

### **The Objectivity of Morality**

The question of morality's objectivity is a pressing one. There are many conflicting intuitions one may have when thinking about the answer, as well as many concerns about the implications either answer may have for us. Very broadly, concerns over the objectivity of morality can be split into two groups - concerns arising from analysing the nature of moral reasoning and expression itself, and concerns regarding the possible consequences we as people may face by believing in objective morality. The arguments which comprise the second group are usually the more popular ones, but they are also the most irrelevant; the question of moral objectivity exists independently of any potential outcomes that arise if most people stop believing in it. Concerns such as worrying that objective morality would lead to intolerance and dogmatism not only contain serious doubts about the soundness of their own conclusions within themselves, but it is simply a fact that moral objectivism only deals with the nature of how a moral claim *is* in itself, not what we *ought* to do in light of said moral claim. Thus, it is within the first group of concerns that we can find the sharpest criticisms of moral objectivism.

Of the many potential arguments against moral objectivism, I believe the three strongest ones are: The Argument from Categorical Reasons, The Motivation Argument, and The Argument from the Scientific Test of Reality. I will begin discussing these arguments with The

Argument from the Scientific Test of Reality. This argument, which I will hereby shorten to simply the Argument from Scientific Inquiry, is rather straightforward - science is the best method of obtaining objective knowledge about the world, and since morality never features in scientific explanations, there is no reason to believe that objective morals exist. In other words, the argument follows thus:

1. If scientific inquiry cannot verify the existence of X, then the best evidence tells us that X does not exist
2. Scientific inquiry cannot verify that objective moral values exist
3. Therefore, the best evidence tells us that objective moral values do not exist.

This argument is logically valid, and at first glance it seems that both premises are plausible.

There are two main responses by objectivists, one which I find convincing and one which I do not. The response which I find unconvincing is to accept premise 1 and reject premise 2. These thinkers, known as moral naturalists, claim that the real world does in fact have a moral dimension, and moral theories can be studied and tested like any other. I find this response doubtful in that it is still very questionable that moral features are *essential* to explain our beliefs and behaviors, as well as the fact that moral naturalism is just as vulnerable as the Argument from Scientific Inquiry to the other response; rejecting premise 1 and accepting premise 2. This response highlights the key fact that moral claims and scientific claims are two distinct kinds of claim - science deals with positive claims, i.e. claims about what *is* the case. On the other hand, ethics concerns itself with normative claims, claims about what *ought* to be, or how we *should* behave. Moral questions are simply unintelligible in a scientific context; there is no physical test

or experiment that can be done to determine the morality of an action, or determine what actions should be undertaken for moral reasons. Not only that, but a bit more analysis reveals that premise 1 is self-contradicting. Phrased slightly differently, premise 1 states that “A claim is true only if science can verify it.” Yet that claim in itself cannot be verified by science, so by its own logic it should be disregarded. Of course, this whole line of thinking only defends the plausibility of non-scientific claims, and does not prove that objective moral values exist. But I believe there is sufficient doubt that can be cast upon this argument to make it ultimately less persuasive than the other two.

The next argument is the Argument from Motivation. This argument, constructed by David Hume, follows thus:

1. Moral Judgements are able, all by themselves, to motivate those who make them
2. Beliefs are never able, all by themselves, to motivate those who hold them
3. Therefore, moral judgements are not beliefs
4. If moral judgements are not beliefs, then they can't be true
5. Therefore, moral judgements can't be true

This line of reasoning is tricky to grasp at first, but Hume is using the same distinction we touched upon during the Argument from Scientific Inquiry - the is/ought distinction. Hume actually first developed this distinction, but rather than use it to establish two different classes of truth, used it to prove that moral judgements are fundamentally emotive, and thus unlike beliefs cannot be true or false. For the same reason an expression of personal preference in regards to something doesn't actually make any claim about the thing itself, so too is it the case with moral

claims. Like the first argument, there are two main responses to this one; reject premise 1 and accept premise 2, or reject 2 and accept 1. The first response in this case is to say that moral judgements are in fact beliefs, as well as agree that beliefs do not motivate us to act in and of themselves. This seems doubtful at first, but we can conceive of examples in which a person may sincerely hold a moral belief and yet be unmoved, such as the fact that many people believe it is inarguably a great good to donate to charity, yet will walk right by a donation bin without a second thought. The second response is to maintain the beliefs are in fact able to motivate action, depending on the belief. Sure, believing in the Pythagorean theorem produces no motivation in a person, but *evaluative beliefs* do. People believe in right and wrong, good and bad, etc. and it is certainly plausible that these kinds of beliefs can motivate a person to take action. On my part I find both of these responses plausible, but I think this argument introduces many hard questions about the nature of moral motivation and the formation of our ethical judgements.

The final argument is the Argument from Categorical Reasons. When people think of moral duties, it is commonly assumed that said duties come with excellent, universal reasons to obey them. This argument calls that assumption into question, stating:

1. If there are objective moral duties, then there are categorical reasons to obey them
2. There are no categorical reasons
3. Therefore, there are no objective moral duties

At first glance, this argument appears very strong. It is logically airtight, and both premises seem very plausible. In fact, I believe there is no way moral objectivists can get around this argument unscathed. The first response to this argument, rejecting premise 1 and accepting premise 2, must

sacrifice the strength and universality of morality as a whole by admitting that any objective moral duties do not inherently possess excellent reasons to obey them in the first place. I believe, however, the second response takes fewer losses than the first; though it may seem quite doubtful at first that moral duties possess reasons for obeying them that are compelling even if I do not personally benefit from them or desire them, there are cases in which it seems that is the case - for example, if a person is walking by and sees an oblivious stranger is about to be struck by a car, it seems to be the case that said person has reason to call out the stranger and alert them of the danger even if that person does not care about the stranger or desire recognition for helping them. Outside of cases like this, however, moral objectivists still have their work cut out for them to justify the presence of categorical reasons in less extreme cases.

For my part, I tentatively maintain that morality is objective. Many assumptions I once had have been shaken by the arguments presented here, and there is still much more to analyze and debate. But ultimately, I believe the responses highlighted to each argument provide enough space to hold that morality can be truth-apt, need not worry about the march of science, and can plausibly possess categorical reasons to support its duties. I am still very open minded about questions such as these, and I am more than willing to have my mind changed as I continue to study the many arguments surrounding the objectivity of morality.