

Attila Tanyi

John Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*

Proseminar, Konstanz, Summer semester 2010/11

Monday, 14-16pm, Room F423

Introduction. John Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* is one of the most influential works in contemporary analytical ethics. Mackie's work is admirable both in its breadth and its depth. Its perhaps most famous first chapter is the locus classicus for error theories in contemporary meta-ethics. There Mackie argues that ordinary moral discourse and thought involve an assumption that there are what he calls "objective values," and that this assumption is false. Consequently, ordinary moral thought and language are infected by an error that precludes any ordinary moral claims and thoughts from being true. Mackie then completes his error theory by providing an explanation of our tendency to make this error, to mistakenly suppose that ordinary moral thought and language involve our successfully coming to know about the sorts of things he claims don't exist. Mackie's book doesn't end here, however. He goes on to cover a wide range of territory in normative ethics and meta-ethics, along with a few issues in metaphysics (the existence of God and freedom of the will) that have some bearing on moral issues. In fact, despite his worries about the objectivity of morality, Mackie goes on to defend a substitute for morality, one that looks quite a bit like a broadly consequentialist moral theory, and he even weighs in on several controversial moral issues that are still with us. In short, in a little over two hundred pages of exceptionally clear prose, Mackie covers just about everything of interest in moral philosophy.

This book is therefore essential reading for anyone interested in meta-ethics. Understanding some of the material and its importance may require some background knowledge, but enough of the book is more generally accessible that it also constitutes a good wide-ranging introduction to issues in both meta-ethics and normative ethics for a person with some background in philosophy (and perhaps for the general reader). Furthermore, the book, while not a work of history, is sufficiently informed about the history of the issues it discusses to provide the reader with an entry into study of the history of the subject.

Hausarbeit möglich. The course will be completed by a 10-15 page long paper (Times New Roman, 12, 1.5) written by the student on topics that are related to the course. Topics must be discussed with the course instructor and must have his permission. During the course student presentations will also be possible (they will be compulsory if the number of students will not be higher than the number of occasions). The idea for these presentations, however, is not that the student gives a lecture to the other participants of the course, but that he/she guides us through the text, by summarizing Sidgwick's position and making critical remarks and commentaries.

Course material. Since we will read one book, it is important that we have the same edition. The one we will use - this is the standard one, available in bookshops and on the internet - is John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin, 1991. It is strongly recommended to purchase the book; there is nevertheless a copy (both the English original and the German translation) in the semester apparatus of the course.

Background and overview reading. I am not aware of the existence of any lengthier encyclopedia entry on Mackie's philosophy. If anyone knows or finds such an entry, please let me know. The semester apparatus of the course contains two edited volumes on Mackie's

philosophy, these can be consulted as a background.

Course schedule. What follows is the schedule of the course with topic and literature for each occasion. I do not here provide the secondary literature; if a student is interested in the given topic – wants to write his/her paper on it, for instance – I am happy to provide further bibliographic information. ILIAS will have the secondary material as well.

Seminar 1 (April 11). Introduction and general matters of interest (practical issues: examination, grading, student presentations etc.) Overview of Mackie's life.

Seminar 2 (April 18). The subjectivity of values, Part I.

Chapter I, sections 1-6

Seminar 3 (April 25). The subjectivity of values, Part II.

Chapter I, sections 7-12

Seminar 4. *No seminar, Easter holiday.*

Seminar 5 (May 2). The meaning of 'good'.

Chapter II

Seminar 6 (May 9). Obligations and reasons.

Chapter III

Seminar 7 (May 16). Universalization.

Chapter IV

Seminar 8 (May 23). The object of morality.

Chapter V

Seminar 9 (May 30). Utilitarianism.

Chapter VI

Seminar 10 (June 6). Consequentialism and deontology.

Chapter VII

Seminar 11 (June 13). *No seminar, public holiday.*

Seminar 12 (June 20). Elements of a practical morality, Part I.

Chapter VIII, sections 1-5

Seminar 13 (June 27). Elements of a practical morality, Part II.

Chapter VII, sections 6-10

Seminar 14 (July 4). Determinism, responsibility and choice.

Chapter VIII

Seminar 15 (July 11). Religion, Law, and Politics.

Chapter IX