

CHAPTER 21

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Eleven Arguments Against Moral Objectivity

Ethical objectivism is the view that there are some objective moral standards. Given my understanding of objectivity, this amounts to the view that these standards apply to everyone, even if people don't believe that they do, and even if obeying them fails to satisfy a person's desires. Moral claims are objectively true whenever they accurately tell us what these moral standards are, or tell us about what these standards require or allow us to do.

Moral skepticism, as I have defined it here, is the view that ethical objectivism is false, and thus that there are no objective moral rules and no objective moral truths. Unsurprisingly, the pros and cons of ethical objectivism and moral skepticism are mirror images of one another. As with any two contradictory positions, a big reason to favor one side is unhappiness with the other. Perhaps the biggest reason that so many people are moral skeptics is a suspicion that ethics just cannot be objective.

Naturally, objectivists are happy to return the favor, and usually defend their own position by raising their serious doubts about moral skepticism. We've considered the leading skeptical views in the last two chapters, and have noted some of the difficulties they face. If these worries cannot be solved, and if objectivism can be defended against criticisms, then objectivism wins by default. Relativism, nihilism, and objectivism are the three options when it comes to the status of ethics. If two of these can be defeated, then the one left standing must be the correct account.

Objectivists, of course, believe that they'll be the ones standing at the end of the day. Whether they are right about that depends on their ability

to handle the many criticisms that have been sent their way. It's now time to focus on these criticisms, to see whether objectivism can respond to them in a satisfying way.

There are many sources of doubt. As we'll see, some of the most popular arguments are also the least plausible. But others represent deep challenges. With the most serious of the objections, it is impossible to offer a final verdict in just a page or two, which is all I will allow myself here. My goal in this chapter is simply to show that, despite widespread doubts about ethical objectivism, none of the most popular skeptical arguments is obviously correct, and some, indeed, are pretty plainly unacceptable. And to those that represent more significant challenges, there are potentially promising replies that objectivists can offer.

Let's consider some of the least plausible arguments first, before turning to critiques of objectivism that are more difficult to handle.

1. Objectivity Requires Absolutism

Many people claim that if morality were objective, then moral rules would have to be absolute. And since they aren't, morality isn't objective after all.

The *Argument from Absolutism* summarizes this line of thought:

1. If moral claims are objectively true, then moral rules are absolute.
2. No moral rule is absolute.
3. Therefore, moral claims are not objectively true.

An absolute moral rule is one that is always wrong to break—no exceptions.

I don't know if there are any absolute moral rules.¹ If there are, good candidates would include the prohibition on rape and on deliberately killing innocent people. Luckily we don't have to settle this issue here, because even if premise 2 is true, and there are no absolute moral rules, premise 1 is false.

That first premise tells us that when it comes to morality, being objective and being absolute go hand in hand. But that isn't so. The moral rule that forbids us from lying is probably not absolute; in some cases, morality would probably allow us to lie. For all we know, though, that rule could be objective. Ross, for instance, thought that the fundamental moral rules are objective.² But he denied that they are absolute. Likewise, if God exists,

1. See chapter 15 for a much more detailed discussion of this question.

2. See chapter 16 for a presentation of Ross's views.

and creates or reveals the moral law, then morality would be objective. But God might allow us to lie in certain circumstances, and might also permit us (in unusual cases) to break other moral rules. There is nothing in the very idea of an objective morality that requires moral rules to be absolute.

There is a general reason for this. The objectivity of moral rules has to do with their *status*: with whether they are correct independently of our opinion of them. The absoluteness of moral rules has to do with their *stringency*: with whether it is ever okay to break them. There is no direct connection between matters of status and stringency. This is clear when it comes to natural laws. Various biological and psychological laws admit of exceptions, and so are not absolute, even though they are objective.

This does not of course show that moral rules are objective. But it does support the view that even if they are, they do not have to be absolute. So premise 1 is false. And since it is, this argument does not threaten ethical objectivism.

2. All Truth Is Subjective

A popular thought in some circles is that claims can be true only relative to individual perspectives. On this line, there are no objective truths at all. Forget about morality for a moment—claims in logic, chemistry, or history can never be objectively true, either. So it's no surprise that objective morality is an illusion. The *Argument Against Objective Truths* couldn't be simpler:

1. There are no objective truths.
2. Therefore, there are no objective moral truths.

The first thing to note about this argument is that, if it works, there is no special problem for morality. Most moral skeptics are trying to show that morality is in some ways second-rate, that it fares poorly in contrast to more precise disciplines such as mathematics and physics. By embracing a global kind of skepticism, this argument abandons that strategy.

The problem with this argument is its premise.³ Premise 1 is either true or false. If it is false, then the argument crumbles right away. So suppose that it is true. But this is impossible. The premise *cannot* be true. If it

3. Unlike almost all of the other arguments we've seen in this book, this one has only a single premise: 1. But an argument's having just one premise is not by itself any problem. Indeed, the logic of this argument is perfect. If 1 is true, then 2 must be true.

were, then there would be at least one objective truth—premise 1. And if there is at least one objective truth, then premise 1 is false! No matter how we look at it, then, this premise is false.

Since that is so, it follows directly that there are at least some objective truths. Perhaps none of them is a moral one. But we can't rely on this argument to support that skepticism.

3. Equal Rights Imply Equal Plausibility

I have heard countless moral disputes end on this conciliatory note: “Well, everyone has a right to their opinion. You have your view, and I have mine. Maybe we’re both right.”

This familiar refrain is sometimes taken one step further in the following way: since everyone has a right to a moral opinion, no one’s moral views are any better than anyone else’s. And if everyone’s moral opinions are on par with one another’s, then there is no objective moral truth.

These thoughts can be combined into an *Argument from Equal Rights*:

1. If everyone has an equal right to an opinion, then all opinions are equally plausible.
2. Everyone has an equal right to his or her moral opinions.
3. Therefore, all moral opinions are equally plausible.
4. If all moral opinions are equally plausible, then ethical objectivism is false.
5. Therefore, ethical objectivism is false.

The fourth premise is true. No question about it. If moral standards are objectively correct, then some people’s views are going to be very far from the mark, and others are going to be right on target.

I also believe that the second premise is true. Everyone has a moral right to freedom of conscience. Each person is morally entitled to decide for herself what to believe, and not to be brainwashed into thinking what others want her to think.

If I am wrong about that, then so much the worse for the argument, since it obviously relies on the truth of premise 2. But the argument is a failure even if 2 is true, for premise 1 is false.

From the claim that we each have a right to our opinions, nothing at all follows about their plausibility. I was once walking through a forest with a friend who knows a lot about trees. (I don’t.) I suggested that the one I was looking at was an ash. It wasn’t. He knew it was a larch. Our

views were not equally plausible, even though I had as much a right to my opinion as he did his.

There are countless examples of cases in which people have an equal right to an opinion—that is, an equal right not to be forced to change their mind—even though their views are mistaken. Some historical claims are true and others false, even though we each have an equal right to our historical opinions. The same thing can be said of our opinions concerning economics, trigonometry, basketball strategy, or beer brewing. Most people know more than I do about each of these things, and so my views on these subjects are far less plausible than theirs. And yet my right to hold the views I do is just as strong as anyone else's.

The first premise of the argument confuses two entirely separate matters: whether a person has a right to an opinion, and whether that opinion has any merit. This confusion undermines premise 1, and with it, the argument itself.

4. Moral Objectivity Supports Dogmatism

Pick any blowhard, tyrant, or political fanatic, and there is one thing they all share. They are all ethical objectivists. These are the folks who believe in moral truth with a capital *T*. Luckily for them, they have managed to discover that Truth. All they are trying to do is to let you in on some of it. This may take some shouting, perhaps some coercion, maybe even some killing, but Truth can be pretty demanding.

This thoroughly unpleasant picture yields the following *Argument from Dogmatism*:

1. If there are objective moral standards, then this makes **dogmatism** acceptable.
2. Dogmatism is unacceptable.
3. Therefore, there are no objective moral standards.

Dogmatism is the character trait of being closed-minded and unreasonably confident in one's own opinions. Dogmatism is a vice, and if a theory recommends that we always close our minds to competing ideas, then that theory is very implausible. So premise 2 looks good. But ethical objectivism does not encourage a dogmatic attitude. The first premise of this argument is false.

By itself, the claim that there are objective moral standards is perfectly neutral about how broad-minded we should be. Ethical objectivism

is a view about the status of moral claims. It does not tell us what is and is not morally acceptable. All it says is that the correct moral code, *whatever it happens to be*, is objectively true.

But we can say more. If moral truth is not of our own making, then it will not always be easy to discover. And that fact should encourage us to be humble, rather than arrogant and closed-minded. The proper outlook of astronomers and geologists and chemists is that of wonder, a recognition of one's intellectual limitations, and an appreciation that no matter how smart you are, you'll never know the entire truth about your subject matter. These are appropriate attitudes precisely because there are objective truths in these subjects. Scientists do not get to have the final word about the nature of reality. They might always be corrected by a later generation of thinkers.

If ethics, too, is a subject whose truths are objective, then we should also be open-minded about moral matters. It's perfectly consistent to say that the answers to some questions are objectively true, even though you're not sure what those answers are. If, in ethics, our say-so doesn't make it so, then we should always be open to correction.

It is true that the worst fanatics among us are always ethical objectivists. But that is not a strike against the theory. Rather, it is a strike against the individuals who misapply it.

Ethical objectivism is not committed to saying that moral wisdom is easy to get. In fact, objectivism makes such wisdom harder to come by than its competitors do, precisely because objectivism denies that individuals or societies get to have the final word about what is right and wrong. And so objectivism does not license dogmatism. Thus the first premise of this argument is mistaken. The argument is therefore unsound.

5. Moral Objectivity Supports Intolerance

A very popular reason for rejecting ethical objectivism is a concern for tolerance. People in open societies rightly value tolerance, but many think that tolerance would be threatened if moral standards were objectively correct. If some moral codes are better than others, then what's to stop those with the upper hand from lording it over those who embrace a faulty code of conduct?

Indeed, these critics say that the best way to support tolerance is to assume that all moral views are as good as any other. If that were so, then no one would be in a position to suppress the lifestyles of those who march

to the beat of a different drummer. We would have to agree to disagree, since no one's moral outlook would be better than anyone else's. That is what is needed to support tolerance.

We can trace this line of thinking in the *Argument from Tolerance*:

1. Tolerance is valuable only if the moral views of different people are equally plausible.
2. If ethical objectivism is true, then the moral views of different people are not equally plausible.
3. Therefore, if ethical objectivism is true, then tolerance is not valuable.

That second premise is true. Ethical objectivism rejects the idea of moral equivalence. Some moral views are better than others.

But the first premise is false. In fact, ethical objectivism is much better than moral skepticism at supporting tolerance. The basic reason is this: *if all moral views are equivalent, then a tolerant outlook is no better than an intolerant one*. The outlook of a committed bigot would be as plausible as yours or mine.

Indeed, we can easily frame a counterargument that shows why the value of tolerance poses a threat to skepticism, rather than to objectivism:

1. If all moral views are equally plausible, then moral views that support tolerance and those that support repression and intolerance are equally plausible.
2. Moral views that support repression and intolerance are not as plausible as those that support tolerance.
3. Therefore, not all moral views are equally plausible.

The first premise must be correct. And those who value tolerance will want to embrace the second. The conclusion follows directly.

Those who favor tolerance tend to regard its value as universal—good for everyone and every society. This applies especially to areas plagued by intolerance, since tolerance is needed most just where it is least enjoyed. Yet if individuals have the final word on what is morally right, then those who are *fundamentally* intolerant—intolerant at their core, in their deepest beliefs—are making no mistake. The same goes for societies. If social codes, rather than individuals, are the measure of morality, then deeply intolerant societies are no worse than freer ones. Their rejection of tolerance is as plausible as your endorsement of it. That should be little comfort to those who value tolerance.

Those who think of tolerance as very valuable will want to say that tolerance is morally required even for those people and those societies that despise it. Such a view is perfectly compatible with ethical objectivism.

6. Moral Objectivity Cannot Allow for Legitimate Cultural Variation

If there are objective moral standards, then they will apply to everyone, in every society. If, for instance, it is objectively wrong to slaughter people just for fun, then it is wrong to do this everywhere—not just in my society or yours, but everyone's.

While this seems pretty plausible, other cases raise a worry for objectivism. For it does seem that there can be legitimate cultural variation in what is morally required and forbidden. I never offered my prospective in-laws any cattle before I proposed to my wife. And that was morally okay. But had I failed to make such an offer in certain parts of the Sudan, I would have been acting immorally. Feeding one's children from garbage dumps is immoral in my town but morally acceptable in certain Asian slums. Showing up to school or work naked would be thought a terrible sin in many New England communities, but perfectly fine in a nudist colony.

This sort of variation gives rise to a worry that can be expressed in the *Argument from Cultural Differences*:

1. If ethical objectivism is true, then all moral standards apply universally—to everyone, in every society.
2. Some moral standards do not apply universally, but only in certain cultural or social contexts and not in others.
3. Therefore, ethical objectivism is false.

Ethical objectivists will insist that some moral standards—like the one above that prohibits recreational slaughter—do apply universally. But others—like the one prohibiting public nudity—do not. Thus objectivists will reject the first premise of the Argument from Cultural Differences.

Doing so certainly requires explanation. But objectivists can provide it. The core idea is simple: the *basic* moral principles apply to everyone, everywhere. But when we apply these principles to different living situations, they can generate more specific moral advice that can allow for some degree of cultural variation.

For example, it may be that the moral duty to show respect to loved ones is universal. No matter who you are or where you come from, you are morally obligated to show such respect. Fulfilling that duty usually requires also showing respect to the family members of one's beloved. Different societies have developed different ways of doing this; some Sudanese tribes take it as a sign of disrespect if a suitor does not provide a cattle dowry. In our society, we have other ways of conveying such respect.

A natural way to describe this situation is to say that although there is just one basic rule in play here—show respect to others—this rule can generate different moral advice in different circumstances. The rule requiring respect can require men to provide cattle to prospective in-laws in Sudan, even though no such standard governs the behavior of those in the United States. The objectivist explains this moral difference by pointing out that a moral standard that dictates the terms of a dowry is not a basic moral rule. If someone is morally required to provide a dowry in the first place, this must be because of some deeper moral principle that explains why—perhaps, as in our example, by reference to the more general moral rule that counsels us to show respect to loved ones.

The lesson of this example is perfectly general. Customs and traditions can help to shape our specific moral duties. The duties of a Sudanese tribesman will differ to some extent from those of a U.S. citizen. But this difference, and all others that stem from being situated in different cultures or societies, will ultimately be explained by reference to moral principles that apply across the board—to everyone, everywhere. These universal moral rules may well be objectively correct, even if they sometimes support different specific moral duties for those in different cultures or societies.

7. Moral Disagreement Undermines Moral Objectivity

A classic argument against moral objectivity takes its cue from a simple observation: there is a lot more disagreement in ethics than there is in science. And there is a ready explanation for this. Scientists are trying to understand the nature of objective reality, whereas in ethics, there is no objective reality to be discovered. When it comes to morality, we are merely expressing our personal opinions, ones that have been obviously shaped by the time and place in which we've been raised. Different upbringings, different moral outlooks. But scientists the world over can agree on a wide set of truths, no matter their religious or cultural backgrounds.

The *Argument from Disagreement* nicely summarizes this line of thought:

1. If well-informed, open-minded, rational people persistently disagree about some claim, then that claim is not objectively true.
2. Well-informed, open-minded, rational people persistently disagree about all moral claims.
3. Therefore, no moral claim is objectively true.

Perhaps premise 2 is too strong. Maybe there are some moral claims that every smart, rational, open-minded person accepts. But without a lot more investigation, it would be premature to assume that this is so.

What is clearly true is that for any moral claim—even one you find to be just obvious—there will always be someone else who thinks that it is false. But that doesn’t show that premise 2 is true, since such people may not be well informed, or open-minded, or rational.

Indeed, moral disagreement might well be a product of sloppy reasoning, of not having enough facts under our belt, of having a personal stake in the outcome, or of a general prejudice. What if we were able to correct for these sources of error? Imagine people who were absolutely on top of *all* of the details, say, of affirmative action policies, who were free of personal bias and other prejudices, and who were able to reason flawlessly. Perhaps they’d all agree about whether affirmative action is morally acceptable.

Perhaps. But I share the skeptic’s concerns here, and am not sure that even perfectly ideal reasoners would agree about every moral issue. So let’s accept, at least for the moment, that premise 2 is true. What of premise 1?

That premise must be false. There are counterexamples galore. Brilliant physicists disagree about whether the fundamental elements of matter are subatomic strings; eminent archaeologists disagree about how to interpret the remains discovered at ancient sites; the finest philosophers continue to debate whether God exists. And yet there are objective truths in each area. There are objective truths about the fundamental nature of the physical world, about the nature of various prehistoric tribes, about whether there is or isn’t a God. Gaining knowledge of these truths can be hard, and perhaps, in some cases, impossible. But our beliefs on these matters must answer to an objective reality. Our views don’t make physical or archaeological or philosophical claims true; the facts are what they are, independently of what we think of them.

There is another reason to doubt premise 1: this premise is itself the subject of deep disagreement. Really smart people still argue about whether it is true. And so, if such disagreement is enough to undermine objective truth, then the premise, by its own lights, can't be objectively true! And it certainly isn't "relatively" true—true just because I, or my society, believe in it. The premise, then, is false.

So deep disagreement, even among the best minds, is not enough to show that skepticism in an area is correct. As a result, the many disagreements we see in ethics are perfectly compatible with its objectivity.

8. Atheism Undermines Moral Objectivity

Recall (from chapter 5) the famous claim of Ivan Karamazov, one of Dostoevsky's finest creations: if God is dead, then everything is permitted. His guiding thought is that true morality can exist only if God underwrites its authority. Morality is a sham if God does not exist, because the only way morality could rest on solid foundations is by being authored by God.

Some atheists have taken up this line of thinking and have used it to justify moral skepticism. If they are right, and God does not exist, then morality can't possibly be objective. The *Argument from Atheism* expresses this outlook:

1. Morality can be objective only if God exists.
2. God does not exist.
3. Therefore, morality cannot be objective.

I'm going to make things much easier on myself by leaving that second premise alone. If it's false, and God exists, then the argument crumbles. But let's just assume for now that there is no God. Then what?

Well, if premise 1 is true, and objective morality really does depend on God, then moral skepticism is vindicated. Many people think that 1 is true. They reason as follows. Moral laws, like other laws, must have an author. But if the laws are objective, then (by definition) no human being can be their author. So who is? Three guesses.

This reasoning has always been very popular.⁴ But it is mistaken. It rests on this key assumption: *laws require lawmakers*. Suppose this

4. For much more on this line of reasoning, see the extended discussion in chapter 5, pp. 66–70.

assumption is true. It then follows that objective laws need lawmakers, too. But human beings cannot play this role, since objective truths are true independently of human opinion. That leaves only God to do the work.

But if atheism is true, then the crucial assumption is false. Laws would not require lawmakers. Atheists believe that there are objective laws—of logic, physics, genetics, statistics, and so on. And yet if God does not exist, these laws have no author. We discovered these laws. We invented the words to describe the laws. But they are not true because we believe them to be. Their truth is objective, not subjective. If atheists are correct, no one authored such laws.

Thus if atheism is true, objective laws do not require lawmakers. So, for all we know, objective moral laws do not require a lawmaker, either.

Atheists might say, though, that *moral* laws require lawmakers, even though other laws do not. But why single out morality like that? Until atheists can provide an explanation for holding moral laws to a different standard from other objective laws, they are best advised to allow that moral laws do not require an author, either.

The Argument from Atheism is thus unpersuasive. It will obviously do nothing to convince religious believers, since it just assumes (in premise 2) that they are wrong. But even if atheists are correct, and God does not exist, premise 1 is highly doubtful, because its best support is flawed. That support comes from the assumption that laws require lawmakers—an assumption that atheists themselves should not accept.

9. The Absence of Categorical Reasons Undermines Moral Objectivity

Most people think that all moral duties come prepackaged with a special power. They automatically supply people with reasons to obey them. And it doesn't matter what we care about. If it's really your duty to repay that loan or help your aged grandparents, then you've got an excellent reason to do so—even if doing these things fulfills none of your desires.

That's unusual. My reasons for writing this book, using my treadmill, or listening to music all depend on what matters to me. Most reasons are like this. The reasons that come from morality, however, are categorical. They apply to us regardless of what we care about.⁵

5. For detailed discussion of categorical reasons, see chapter 11, pp. 168–169.

Many philosophers cannot see how categorical reasons are possible. Their puzzlement has given rise to a powerful *Argument from Categorical Reasons* against ethical objectivism:

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.

This argument has convinced some very smart philosophers. And they may be right to be convinced. But for those with objectivist leanings, there are two lines of response. Since the argument is logically perfect, objectivists have to reject either the first premise or the second.

Some challenge premise 1. They deny that objective moral duties must supply us with reasons for action. It may be that some people have no reason to do what morality requires of them. Whether there are objective moral standards is one thing; whether they supply us with reasons to obey them is another. The answer to the first question may be yes, even if the answer to the second is a disappointing no. If this line of thinking is right, then we will have to abandon the age-old hope of showing that everyone has reason to be moral.⁶

The second strategy stands by premise 1, but rejects premise 2. On such a view, objective moral duties really do provide categorical reasons—and these reasons exist. There are reasons to behave in certain ways, even if such behavior doesn't benefit us or satisfy any of our desires.

To make this reply a success, we must reject the most popular view of reasons. This view says that you have a reason to do something only if doing it will promote self-interest or get you what you care about.

The best way to criticize this popular view is by example. (Recall the discussion in chapter 8, pp. 114–115.) Suppose that you are hiking along a cliff path and notice a stranger who is absent-mindedly walking from the opposite direction. You see that he's about to take a wrong step and plunge to his death. There is a reason to yell and alert him of the danger. And that reason applies to you even if you don't care a bit about the man or about

6. If this line can be defended, then we also have an adequate reply to error theorists. They claim that moral thinking assumes the existence of categorical reasons, but that no such reasons exist. But if morality does not make that assumption, then it may be in good shape even if there are no categorical reasons.

the pats on the back you'll receive when the story gets out. There is something to be said on behalf of your warning him, something that favors it, that justifies it, that makes it a legitimate thing to do. These are just different ways of saying the same thing: there is an excellent reason for you to save that stranger's life, even if doing so won't make you any better off or get you anything you care about.

In short, those who believe that morality is objective must show either that its duties do not have to supply categorical reasons, or argue that such reasons exist. Many philosophers nowadays are developing these strategies, though just as many others (surprise!) are working to ensure that they do not succeed.

10. Moral Motivation Undermines Moral Objectivity

Ask yourself this question: If you sincerely judge an action to be your duty, aren't you automatically motivated (at least a little bit) to do it? If you think a plan or a policy is a morally good one, aren't you moved to some extent to help it along? If you answered yes, then you share the belief that moral judgments are motivational by their very nature. Their essence is to move people to act.

It's not just a coincidence or some kind of minor miracle that moral judgments so reliably move us to act. They have this power because, at their core, what they do is express the very things that cause us to act—our desires, cares, commitments, and emotions. When we judge an action wrong, we are expressing our distaste or hatred of it, our desire that it not be done, our concern for those who might be harmed by it. Our moral judgments express our feelings, and our feelings are our basic motivations. That is why our moral judgments are so easily able to get us to act.

Contrast this picture with another one. Beliefs, unlike moral judgments, are not really in the business of getting us to act in certain ways. They are focused on stating the facts, on reporting the truth, on describing reality. If I believe that there is a computer monitor in front of me, two cats nearby, and an Oriental rug underfoot, I am not moved to act in any way at all. If I want to use the Internet, or pet my cats, or vacuum the carpet, then these beliefs will help to direct my actions. But the key here is that beliefs can do this only by attaching themselves to my desires. If I didn't want to use the Internet, pet my cats, or vacuum my rug, then none of these beliefs would have helped at all in guiding my actions.

This contrast between moral judgment, on the one hand, and belief, on the other, inspired David Hume to construct the following *Motivational Argument*. Generations of moral skeptics have found it compelling:

1. Moral judgments 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 judgments are not beliefs.
4. If moral judgments are not beliefs, then they can't be true.
5. Therefore, moral judgments can't be true.

Have a look at that conclusion. Unlike the previous ten arguments, this one doesn't say explicitly that ethical objectivism is false. But that will be cold comfort to the objectivist. If the conclusion of this argument is correct, then moral judgments can't be true. And if they can't be true, then they can't be objectively true. And if they can't be objectively true, then ethical objectivism is false.

Of the three premises in this argument, number 4 is pretty secure. If moral judgments are not beliefs, then they are expressions of plans, orders, commitments, desires, or emotions. Such expressions are not true or false.⁷ Suppose that I say that slavery is evil. And suppose that I am not thereby stating a belief, but am instead expressing my emotions or commitments. What I'm really saying is "Don't enslave people!" or "Slavery—grrrr." These statements aren't true (or false). So if moral judgments are not beliefs, then they can't be true.

That leaves only two ways for objectivists to fight back against this argument. They can try to undermine the first premise, or the second. Unsurprisingly, objectivists have done both.

Some objectivists criticize 1 while accepting 2. They say that moral judgments are beliefs; beliefs cannot motivate all by themselves; therefore moral judgments cannot motivate all by themselves. Moral judgments, like all beliefs, need a supplemental desire in order to move people to action.

These objectivists begin with an assumption: it's possible that sincere moral judgments leave us entirely cold.⁸ True, since most people have

7. Recall the lesson about such expressions from the previous chapter's discussion of expressivism, pp. 316–318

8. Those who are wholly indifferent to their sincere moral judgments are known as *amoralists*. For more on amoralism, see the discussion in the previous chapter, p. 319; and in chapter 14, pp. 208–212.

moral concerns and want (at least a little) to be moral, moral judgments will motivate most of the people who make them. But some people just don't care about morality. They judge things right or wrong and yet are completely unmoved. And that shows that premise 1 is false. Moral judgments cannot move people all by themselves.

Some objectivists take a different approach. They accept 1 and reject 2. So they insist that beliefs alone *can* motivate people to act. But clearly, not just any belief could do that. My belief that three plus three equals six, or that Peru is in South America, won't move me to do a thing. But **evaluative beliefs**—beliefs that tell us what is good and bad, or right and wrong—may be able, all by themselves, to get us to act. If they can, then premise 2 is false.

Kant was one of those who rejected premise 2. Recall his claim (in chapter 12, pp. 181–182) that the good will involves only our reason, and not our desires or emotions. Reason tells us that something is our duty, and we are motivated to do it directly, on the basis of that belief alone. As Kant admitted, it isn't clear whether anyone has ever really acted from a good will, and so acted without the aid of any desires.

These issues are still very much at the center of discussion among philosophers. Objectivists will be able to defeat the Motivational Argument only if they can show that (a) moral beliefs can motivate all by themselves, or (b) they can't, but that this is okay, since not all moral judgments end up motivating people anyway.

11. Values Have No Place in a Scientific World

One of the tools that philosophers use when choosing between competing theories is called **Occam's razor**, after the medieval logician William of Occam (1285–1348). Occam's razor tells us never to multiply entities beyond necessity. What this means in practice is simple. When trying to separate fact from fiction, consider something to be real only if you need to assume its existence in order to explain what happens in the world.

Occam's razor explains why we shouldn't believe in such things as ghosts. Anything they might account for—spooky feelings in graveyards, creaking noises in old houses—can be better explained without assuming that ghosts really exist. Ghosts aren't needed to make sense of what we experience. So Occam's razor tells us that they don't exist.

Many people think that objective values are just like ghosts—creatures of our imagination. These critics deny that we really need to rely on moral

features in order to explain the way the world works. Science is our path to understanding the nature of reality. And scientists never have to include moral features in their explanations of molecular structure, biological adaptations, heat transfer—or anything else. Calling something moral or immoral seems like a kind of luxury, one that adds nothing to understanding the ultimate nature of reality.

We can summarize this line of thinking in the *Argument from the Scientific Test of Reality*:

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

This argument reflects a basic commitment to the idea that the supernatural does not exist, and that everything in the world can ultimately be explained by science. Since scientific investigation does not tell us whether actions are moral or immoral, good or evil, this seems to leave objective morality out in the cold.

Ethical objectivists have offered two replies to this argument. The first reply accepts premise 1, but rejects 2. Those who adopt this strategy believe that science is the ultimate test of reality, and also believe that morality can pass scientific muster. Other objectivists are doubtful of that, and so reject premise 1. Let's consider these in turn.

Many objectivists are so impressed with science and its potential for illuminating the nature of our world that they insist that morality be scientifically respectable. Such objectivists must therefore find a place for moral values within a scientific world. They do this by arguing that moral features are nothing other than ordinary, run-of-the-mill qualities that science can tell us about. We use a different vocabulary to refer to them—we talk of good and evil, right and wrong, rather than neutrinos and quarks and molecules and proteins. But the words we use are not important. What is important is that, as these thinkers see it, the natural world is the only world there is. So moral features must be part of that world if they are to exist. This kind of view is called **moral naturalism**.

Moral naturalists could claim, for instance, that being morally right is nothing other than maximizing happiness, or that being good is the very same thing as being desired. We can use scientific means to check whether happiness is maximized, or whether people really desire things. On this

view, moral features are nothing but a special class of scientific features. There isn't anything mysterious about them. Moral naturalists thus reject premise 2 of the argument, because they think that moral features just are natural (that is, not supernatural) features of our world.

If that is right, then moral values will need to pass the Occam's razor test of reality. Recall that this test tells us that we have reason to believe in things only if they are essential to explaining things. That's why we no longer believe in ghosts (or the tooth fairy or Superman). We have reason to think that physical objects like buildings or apples or planes are real, because their existence best explains why we see and taste and hear what we do.

But are moral features really needed to explain anything? Naturalists say yes. They think, for instance, that Stalin's *evil nature* is what explains his sending millions to their death in prison camps. The *wrongness* of slavery explains why slaves and abolitionists opposed it. The *injustice* of child abuse explains our anger when we learn of it, the child's resentment, and our efforts to protect children from it.

Many are doubtful that we really need to rely on moral features to explain the goings-on of our world. They think, for instance, that we don't need to refer to Stalin's evil nature in order to explain why so many ended up in the Gulag. Instead, we can refer to his beliefs, fears, plans, and desires to explain why he undertook such actions. We *could* morally evaluate such things if we like, but that wouldn't be essential to explaining why Stalin did what he did. Moral features are wholly optional and unnecessary when trying for the best, most rigorous explanation of why we act as we do and have the experiences we have.

Objectivists who share these doubts about naturalism thus accept premise 2 of the current argument. They agree that science cannot verify the existence of objective moral values. These objectivists must therefore criticize premise 1, and its claim that science is the ultimate measure of reality.

Their best strategy is to draw our attention to the fact that moral features are **normative features**. Normative features are those that tell us how things *ought* to be, or how we *should* behave. They rely on **norms**: standards of behavior that supply us with ideals or requirements.

The basic idea behind rejecting premise 1 is this. Science tells us how things really are. Science does not tell us how things ought to be. Science describes; morality prescribes. Science has its limits. It is out of its depth when trying to tell us about our ultimate purpose, the goals we ought to

aim for, the standards we should live by. Science can tell us a lot. But it can't tell us everything.

There is some reason to deny that science really does have the final word on *everything*. Consider this:

(T) A claim is true only if science can verify it.

(T) can't be true. For science cannot verify it. (T) is not a scientific statement. We cannot test its truth by analyzing what we see, hear, taste, feel, or smell. We cannot mathematically test it. There are no lab experiments that will confirm it. Since (T) is false, it follows that there are some truths that science cannot confirm. Perhaps moral ones are among them.

Now consider this principle:

(B) You are justified in believing a claim only if science can confirm it.

(B) is also problematic, since science cannot confirm it. Only philosophy can do that. If we take (B) at face value, then by its own lights we cannot be justified in thinking that it is true. So we are not justified in thinking that science is the source of *all* truths.

This line of reply does not prove that objective moral values exist. But if successful, it does show that science cannot have the final say about everything. This means that at least some non-scientific claims are true, and perhaps highly credible. Moral claims may be among them.

Conclusion

Our discussion of these eleven arguments has not revealed a single one that confirms the existence of objective moral values. That was deliberate. I had given over the previous two chapters to the critics of objectivism, and showed how each of the anti-objectivist theories encounters some serious problems.

It's only fair, then, that we devote some time to the many worries that people have about how morality could possibly be objective. I have tried here to outline the ones that are either very popular or very threatening. The most popular ones actually seem easiest to handle. The less well-known arguments strike me as more difficult to rebut.

There is no quick, knockdown argument that will demolish ethical objectivism. Nor is there any short and sweet proof of its truth. I have offered these arguments, and their replies, not in order to create the impression of a victory for either side, but rather to give you a sense of

how complicated things can get in this area of philosophy. Those who act as if moral skepticism were obviously true, or just plainly false, have simply gotten it wrong. Matters here, as elsewhere in ethics, are too challenging to admit of pat and easy solutions.

Discussion Questions

1. How might one be an ethical objectivist without being intolerant or dogmatic?
2. What is the best explanation of the existence of widespread disagreement in ethics? Does the existence of disagreement suggest a lack of objective moral truth?
3. How can an ethical objectivist allow for the existence of moral standards that apply only to some cultures but not to others?
4. What are categorical reasons? Do any categorical reasons exist? If not, does this undermine the claim that morality is objective?
5. Do you think that it is possible to make a moral judgment but to be completely unmotivated to act on it? How does this question bear on the matter of morality's objectivity?
6. If ethics is not a science, and moral facts are fundamentally different from scientific ones, would this threaten the objectivity of morality? If so, how?
7. At the end of the day, do you believe that morality is objective? What do you think is the strongest argument in favor of your position?