mais non pas eu égard a nous, qui les surpassons en toute sorte de barbarie'

*ity*, it is wrong. This simply records an apparent difference of opinion. It leaves us where we were, in the manner of a bare anthropological record or a traveller's narrative. Or else – if it is taken to silence all further discussion – it leaves us worse off. It could have no relevance to Montaigne's efforts.

There is a simpler and third thing to mean by relativism – one now sees – less technical, less charged with philosophical theory. This is that morality essentially consists of moralities in the plural, and that moralities in the plural are different and always at loggerheads with one another. This purports to be a statement of fact. The statement is turned into philosophy when someone adds something – namely that there is no vantage point from which to arbitrate between different moralities; or else that for each person the only proper vantage point is that which is locally laid down. Here we come closer, in a sense, to engaging with Montaigne – except of course that he might want to qualify the finding of fact: 'always at loggerheads'. Montaigne would also reject the philosophical addendum. For in his essay he seems to suggest a method for *finding* a more than merely local vantage point from which to understand a particular difference that seems to have come into question. Diversity of customs may or may not amount to disagreement – we must not confuse these things – and the better practice may or may not be the familiar one. The first things to be attended to, though, are the local meanings of the acts that are in question, the reasons there are there for doing such acts and the other beliefs that come into play. Unless we pay heed to these things, we shall not see the good in that which is strange or the bad in that which is familiar.

Let us call such an outlook as this contextualism (not relativism). Philosophically speaking, it might be seen as a bequest from Aristotle.<sup>17</sup> In Aristotle and those who have followed him, this outlook coheres well enough with the general thought that, despite the manifest differences in the ways in which different

<sup>17</sup> Here is a provisional statement of contextualism: No act or practice can be assessed as right or wrong, good or bad, etc. without the full specification of circumstances and context (context embracing, in some versions, the identity of agents). An act or a practice is a response in some situation to something somehow discriminable in that situation or a framework that contains that situation. Properly understood, contextualism may be expected to have both ethical and metaethical consequences. But, strictly speaking, its life starts elsewhere, in the shape of a logico-grammatical reminder: properly to situate an act or a practice or an instance of a practice is the necessary preliminary to passing judgment on that act, that practice, or that instance. Unless we do this, we shall scarcely know what we are passing judgment upon.

peoples (and different people) are introduced to morality and participate in it, there is a common core of morality, which finds its expression in a whole variety of different acts in a variety of different contexts.<sup>18</sup> Montaigne's essay illustrates very well what such a core might comprise, the notions or ideas that Europeans and cannibals had in common, for instance. It also mentions ideas the cannibals did not recognize and ideas the cannibals had that Europeans were not fully prepared for. Here, though, it prepares us for the thought that his countrymen would benefit by taking seriously the native Brazilian idea of human beings as halves of one another; just as, the other way round, the Brazilians stand in need of the European idea of reparation/blood-price and an understanding of the self-renewing evil of vendetta.

The Aristotelian thought is indispensable then, in so far as we are concerned with shareable notions or ideas. It is less clear though whether, on the level of *judgments* that may be critically agreed, the idea of a common core is the way forward for the objectivist eager to learn something from Montaigne. On the level of agreement in moral judgments themselves, maybe it is better to bracket the question of identifying verdicts that *already* command universal agreement. A better question is what verdicts can or *could*, on the basis of reasonable persuasion, command agreement. The philosophical point of paying heed to Montaigne's essay is surely not for the moral philosophers to be appointed to the high office of keepers or interpreters of the human code of morality, as if it were a body of ratified law. Rather, the point is for us to study the interpretive power of contextualism as Montaigne practises it, and to perceive the reach of criticism across difference and the reach of agreement over difference. What we then get from the essay is not only a sense of the power of moral notions or ideas in moral dialogue, but a new intimation also of the *actual variety* of modes of ethical persuasion. It is the second of these things (attention to which is a precondition I believe of any sensible prolongation at all of philosophical metaethics) which might prompt us to hope for the possibility

<sup>18</sup> Downwind from Aristotle's famous discussion of natural justice (contrast customary or legal justice) in *Nicomachean Ethics* V.7, there are countless further expressions of the thought. For a modern exposition of it, see Aurel Kolnai, 'Moral Consensus', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 70, 1969–70, to which I am indebted in my account of the third kind of relativism. For an expression a hundred years on from Montaigne, see chapter two of Book One of Leibniz's *New Essays*.

that *sometimes* one who undergoes discursive moral persuasion on some particular matter or question, and who fully understands what is being said and the context for which it is being said, might be left with nothing else to think but one thing – *even if* such persuasion is ‘a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender provided that they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected’. (See above Section IV.)

## X

This is all very well, the anti-cognitivist will say, but what if there are well formed questions that cannot be answered in this dialectically satisfying way? I answer that objectivism in ethics, or moral cognitivism (as one might say), comes without *a priori* assurance that it *must* be right or prevail over the whole range of ethical questions. Nevertheless, with disagreements of the kind that the objector has in mind, it will be sensible to try to discover what other disagreements (e.g. historical or theological disagreements) subsist in the area, whether parties in disagreement really mean the same by their words, and what previously unknown or neglected ideas, indispensable nevertheless to human purposes, might be usefully proposed to those who appear to be in genuine dispute.

What is the final destination of this way of seeing these issues? Is the *telos* aspired for a compendious morality equipped with an answer to every well formed question that might in practice be asked, or a global ethic with pretensions to match and run in tandem with the pretensions of some total political/economic global order?

Nothing could be more absurd or give rise more readily in practice to yet new forms of ignorance and endless new and proportionately unjustified subversions by stronger countries of the political or economic fabric of those that are weaker. Setting aside reservations concerning the prospect of the West’s exporting the most suspect features of that which is called democracy (without any mention of the warnings of Tocqueville or Mill or of the danger that the less serious interests of the majority can swamp the truly vital interests of a minority), I say that, so far as ethics is concerned, the suggestion rests on rank confusion.

For, first, a morality does not consist of a set of moral propositions, even a very large one. Moral judgments are indeed partial

expressions of the findings or demands of some particular mode of being and its associated sensibility. But there is simply no question of collecting up a whole mass of moral judgments arrived at by some combination of Montaigne's methods and philosophical good will in order for these judgments to represent or construct or create an ethic, a morality, or a whole manner of life for citizens of the new world-order. For (1) judgments are only half of the story (the later half) and (2) moral judgments themselves, even when spelled out, cannot even be understood as they are intended except against the background of a lived understanding that will never be fully articulated. In the absence of such a background, you have no hope of being understood exactly as you intend to be understood even if you say something as simple as 'it is wrong to say what is not true/what you don't know is true/what you know is not true . . .'.<sup>19</sup> In the absence of such a background, which it would be an endless process, that is impossible, to spell out fully explicitly, you could not even keep in balance, as is second nature to us, the conflicting claims of a pair of fully compacted proverbs such as 'he who hesitates is lost' and 'look before you leap'. I owe the example and the expression 'compacted' to Christopher Ricks.<sup>20</sup> In so far as globalism will dilute or seek to dispense with the moral counterpart of that sort of understanding and put nothing of comparable power or strength in its place (and how could it do so?), it can as well destroy morality as enhance it.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> This is to say that injunctions of these kinds cannot be replaced by an exact instruction or precept. On this point, I should like to refer to the remarkable and importantly sensible essay on lying and truth-telling in Leszek Kolakowski's book *Freedom, Fame, Lying and Betrayal: Essays on Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> See his *Essays in Appreciation* (1996), page 323.

<sup>21</sup> Lest this remain obscure, let me illustrate the point by reference to the United Nations' so-called Millennium Development Goals agreed in September 2000. They are: (1) to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; (2) to achieve universal primary education; (3) to promote gender equality and empower women; (4) to reduce child mortality; (5) to improve maternal health; (6) to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; (7) to ensure environmental sustainability; (8) to develop a global partnership for development. Well, who can be against any of these things? The question is not of course whether one is for them or against them, but the danger that such approved formulations and the priorities that they encapsulate should upstage or else corrupt local perceptions and interpretations of that which is locally needed or intended.

Imagine goal (2)'s being interpreted in the boardroom of an international company or the external aid department of a foreign government, six thousand miles from the intended beneficiaries of assistance in the furtherance of such goals. Prescind from all local understanding and then, from within that vacuum, try to consider how good an idea it would be to persuade some national government or charity to fund a scheme to take

There is a second confusion for us to guard against here, a confusion between *generality* (as understood in contrast with *specificity*) and *universality* (a judgment's holding over *all* of the so specified or stated range of cases or instances) – the confusion so usefully exposed (for purposes of his own) by R. M. Hare.<sup>22</sup> I think that those who dream of a world ethic do not think of it as given in terms that are endlessly specific or that can only be mobilized or made articulate by drawing upon an existing way of being. They are apt to think of it as offering us *prima facie* answers to all questions that are likely to be posed to it, answers given in terms that are at once usefully general and helpfully prescriptive. If that is the dream, however, let me point out that it is only with the help of contextualism that we have any evident hope of formulating moral judgments that will hold universally and for absolutely all cases (that is, for all cases that fall under descriptions that enter into the question that is under consideration). And contextualism only comes to the rescue of universalism by making full use

word-processors to the Berbers and the Bedouin and adapt their method of education accordingly? Stop, you say! Nobody is going to suggest *that!* All right. I believe you. As of now nobody is going to suggest that.

So let us consider goal (1) instead, together with the UN resolution on which it rests: 'we are committed to making the right [sic] to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want. We resolve therefore to create an environment – at the national and global levels alike – which is conducive to development and to the elimination of poverty' (§§11–12 General Assembly resolution fifty-fifth session 55/2, New York 6–8 September 2000). Suppose the question revolves around a vast dam-scheme of great interest to international contractors and projected for the Narmada River (say) by an Indian State Government – a dam-scheme projected (in some sense) democratically and in the name of something tantamount to goal (1) but in defiance of the interests of indigenous peoples (upward of quarter of a million persons, say) who are outnumbered by middle class city-dwellers (reminding one again of the warnings of Mill and Tocqueville). Suppose that the construction work for the water scheme will benefit enterprises that export goods and services from some country that is a candidate to help fund the aid-scheme (or subscribes funds to an agency which is such a candidate). Suppose these enterprises pay their taxes to this country, and benefit its balance of payments. How will it be decided whether this constitutes a beneficial step towards goal (1)? On what basis will it be decided? Into a moral vacuum that sort of scheme will rush. Into a partial such vacuum, it will also rush.

Proposals of such kinds could be multiplied beyond all present necessity. In a footnote chiefly concerned with the implicit knowledge that is required in the business of interpretation, my aim is to illustrate the effect of setting out goals within a context of understanding that is, *from the nature of the case*, insufficiently informed by the local realities of a myriad very diverse supposed beneficiaries.

<sup>22</sup> See R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford 1963), page 39. As I should see it, this is a distinction between something that concerns the content of the sentence used to make a judgment and something that concerns the success or unsuccess of that judgment with respect to all pertinent cases. In so far as content is analogous to sense and valuation is analogous to reference, the confusion is analogous to a sense-reference confusion.

of the conceptual resources of specificity. Montaigne's readers are convicted of being more barbarous than the Brazilians by a would-be universal or would-be incontrovertible standard that is brought to bear upon the specifics of what they do and the specifics of what the Brazilians do, each set of customs being understood for exactly what it is, in its context. In so far as universality is achieved in cases of this sort, it is almost entirely at the expense of generality.

Does *that* at least help Mackie's argument from relativity? Not at all. It suggests that, once we understand better what sort of thing a first order ethic is, we can hope to see distinct ethical systems as neither at loggerheads nor aiming at unity, but as simply aspiring in their distinctness and the specificity of their *verdicts* to universality. They aspire to be correct (as contextually interpreted) while holding themselves answerable to any case anywhere. On these terms, we become open to the further reflection that, by their nature, ethical systems have within them powers of regeneration, reparation and renewal that will always invite the efforts of moralists, satirists and other analogizers who strive to make their participants follow their ethical commitments through. The objectivist's faith is this: that, when or if participants do try to follow through, when they recant that which they must recant in order to persevere in this process, disagreement and conflict can diminish. Compare the ratchet mechanism that now sustains the once extremely uncommon opinion that there is something wrong with slavery. And now we are back where we were in the response to the queerness objection (see II, IV and V). We are back in the metaethical business (entirely foreign to Montaigne) of plotting the philosophical significance of all the ways in which morality gives the appearance of a real subject matter fully answerable in its own way to the true.

## XI

A word more, before we end, about this earnest character, the moral objectivist. In the poem from which our epigraph is taken, William Empson begins by describing the totalitarian efforts of 'thinkers' and 'hoppers' to counter totalitarianism and their pious hopes that, once 'the loony hooters' (Hitler and Mussolini perhaps) have been squared, things can be 'reconverted to be kind and clean'. Then come the lines of the epigraph. Then, lest

cheerfulness break in, the poem switches course to intimate that collectivism itself may have its origin in the same depths as does the rest of the gigantic circus. So after the cheerfulness, poetic resignation.

The objectivist, by contrast, is not resigned. An objectivist who is any good at objectivism can acquiesce as happily as Montaigne (critically, that is) in the gigantic anthropological circus. He will gain some of the same comfort as Empson from the calmness of the sea ten fathoms down. Maybe, with Humean optimism and a literal mindedness sadly at variance with the spirit of Empson's poem, he will conceive of these depths as holding within them not only the obstinacy of the human will, despite everything, to find the way to survive, not only the innate tendencies that are expressed in self-love, benevolence, imagination and reason, but also the capacity to look for notions or ideas of (say) solidarity, reciprocity, need, desert, responsibility, virtue . . . But what does the objectivist say comes of this mass of stubborn potentiality? Well, on the level of the actual, everything depends (he will say) on what ideas (and what acceptations of what ideas) do actually take hold – and it depends on human dispositions, *hexeis* as Aristotle would say, *Bildung*, or ethical formation (as Sabina Lovibond says in her book of this name). The objectivist is not a prophet. He reflects gloomily perhaps that bad ideas (or bad acceptations) tend to drive out good. More cheerfully, he reflects that a new and practical preoccupation with the idea of formation could counteract that vexatious tendency. It is up to us though to cultivate that preoccupation, up to us to hold on to what we do have, and up to us to subvert that which subverts it. But no predictions! (Contrast the cheerful belief, just perceptible in Hume's essay 'Of the Standard of Taste', that, in the end, the better judgment will prevail over the worse.)

## XII

I have digressed. About relativity, I have claimed that we do not need to see distinct ethical systems (even ethical systems that share in many ideas) as aiming at unity, but only as aspiring to universality (in Hare's sense). Maybe relativists are really disappointed unifiers or globalists. But globalism, in so far as this is a creed or a crusade rather than a description of certain tendencies that pose certain new and serious problems (not least

problems of bad ideas driving out good), is a misunderstanding of true internationalism. True internationalism has no need to confuse an aspiration to universality in judgments with the aspiration to propound a mass of general judgments or to attempt general prescriptions about millennial goals for the world (which will be interpreted over and over again to reflect the preoccupations of states that are powerful, caught between the benevolent impulses of their citizens and the insatiable demands of an economy, and unpractised in self-examination). True internationalism would do better to start out from the place where Montaigne and similar thinkers have left off, with the exploration and critical deployment of ideas or notions that human societies really can share – and with the *more specific* humanitarian missions that local knowledge, tempered by justice, will second or that human constitution itself (at least as it appears to a *médécin sans frontière*) will confidently endorse. With declarations against torture, genocide, imprisonment without charge, slavery, forced labour etc. we are on the home territory of the international spirit at its finest and least controversial, the universally valid proscription of specific evil. It is a tragic mistake to suppose that these can be a paradigm for the positive and general prescriptions of a ‘global ethic’.

It is time to conclude. As I have characterized it, moral objectivism is not so much a cut and dried doctrine as an outlook, an outlook of qualified second order optimism relating not to the future but to the conceptual and critical resources and the power of first order ethical thought. The importance of Mackie’s arguments from queerness and relativity, properly construed, is that they combine, when each is explained in the light of the other, to represent a serious challenge to that qualified optimism – a challenge that demands from objectivists and anti-objectivists alike a close attention to the actual resources available to first order ethical thought as well as a new interest in the business of moral persuasion.

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