With Apologies to the Flat Earth Society and Other Subjectivists: A Foundational Response to Whether Truth, like Beauty, Is in the Eye of the Beholder
Author(s): Charles Garofalo and Dean Geuras
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Charles Garofalo
Southwest Texas State University
and
Dean Geuras
Southwest Texas State University

WITH APOLOGIES TO THE FLAT EARTH SOCIETY AND OTHER SUBJECTIVISTS: A FOUNDATIONAL RESPONSE TO WHETHER TRUTH, LIKE BEAUTY, IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

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INTRODUCTION

We thank our colleagues for their rejoinders, and we thank *AT&P* for the opportunity to respond in this forum. As we all presumably agree, lively exchanges, conducted in good faith, cannot but help contribute to the health of our common enterprise. That is why we found it especially ironic that our colleagues, who claim to be inter-subjective, other-regarding, and for the Other, resorted to ad hominem attacks and epithets to characterize us and our position. On the other hand, we are aware that irony is embraced as central to postmodernism. Therefore, the employment of terms like arrogant, authoritarian, condescending, disingenuous, dismissive, ethnocentric, intrusive, and totalitarian may simply have been emblematic of the culture of spin, not to be taken seriously but used merely for public consumption and manipulation.

At the same time, however, we are, frankly, bemused by the threat that our position apparently represents to at least some members of the Public Administration Theory Network. The recent Richmond conference, as well as these pages, have made it clear that the ideological canopy covering the entrance to PAT-Net exclaims: "Objectivists, use the rear door!" Although we have met members who tend to agree with us, and those who are gracious while disagreeing, we have been impressed by the intellectual coziness or political correctness that pervades PAT-Net and that, perhaps, has led to a kind of paradigmatic paralysis. While we certainly do not make any claims to have engendered a paradigm shift in normative public administration theory, the general reactions to our modest effort have been striking nonetheless, inducing us to wonder if they are, in fact, the postmodern projections of a self-appointed elite painfully aware that it is sinking in moral and philosophical quicksand. Whatever the case may be, we are grateful for being excluded as shills of the religious right and for the offers to continue the conversation.

Lastly, we feel obligated to defend others whom our critics have offended. In particular, Kouzmin and Leivesley may consider apologizing to Robert Denhardt. They state that we use the term, "subjectivism" pejoratively. However, we borrowed that usage from Denhardt, who seems to favor the position that he calls subjectivist[1]. If our use is pejorative, his must be, also. Harmon might offer his own apology to Fox and Miller. Harmon assumes that our use of the term "arbitrary" is a rhetorical trick intended to prejudice the reader against subjectivism. But Fox and Miller also use that term, as quoted in our article, to describe postmodern decisions. Under Harmon's assumptions, Fox and Miller must be using rhetorical tricks as well. Or perhaps Kouzmin, Leivesley, and Harmon believe that the offending terms are perfectly acceptable when used by others but bear sinister implication only when used by us. But now on to more serious matters.

KOUZMIN AND LEIVESLEY

Kouzmin and Leivesley's rejoinder strikes us as a remarkable projection, paralleling the caricature of an objectivist (Kantian) as an austere, pinched pedant, moralizing from an armchair or lectern, devoid of feeling, aloof from live human beings. Moreover, they do precisely what they accuse us of doing: on the one hand, they argue that we ask too much of subjectivist/objectivist social theories, while on the other, they fault us for not providing "a reflexively new and rigorous approach to the opportunities for a public administration ethic in a globalizing, economizing world." Even a cursory reading

of our article would make it clear that our purpose was quite different and far more limited, namely, to examine objectivism and subjectivism in relation to normative public administration theory.

We are also intrigued by the intensity of their response, particularly since they found our analysis to be merely "a banal pastiche of highly selected examples from original, in the main philosophic, thinkers and secondary comments on them, very thinly interlaced with trite connective comments." What if Kouzmin and Leivesley had taken us seriously? Would apoplexy or, worse, have been the result? More puzzling and disappointing, still, is their description of our work as a belated intrusion into the world of public administration and politics. We were unaware of any particular pedigree required for participation in PAT-Net. Most discouraging of all, however, is their accusation that we are implicated in an American academic crusade "to silence 'subjectivism' and 'activism', all in the name of ethics." In our view, apart from its delusional quality, libel has no place in genuine intellectual discourse.

FOX AND MILLER

We apologize for appearing to slight or dismiss Fox and Miller's argument. As a matter of fact, we took their discussion of postmodernism very seriously and were, therefore, surprised to find no comments in their rejoinder directly addressing our concerns. Like Harmon, they reprove us for failing to distinguish among subjectivists. They note that their position is "an admixture of situation-regarding perception and intentionality, face-to-face and group constructions of reality solidified into habitual comportments, recursive practices and then institutional proclivities." Yet, after penetrating their turgid verbiage as best we could, we, nevertheless, must pose two essential questions: 1) What is the ethical basis of this admixture? 2) If not subjectivists, what should they be called?

As to their liar's paradox, denigration of logic, and sarcasm toward concern about self-contradiction, Fox and Miller's stance is truly startling. To label logical reasoning as "shackling, fettering and claustrophobic" and to transmogrify it into a childish tit-for-tat game is grotesque. To separate "heroic public performances," however defined, from reasoning or to suggest that we are incapable of entertaining the notion of ethics as a work in progress is absurd. And to imply that we would require Schindler to be a logician before affirming the risks he took is contemptible. Lastly, Fox and Miller have yet to explain the power of the so-called postmodern condition or why it cannot be resisted. Foundationalism, they tell us, is nothing more than nostalgia. The "questioning lilt" at the end of genXers' statements reflects, not the typical uncertainty of youth but, rather, the postmodern juggernaut. Our culture is in the control of the spin doctors, and there is nothing anyone can or, presumably, should do about it. If this is the message they send to their students, then Dick Morris is truly a visionary.

HARMON

In his lengthy rejoinder, Harmon says that our position mirrors mainstream opinion in academic public administration and that PAT-Net is intellectually estranged from the majority. Without suggesting in any way that the majority is correct simply because it is the majority, we do wonder why that is the case. Is the majority simply benighted? Has the minority somehow discovered (made?) the truth, if we may use that term, but been reticent about its discovery or creation? Or is there some other explanation for the alleged disjunction between public administration theory and theorists and the rest of public administration? Rather than being merely frivolous or provocative, these questions, in our estimation, must be addressed if a serious and substantive dialogue about the issues in these pages is to take place. We hope, however, to avoid the error of ascribing more force to his arguments than he, himself, intended. He evidently does not consider his arguments conclusive. At the end of his essay, he asks other PAT-Net members for "amendments and corrections" to his arguments. Clearly, he would not have made such a request if he had considered his arguments compelling on their own merits. Nevertheless, we believe that we have ample room for disagreement, because we consider his arguments to be weaker even than he suggests in his closing comments.

Our responses will be offered without concern for sequence. We number them so as not to confuse them with each other.

1. We cannot fathom why Harmon thinks that our advocacy of reason as a major component of morality is equivalent to the elevation of philosophy to a position of privilege. On the contrary, we take an instrumental view of philosophy, believing it to be valuable only to the extent that it provides something useful to human beings struggling and stumbling through life.

By no means, do we ascribe supreme or even superior wisdom and authority to either philosophy, in general, or to any single philosopher, in particular, including Kant. To the extent, however, that philosophers have anything to say to us, we maintain that their advice or guidance is entirely appropriate. No one is required to accept it. Moreover, in terms of undeserved privilege, we might wonder about the privileged position of PAT-Net members whose apparent anti-elitism appears to contain an elitism of its own. After all, if the commonsensical view of morality is objective, then where do public administration theorists find license to claim it is misguided?

2. We apologize if we did not make our position sufficiently clear in our original essay, but we seem to have left Harmon under a misunderstanding that pervades his reply. That misunderstanding appears to constitute the main point of his Introduction and of his section concerning The Pseudo-Problem of Ethical Relativism. In several places, he suggests that we expect relativists to support nefarious or questionable behavior. For example, he asks if we can find an example of a tyrant who was a relativist. He also suggests that we fear the decay of the political system if relativists should ever be in complete control. However, we have no expectation that people who are relativists will all think and behave as the relativist, Thrasymachus, in Plato's Republic or as a Nietzschian member of the Third Reich. We argue only that relativists have precluded any good reasons by means of which good and bad behavior can be distinguished and on the grounds of which one form of behavior should be preferred to another. Our concern is with the lack of adequate foundations for moral judgments rather than with the likelihood that relativists will behave badly. We suspect that most relativists will make specific moral judgments similar to our own, but we argue that, on their own terms, they cannot justify those judgments.

Our point can be illustrated by comparing the following distinct statements: (1) Relativists cannot justify the claim that Mother Teresa is morally better than Hitler; (2) Relativists believe that Mother Teresa is not morally better than Hitler. We assert only (1), but Harmon supposes that we assert (2).

We assume that relativists make many judgments with which we strongly agree, e.g., that racism is wrong, that people are born with equal rights, that murder is wrong. However, the relativist can give no reason why the opposite claims are not equally valid. For the relativist, such moral judgments are akin to preferences in taste, for which rational argument and empirical evidence are neither useful nor relevant. Just as there is no good reason why one should prefer
the flavor of chocolate to that of raspberry, the relativist cannot, with consistency, give good reasons to prefer racial equality to racism. It is of no avail to cite, as examples, many relativists who do give good reasons for moral preferences. We argue that their giving of such reasons, as strong as they may be, is inconsistent with relativism. By analogy, the mere fact that some Marxists may believe in the free market does not establish that Marxism is consistent with belief in the free market. People often adopt mutually exclusive positions without realizing their inconsistency.

Harmon, himself, appears to adopt such inconsistent thinking. He maintains that he gives no moral advice. Yet he advises us that virtue can become a vice if it is taken to excess, and, most ironically he claims that "public administration theorists should stop giving moral advice" (our emphasis) These contradictions may be more than merely oversights. They raise the important question of whether subjectivism, as Harmon understands it, is inevitably self-contradictory.

3. Harmon claims, as do Kouzmin and Leivesley, as well as Fox and Miller, that we ignore the distinction between individualized subjectivism, which they reject, and subjectivism in an intersubjective form, which they favor. However, they give no reason why one form of subjectivism is better than the other. Indeed, it is our contention that they cannot establish the superiority of

one over the other except as a matter of sheer preference. If they were to appeal to reason or any other objective source to justify such a preference, they would engage in objective analysis[2].

4. Harmon offers three objections that he considers "crippling" to our view: that truth is made rather than found, that the faculty of reason violates the "impulse toward morality," and that morality is "incurably aporetic." However, we find no clear line of argument for any of the three supposedly crippling objections. Harmon only offers quotations taken out of context and broad observations without clear support.

For example, in arguing that truth is made rather than found, he quotes Richard Rorty's claim that "where there are no sentences, there is no truth." But nothing in the quoted passage establishes that conclusion. It establishes only that the concept of truth, as applied to statements, has a linguistic aspect. But the existence of that linguistic aspect does not preclude an additional nonlinguistic aspect that renders the statements true. Furthermore, nothing in the quoted passage precludes the existence of nonlinguistic facts. Harmon gives no reply, in behalf of Rorty, to some fairly obvious questions: Was nothing true before human beings existed? Did nothing exist before human beings began to use language? Was the earth flat and larger than the sun three thousand years ago when people said so? Was slavery morally acceptable in days when people said so?

To buttress his position, Harmon again cites Rorty: "Truth cannot be out there--cannot exist independently of the human mind . . .," and that truth is what we make it to be, according to convention or considerations of practicality. Apart from the irony, especially for a subjectivist, of locating the source of truth in the human mind, we are certain that Harmon would object to any suggestion that convention and practical considerations were correct and should have prevailed in cultures such as the American segregationist south or pre-Mandela South Africa.

In fairness to Rorty, his position is much more intricate, subtle, and sophisticated than the short quotation can capture. But so, also, are the positions of the many critics of his controversial view. Harmon merely quotes a portion of Rorty's work, ignores his critics, and assumes that Rorty has the last, best word on the matter. Harmon's problem here is that he is trying to analyze a very complex problem in three typed pages.

Similar problems attend his discussions of the moral impulse and the aporetic quality of morality. He accepts uncritically Zygmunt Bauman's opinion that, in Harmon's words, "morality is essentially a sentiment and, as such, neither admits nor requires justification in terms of anything outside of itself." We wonder why morality, as a sentiment according to Bauman, needs no justification. Is its exemption based on its fundamental nature? Moreover, Bauman's suggestion that morality cannot be proved to be universal because it is limited by accident, socialization or deprivation in no way vitiates the objective ethical position. If we believe that moral potential is universal, then we cannot argue that moral capacity is absent in some and present in others. Otherwise, we would be claiming the existence of an invidious moral hierarchy. Finally, we are, frankly, baffled by the contention that the notion of universal morality somehow silences the moral impulse. If the moral impulse is as natural and fundamental as Harmon seems to believe, then it shares a universality with reason that cannot be suppressed, let alone silenced. It also would mean, furthermore, that the moral impulse, like reason, is objective.

In Harmon's discussion of the aporetic quality of morality, he again seems to have misunderstood our position. We do not claim that authoritative relationships and other political issues can be settled only by appeals to universal principles. What we do claim is that universal or objective principles have a foundational and theoretical role in the adjudication of these issues, and that pointing to "pragmatic, situational considerations" as decisive is superficial, at best, and, perhaps, even misguided. Schindler did not have to pass Philosophy 101 to be moral.

5. In his discussion of the process alternative, Harmon posits that we are rigid, dichotomous thinkers unable to confront the tensions of public administration, in particular, and social life, in general. We are frightened by the "arbitrary" and tried to trick our readers into supporting us through rhetoric and caricature. The logic or fairness of this description eludes us. We do not side with Finer in the administrative discretion debate. We,

too, regard the moral self as social; and we are encouraged by the rejection of radically individualized subjectivism. We prize human relationships over mindless regulation, and we value discourse. The question, however, to which we must return still looms: What is the ethical basis of our decisions and actions in this complex world of competing interests, obligations, and values? As Selznick says in *The Moral Commonwealth* (1992): "Moral worth depends on a theory of the good, which must draw on general knowledge of human needs, dispositions, possibilities, and limits" (p. 98).

6. Harmon presents his final argument as a supposed summary of our position. He claims that our position "reduces to little more than the statement, "You subjectivists must be wrong because you don't agree with what we already know to be true and which we, therefore, refuse to examine critically." However, he misrepresents our argument. We argue that subjectivism cannot establish that anything is true, let alone what we claim to be true. In his final footnote Harmon asserts that "a positive claim that truth exists...is, for reasons like Rorty's simply conceptually incoherent." The position thus expressed precludes any truth whatsoever.

We do believe that some things are true. Perhaps that belief will enable us to clearly differentiate our position from Harmon's. In thus differentiating them, we will allow the impartial reader to choose the position that he or she considers better. Among the many things that we believe to be true are the following: The earth exists and has existed before human beings did; the sun is larger than the earth and was larger than the earth three thousand years ago, when people commonly believed otherwise; slavery is morally wrong and was morally wrong three thousand years ago, when people believed that slavery was acceptable; the same stone cannot be completely quartz and completely gold at the same time. We further believe that those statements are true even if no one utters them, writes them, verbally expresses them in any way, believes them, or even thinks about them. We believe that the first two would be true even if the universe were identical to its current state in every way except in that no human beings ever existed.

Harmon may reply that, as he says earlier, "the adjective 'true' is generally acceptable, but only if it is used to describe relatively uncontroversial statements and if one does not attribute to such descriptions any philosophical significance." But why can "true," the adjective, be used to describe alleged facts while using the nouns "truth," or "truths" to describe them is incoherent? The considerations that led him to conclude that there is no truth serve equally well to establish that nothing can be true. Furthermore, he gives no reason why noncontroversial statements can be true while controversial ones cannot, and he gives no hint of a criterion by which even noncontroversial claims can be rendered true. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to present such a criterion on subjective grounds.

But he should not be too quick either to declare our handful of statements, which we consider true, to be noncontroversial. As we have previously remarked, his claim that human beings create truth rather than discover it would render, at least controversial, the statements, "The earth exists and has existed before human beings did; the sun is larger than the earth and was larger than the earth three thousand years ago, when people commonly believed otherwise; slavery is morally wrong and was morally wrong three thousand years ago, when people believed that slavery was acceptable." He even would bring into question the statement, "The same stone cannot be completely quartz and completely gold at the same time": in the body of his reply, he questioned the law of noncontradiction.

Harmon cannot avoid these difficulties by retreating to the position that he is only denying truth in the nominal form while accepting the fact that some things are true-true being used here as an adjective. If he adopts that position, and therefore accepts the truth of the above statements as we do, he relinquishes the substance of his subjectivism. He would have to give up the claim that truth is only intersubjective, because he would admit that things could be true, even if no one or group of intersubjective thinkers believed them or even existed.

7. We reject the claim that intersubjectivity determines truth. We find subjectivism in its intersubjective form to be made of no more substantial straw than subjectivism in its individual form. We believe that it is possible to

arrive at true beliefs without reaching intersubjective agreement about them with anyone. We again offer numerous claims that we consider true but that Harmon could not accept. We once again do this to draw the line clearly between our position and Harmon's, so that the impartial reader can choose the position that he or she considers stronger.

We believe that a person, living in an isolated desert, with no one within miles, can determine that his house is on fire without needing other people with whom to engage in intersubjective discourse on the matter. We also believe that he could not extinguish the fire by telephoning other people and telling them that no fire exists. We believe, further, that if he had entered a coma before the fire started and, without his awareness or any one else's, the fire destroyed the house and immolated him, he and his house would have been destroyed even if no one ever should learn of the incident. We believe that if, years later, someone should discover the remains, infer that the fire was an act of suicide, and convince everyone in the world, through intersubjective dialogue, that the death was a suicide, the death would not thereby be a suicide.

We believe that similar considerations apply to more abstract issues, such as those in science, religion and ethics. We believe that the proposition "A planet, whose mass is between that of Earth and Venus, revolves around Polaris," is either true or false. We believe that if the proposition is true, it is true regardless of whether any person or group of people, intersubjectively believe it or not. We believe that if that proposition is false, it is false regardless of whether any person or group of people, intersubjectively believe it or not. We believe that the truth or falsity of the proposition does not depend upon any intersubjective agreement among human beings. We also believe that if everyone believed in heaven, it would not necessarily mean that heaven exists. We also believe that slavery is wrong and would be wrong even if all of the spin doctors, radio personalities, and everyone else in the world, including the slaves themselves, considered slavery to be right.

We also believe some controversial things. We believe that capital punishment is wrong. We believe that it would still be wrong even if everyone else in the world considered it right. We also believe that we may be wrong in our belief. But if we are wrong, we are not wrong merely because others disagree with us but because we have mistaken beliefs about the legitimate power of government and about the efficacy of capital punishment.

In short, we believe that there are facts whose existence does not depend upon the beliefs of any individual or intersubjective group. Harmon does not believe as we do, and therein lies the difference that the reader must take into account. But what if the mass of humanity agrees, intersubjectively, with us? Must Harmon, therefore, agree on the basis of our intersubjective conviction? Must Harmon always base his beliefs upon a group, or should he not make up his own mind on the basis of what seems to him and him alone to be-can we say it?-true.

We do not deny the value of consulting others in forming one's own beliefs and in discovering truth. Indeed, the wisdom and opinions of others are invaluable, but they do not define truth merely by their consensus, intersubjective or otherwise. The value that those opinions possess derives not from the mere fact that people hold them but from their inherent rationale and evidence.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The discussion of the moral impulse moves us to the center of the objectivist-subjectivist debate because it concerns fundamental beliefs about human nature and moral development. Harmon contends that reason has no role in the attainment of moral ends and that "All that we can rely upon is the evidence of our personal experience and, one hopes, a relatively common understanding of what we mean by 'moral'." While we are heartened by his hope for common ground, we must demur from his claim that our personal experience and a shared meaning of moral constitute the sum total of our resources in this regard. The moral impulse or moral sense, in James Q. Wilson's words, is clearly an important element in human growth and maturation[3]. Yet, again, we must ask why reason must be separated from affect or emotion, and whether there is an ethical basis for the common understanding of "moral" hoped for by Harmon. Therefore, we would recommend that interested public administration theorists, preferably on a collaborative basis, consider a research agenda organized around the investigation of the nexus between objectivism and subjectivism, as well as between deontology and teleology, and the significance of these perspectives and relationships for administrative theory and practice.

In our paper prepared for the Richmond conference, we argued that, based on our own research,

subjectivism or relativism, as distinct from compromise and expediency, plays little or no role in administrative practice. We suggested that the real question for practice concerns the two main components of objective ethical theory: deontology and teleology. We maintained that, in reality, deontology and teleology constitute a unity in which principle and purpose are inseparable. And we noted the synthesis in practice, discussed by a number of public administration scholars, between deontology and teleology. Here, then, we offer this research initiative in the broader objectivist-subjectivist context, and we invite our colleagues to participate.

NOTES

[1] Robert Denhardt refers to himself as a subjectivist in his essay, "Public administration theory: The state of the discipline," (1990) in Naomi Lynn & Aaron Wildavsky,(Eds.) *Public Administration: The State of the Discipline* (pp. 43-72), Chatham House, N.J.: Chatham House.

[2] Philip Selznick, *The Moral Commonwealth* (1992) Berkeley: University of California Press, locates the nature, sources, and processes of morality in the individual, in institutions, and in the community.

[3] See James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (1993) New York: The Free Press, for a discussion of what he calls our "natural moral sense."