Mackie’s “The Subjectivity of Values”

I. Moral Scepticism (15-17)

A. How does Mackie distinguish between first and second order views about morality? In what way is his moral scepticism a second order view?

B. In what way is there a descriptive sense to our moral judgements which we need not be sceptical about? What, in contrast with this descriptive sense, is Mackie sceptical about?

II. Subjectivism and the Multiplicity of Second Order Questions (17-20)

A. How does Mackie distinguish his second order concern with morality from another he is not concerned with dealing with the meaning of moral judgements?

B. How does he draw upon the example of color to illustrate the importance of not collapsing these two second order concerns? (19-20)

III. Standards of Evaluation and the Appearance of Objectivity in our Moral Intuitions (25-35)

A. How does Mackie grant that evaluative judgements (including ethical ones) may be true or false in a way that is consistent with his position? (25-27)

B. How does Mackie grant that standards of evaluation may be objectively appropriate (or inappropriate) in a way consistent with his position? (27)

C. How does Mackie make use of Kant’s distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives to clarify his position?

D. Despite rejecting the idea that there are any such things as genuinely categorical imperatives, how does Mackie argue that Kant’s idea captures something important about our moral intuitions? (32-34)

E. How does the reaction that life has lost its value if there are no objective values (characteristic of reactions to existentialism) further support Mackie’s claim regarding the objectivism of our ordinary moral judgements? (34)

F. What conclusions does Mackie draw regarding the meaning of moral concepts and judgments from his analysis of the inherent objectivism of our ordinary moral judgements? How does this further reinforce his call to
distinguish conceptual from factual second order questions about morality? (35)

G. What does Mackie mean in characterizing his position as an “error theory”? (35)

IV. The Argument from Relativity (36-38)

A. How does the apparent relativity of moral values from culture to culture support Mackie’s moral subjectivism? Why does Mackie believe that the disagreement about moral values from culture to culture cannot be compared to disagreement about objective issues in scientific fields of study?

B. What is the “well-known counter” to the argument from relativity that Mackie discusses on p. 37 and how does he respond to it in the last paragraph of this section?

V. The Argument from Queerness (38-42)

A. Mackie distinguishes two ways in which objective moral values are “queer”: a metaphysical sense and an epistemological sense (involving an appeal to intuition). How are objective moral values queer in both of these senses for Mackie? (38-39)

B. What is the objection that Mackie attributes to Price to the argument from queerness? How does Mackie respond to it? (39)

C. How does the appeal to Plato’s form of the good illustrate the queerness of objective moral values? In what way do objective moral values provide “the knower with both a direction and an overriding motive”? (40) Why is this a problem? How does Mackie’s reference to Hume’s conception of reason help to bring out the problem?

D. Why does Mackie think there is a problem with figuring out what the word “because” refers to in the sentence “it is wrong because it is a piece of deliberate cruelty”? How does this create further problems for the objectivist? (41)

VI. Patterns of Objectification (42-46)

A. What does Mackie mean by speaking of the objectification of values? How is this akin to what he calls the “pathetic fallacy”? (42)
B. How does the social nature of moral values help Mackie to see how there is some usefulness in the objectification of moral values?

VII. The General Goal of Human Life (46-48)

A. Mackie is concerned in this section to generalize his critique of objective moral values to ancient (Aristotle) and medieval (Aquinas) conceptions of morality that make morality a matter of conforming one’s life to a general goal for human life that would be a distinctively good life for a human being. How does he distinguish between a descriptive and prescriptive version of this claim and argue that these versions may be run together resulting in a new objectification of moral values akin to what he discussed earlier?

B. How does Mackie suggest the objectivist might have recourse to God’s purposes to underwrite the idea of objective goal for human life independent of what we in fact do or would find satisfying? (48)