

Moral Objectivism

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The possibility, let alone the actuality, of an objective morality has intrigued philosophers for well over two millennia. Though much discussed, the problem of the nature of morality is difficult to clearly conceptualize. To conclude that "moral objectivity" is a contested concept is, to my mind, simply to give up the philosophical challenge of assessing the soundness of the concept. Moral objectivists face major difficulties. In this paper I examine these difficulties, and I suggest that there are strong competitive subjectivist options and reservations.

Objectivism and subjectivism come in various forms. R. Franklin writes that an objectivist "asserts, and a subjectivist denies, that there are at least sometimes ultimately better reasons for one moral view than for alternatives. Early emotive and prescriptive views were subjectivist [in this sense]." ¹ As a thumbnail sketch of a form of subjectivism, this acceptably describes one of the central tenets of subjective ethical naturalism. R. M. Hare argues that there are ambiguities in the distinction between subjective and objective statements. ² Consider the following three sentences: (a) The cat is on the mat; (b) I like cats; and (c) Call the cat. The subjective-objective distinction, argues Hare, is ambiguous between (1) the distinction between (a), on the one hand, and (b) and (c), on the other hand, and (2) the distinction between (a) and (b), on the one hand, and (c) on the other hand. Hare prefers to call (a) and (b) 'descriptive' utterances and (c) a 'non-descriptive' utterance. The sense in which (b) is subjective as opposed to the sense in which (a) is objective, is the sense in which I claim morality is subjective. Both (a) and (b) are naturalistic claims--stating facts about the world disclosed by science. Those who take moral claims to be like (a) can be called objective naturalists. Objectivism can also be supported by non-naturalistic arguments; moral truths are not discoverable by scientific methods. Unlike non-descriptivists and objectivists, subjectivists claim that moral rightness and wrongness is dependent on the attitudes or inclinations of some set of speakers.

D. H. Monro distinguishes between 'naive subjectivism', the view that moral judgments state what the speaker feels, and the 'error theory', the view that "moral judgments refer to something outside the speaker's mind but are always [to that extent] false, since all that the speaker has a right to say is that he has a certain feeling or attitude." According to Monro the error theory is "the only form in which subjectivism has been seriously defended: the 'naive subjectivist' who has drawn the fire of most of the critics, is a man of straw." As I see it, the central claim of the error theory is that though perhaps moral judgments or statements do not, in a strict sense, refer to subjective attitudes of certain individuals, that is all they can be referring to, given factual or empirical analysis. Unlike our concepts of a good lecture or a good wine, our concept of a good person does not seem to involve agreement about the objective natural properties referred to in such judgments. Though 'referring' is going on, it is problematic why different properties are being referred to by different persons. Furthermore, there are disagreements in 'fundamental moral judgments' that seemingly cannot be reduced to disagreements about matters of fact, and thus amount to the expression of different attitudes.

J. L. Mackie takes subjectivism to be the negative thesis that objectivism is false--there are no objective values.' By 'objectivism' Mackie refers to a position defined by several theses: First, the semantic thesis that moral judgments are either true or false. Their logic is thus distinguishable from the logic of the expression of merely subjective feelings. Second, the ontological thesis that moral value exists as an object or property of objects among the entities of the actual world. Given a correspondence theory of truth, moral judgments have truth-value in virtue of moral reality. Third, the epistemological thesis that objective values are the object of moral knowledge. Moral ignorance and false belief can be explained by reference to objective value. Fourth, the motivational thesis that moral judgments seem to be categorical imperatives or prescriptions whose claim on a person's will is not based on any appeal to the desires of that person. The features of 'ought-to-be-doneness' and 'ought-to-be-pursuedness' are constituent features of objective requirements and values.'

A Divine Command Theory, which argues that it is God's willing something that makes morally good things morally good, may provide an objective basis for morality--at least for humans, though not for God. Of the four theses mentioned above, the motivational thesis is perhaps the most difficult to establish for the Divine Command Theory: If God is to be obeyed just because he is all-powerful then morality is simply a form of prudence.' This is contrary to our pre-theoretical views.

The breadth of positions, both those of philosophers and ordinary folk, that Mackie tries to capture within the single term 'objectivist' tends to make the term unwieldy. It is perhaps easier to find unity, not in what has been accomplished by the several positions he examines, but in what those positions attempt. The aim is still that of the Platonic enterprise, even though the Platonic solution is only one attempt among others. The aim is that of discovering or devising guides for action which are authoritative (overriding) and non-relative. The subjectivist argues that such guides have as yet neither been constructed nor discovered, and, furthermore, that there is no good empirical evidence that they could be. Though this results in a loss of a certain degree of agreement with our pre-theoretical views, it improves the overall simplicity of the naturalist account.

The claim to objectivity is not that moral judgments are descriptive, prescriptive, universalizable, categorical, imperatival, nor action-directing or practical. It is rather that moral judgments can be validated as true or false, independently of an agent's desires and inclinations--'independent' in the sense that empirical and formal judgments are independent of an individual's desires. When the subjectivist denies that the authoritative force of moral action-guides is anything more than the force of an individual's overriding desires, he can be seen as denying that there are objective values or that there is a way of objectively validating such desires.

One may ask, does the existence of an objective method for resolving moral controversies imply the existence of objective values; or, contrapositively, does the non-existence of objective values imply that there is no objective method for resolving moral disputes? Subjectivists would answer this question in the affirmative. Somewhere in the procedures, methods, reasoning, logic, exercises, or language of morals a subjective element, having the status of a decision, will be involved, although it will tend to be objectified. Appealing to any normative model, however general, will not enable one to avoid the problem of subjective acceptance. And that problem, according to the subjectivist, can only be resolved by the agents involved consulting their desires, finding out what they like, perhaps by finding out what they are like. There is a difference between saying that contingencies are involved and saying that the basis of the acceptance is subjective, but this does not affect the subjectivist position. To say that the world is such-and-such and that the human situation is such that egoism is not a contingently possible choice for any clear-headed individual is, in general, different from saying that most or all humans would find it not to their liking. I suggest that to speak of one's likings is one way of

talking about one's 'nature'. To examine the contingencies behind one's nature is to explore causal hypotheses that explicate one's behavior, verbal and non-verbal. A complete exploration of the contingencies governing one's situation, may show that, all things considered, one cannot sincerely say that one likes such-and-such. I accept Monro's view that the naturalist becomes a straw man once the subjective component (talk of likes and dislikes) is divorced from the natural component (talk of contingent features of the empirical world). When we examine the contingencies behind our concepts we may find ourselves faced with choices regarding the management of our conceptual lives.

Conceptual and linguistic analysis is insufficient to establish sound theories of the meaning and verification of statements in normative ethics. In addition, some form of factual analysis, as Mackie calls it, is needed. Such analysis necessitates a departure from standard twentieth century discussions in meta-ethics. R. Brandt provides a fair outline of the terms of the standard discussion: 'Non-naturalism', according to Brandt, "affirms (1) that . . . ethical terms are meaningful and that . . . ethical statements are true or false and (2) that . . . ethical terms do not name observable qualities . . . and that their meanings cannot be defined, even partially, by citing a relation between them and names of observable qualities." 'Naturalism' or 'definism' accepts (1) and rejects (2). 'Non-cognitivism' rejects (1) and accepts (2). Some forms of non-cognitivism claim that ethical utterances have meaning, say emotive meaning, but lack any truth-value; other forms, say nihilism, will reject (1) outright. Beneath the usual meta-ethical concern with questions of meaning and justification are larger metaphysical issues, which often are disregarded for no good reason. Naturalism includes the metaphysics of empiricism. I would therefore advocate a philosophical approach that involves a certain semantic descent. In fact, in 'defining' or 'explaining' morality, the naturalist does not take the semantics of our moral language at face value--he argues that it is deceptive, involves factual errors, and requires revision.

Philosophical investigations into the nature of morality attempt to provide us with an explanation of what we are (really) doing when we make moral judgments. One might ask what such investigations have to do with what we should do? The answer is nothing necessarily. It is only if we do value, do have a subjective concern, for descriptive accuracy and empirical truth, and only if we do prefer our fundamental principles to be well informed by the empirical facts, that philosophical investigations into the nature of morality will have any effect on our substantive moral positions.

Of the various forms of objectivism, objective ethical naturalism seems to me to be an implausible alternative. It is hard to find anyone holding it in its most simplistic form. I tend to think that any such position will have trouble making sense of the motivational aspects of morality, why we attach such importance to moral demands. How does something by simply being the case provide motivation for action? This is an embarrassing question for objective ethical naturalism. To hold in its most simplistic form, as a thesis about the ontological status of moral values, I would think that an objective ethical naturalist would have to hold that values exist in the world in the same way as material objects exist, or as features of such objects exist, or as relations among such objects and features exist.

Mackie briefly suggests that there may be categorical imperatives which are counsels of prudence.' Such counsels of prudence would be related to an agent's future well-being, whether or not he had any present desire that his future desires should be satisfied. One might try to develop a theory of objective interests upon this model and try to build upon this base some sort of objective ethical naturalism. It is notorious that the importance people attach to interests differ not only among individuals but also for a given individual at different times. Though we may speak of basic 'needs' and 'interests', we must recognize such needs and interests may be rationally sacrificed. For gain, glory, and love humans have been willing to take great risks and make great sacrifices. As a subjectivist, I think that the project of constructing an objective naturalism would always remain unanchored--at some point there must be an empirical connection between 'present self' and 'future self', or 'prudent self', or 'moral self', that will provide the impulse towards taking action. I admit that morality could be that sort of practice, game, or institution that once you subscribed to it your present desires were in some sense irrelevant, as they are in a game of chess--whether I like it or not, I may well be in checkmate. The contingencies of the human situation may be such that opting out of the morals game may well be practically impossible for any given individual. Nevertheless, besides having reservations about such conclusions, I want to say that 'acceptance' must come into the story at some level. Mackie argues that the "rationalist's program is to show that there are objectively valid necessary principles of action, intrinsically authoritative prescriptions or directives."¹⁰ I admit that someone could produce an objective ethical naturalism that shows no concern for motivational questions. But, objectivity without prescriptivity gives the game away.

NOTES

¹R. L. Franklin, "Recent Work on Ethical Naturalism," American Philosophical Quarterly Monograph 7 (1973), pp. 55-93. Citation p. 57.

²R. M. Hare, Moral Thinking (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 201.

³D. H. Monro, "Critical Notice of The Logic of Moral Discourse, by Paul Edwards," The Australasian Journal of Philosophy 34 (1956), p. 53.

⁴Monro, p. 53.

⁵J. L. Mackie, Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 15.

⁶This analysis is developed further by R. Burch, "Objective Values and the Divine Command Theory of Morality," New Scholasticism 50 (1980), pp. 279-304.

⁷The divine command theory is defended against this charge by R. Burch, p. 300. According to Burch, an objective value is objectively motivating in the sense that mere knowledge of it gives the knower a motive for behaving morally. His argument is that once God's existence is accepted, one willingly accepts God's commands because God is the sort of entity that one willingly obeys. This argument is reminiscent of Plato's mystical vision of the Form of the Good in the Republic and the Symposium--Absolute Beauty is irresistible.

⁸R. Brandt, "Parallel Between Epistemology and Ethics," in P. Edwards (ed.), The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1967), vol. 3, p. 7.

⁹Mackie, p. 29.

¹⁰J. L. Mackie, Hume's Moral Theory (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 22.