

## Is David Enoch right that we implicitly believe in objective moral truths?

### Introduction

David Enoch makes the claim that we implicitly believe in objective moral truths and provides three arguments for why someone is likely intuitively a moral objectivist. The goal of this essay is to determine whether Enoch is right that people implicitly believe in objective moral truths. In this essay I will start by explaining what a moral objectivist is. I will elaborate on one of Enoch's arguments called the spinach test and explain how he claims this test shows whether a belief is objective or subjective. I will then argue that the test cannot be used as an indicator of the objectivity or subjectivity of a belief and will provide a counter example that shows this.

### Moral Objectivists

A moral objectivist is someone who believes that whether an action is right or wrong is independent of how it is perceived by others. For example, the belief that killing innocents is wrong will be a fixed truth regardless of the current belief system of a certain culture, or the opinions of a psychopath. In contrast, a moral subjectivist will believe that morals *are* dependent on the current culture or belief system.

Enoch believes that people are generally intuitively moral objectivists. By this he means that people who haven't given this topic much thought will likely be on the side of moral objectivists initially. The terms implicit and intuitive are used synonymously in this essay because it can be argued that when a belief is intuitive then it will likely be believed implicitly. To demonstrate this, he uses what is called 'the spinach test'. This test is devised to show that people generally have an intuitive sense of what is objective and subjective which can be extended to apply to morality.

### The Spinach Test

The spinach test is a test that is formulated as a joke. In this joke you can insert the subject matter (or context) that you are exploring and if the 'joke' is funny, then the subject matter is subjective, if it is not funny it is objective. The subject matter can be about a personal preference (subjective), a truth (objective), a moral belief (?), or anything else. The test is to show that if a moral belief is used as a subject matter and the joke is not funny intuitively, then the moral belief must be objective. Enoch provides examples of the three different subject matters, which will be explored in this essay.

The first is the 'original' spinach test (1).

1.      Child:        "I'm glad I hate spinach."  
         Person 1:    "Why?"  
         Child:        "Because if I liked it, I would have eaten it; and it's yucky!"

In test (1) the subject matter is a personal preference. The child has a distaste for spinach, which is his personal preference, and claims this is a belief he would like to hold fixed. Enoch argues that this joke is funny because it makes no sense for the child to hold his dislike for spinach fixed, as this is simply a

subjective opinion, rather than an objective truth. In a world where he would enjoy spinach, not wanting to eat it because he dislikes it in this world doesn't make any sense. Thus, Enoch argues, this is where the comedic affect stems from.

Enoch goes on to construct a joke with the same format, except this time the subject matter is an objective truth, test (2).

2.      Person 1:    "I am happy I wasn't born in the Middle Ages."  
          Person 2:    "Why?"  
          Person 1:    "Because had I grown up in the Middle Ages, I would have believed that the earth is in the centre of the universe, and that belief is false!"

This joke is evidently not funny. Enoch reasons that this is because the subject matter is an objective truth, and it would make sense to want to hold this belief fixed over time. Therefore, because it makes sense it is not funny. Here it could be further explored for *why* it makes sense to hold this belief fixed, but an intuitive understanding of this is enough for the purposes of this essay. Objective truths do not change over time regardless of whether one believes in it or not, so wanting to believe in the truth makes sense and (2) is actually not a joke at all.

Another joke is constructed with the subject matter being a moral belief, test (3).

3.      Person 1:    "I am happy I grew up in the US in the late twentieth century."  
          Person 2:    "Why?"  
          Person 1:    "Because had I grown up in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, I would have accepted slavery and racism. And those things are wrong!"

Enoch argues that because (3) is not funny, then that is indicative that the subject matter, a moral belief, must be an objective truth, much like the subject matter in test (2). Meaning that morality must be objective. If this joke was not funny then that also supports his view that people are intuitively moral objectivists because they intuitively understood that this made sense. The argument that Enoch poses regarding the spinach test can be constructed formally in a logically valid format.

Premise 1	If the spinach test is funny, the subject matter is subjective, if it is not funny, the subject matter is objective
Premise 2	The spinach test is not funny
Conclusion	The subject matter is objective

If the subject matter in question here is a moral belief, then if the spinach test is not funny, the moral belief must be objective. I will argue that Enoch's argument is not sound on the basis that premise 1 is false and thus the conclusion cannot be guaranteed. First I will argue why the subject matter being subjective or objective has little relevance to comedic affect of the joke and then I will provide a counter argument that shows that an objective subject matter can still provide a comedic affect.

### Objection to The Spinach Test

Enoch argues that the joke in test (1) is comical because to hold a subjective personal preference fixed makes no sense, and because it makes no sense it is funny. I argue that the joke in test (1) is funny simply because holding such a strong belief for something so unimportant is *absurd*. It is *silly*. And not because it is simply a personal preference. Consequently, holding any strong belief fixed for something

that is unimportant or trivial is absurd and would prove to be comical when applied to the test. To demonstrate this, I will now construct a similar joke where the subject matter contains an objective truth that is simultaneously very trivial.

4.      Person 1: "I am happy I was born in my hometown in this day and age."  
          Person 2: "Why?"  
          Person 1: "Because had I grown up anywhere else or in a different age, then I wouldn't have known my neighbour John grilled a piece of chicken yesterday. I would have been ignorant!"

It makes sense to want to know the truth, but it is *absurd* to want to know the truth about details that are unimportant in the grand scheme of things. For example, why would it be important to know that the neighbour John grilled a piece of chicken if you were born in another lifetime? Knowing this objective truth has no impact on the state of the world or on ones psyche (these would be reasons for why one would want to know the truth about more important matters such as whether the earth revolves around the sun), but there is no reasonable reason for wanting to know this fact when it is not relevant.

This is why test (2) is not funny because the truth regarding the solar system is reasonably important and thus wanting to hold this belief fixed is not absurd. Test (4) shows that the spinach test is not a test for determining whether a subject matter is objective or subjective, but rather a test to determine whether wanting to hold a certain belief fixed is absurd or not. If the test proves to be funny, then it is absurd, if it is not funny then the belief is reasonable.

With this information, test (3) can be re-interpreted. The fact that it is not funny only indicates that wanting to hold that moral belief fixed isn't absurd. This is a good sign. Unfortunately, because I have shown that premise 1 of Enochs argument is false, it cannot be concluded that the moral belief is objective. Therefore, Enoch was not successful in providing sound arguments that show people implicitly believe in moral truths.

## Conclusion

The goal of this essay was to determine whether Enoch is right that people implicitly believe in objective moral truths. Enoch claimed that if the subject matter in the spinach test is objective, then the joke is not funny, but if the subject matter is subjective then the joke will be funny. Therefore, if the subject matter is a moral belief, and the joke is not funny, then the moral belief is objective. I have shown that the spinach test does not determine whether the subject matter is objective or subjective, but rather it determines whether wanting to hold a certain belief fixed is absurd or reasonable. If it is absurd then the joke is funny, if it is reasonable then the joke is not funny. Therefore it can be concluded that Enoch was not successful in proving that people implicitly believe in moral objective truths.