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Why I am an Objectivist about Ethics (And Why You Are, Too)

David Enoch

David Enoch claims that almost all of us are committed to the objectivity of ethics. When we reflect on our attitudes toward ethical claims and ethical practices, it is clear that we are assuming that there are correct answers to moral questions, and correct standards of moral evaluation, whose truth and authority do not depend on our beliefs or attitudes about them. In the first half of his paper, Enoch presents three tests that attempt to reveal our commitment to moral objectivity. Even if these tests succeed in their aim—and Enoch thinks that they clearly do—he realizes that this is not enough to prove that morality is objective. For as he says, religious commitments also aspire to objectivity. And yet this does not show that any religious claim is objectively true (or true at all).

Still, the compelling appearance of objectivity in morality gives us good reason to think that morality is indeed objective—unless, of course, there are even stronger arguments that undermine this appearance. Enoch devotes the second half of his paper to considering a few of the most important of these arguments. Some critics argue that the extent of moral disagreement undermines moral objectivity. Critics also argue that those who defend the existence of objective truths need to provide a way of coming to know them, but that there is no plausible way to gain moral knowledge, if morality is indeed objective. Critics also worry that ethical objectivity supports intolerance and

dogmatism. Enoch carefully presents each criticism and then offers sharp replies to the objections.

You may think that you're a moral relativist or subjectivist—many people today seem to. But I don't think you are. In fact, when we start doing metaethics—when we start, that is, thinking philosophically about our moral discourse and practice—thoughts about morality's objectivity become almost irresistible. Now, as is always the case in philosophy, that some thoughts seem irresistible is only the starting point for the discussion, and under argumentative pressure we may need to revise our relevant beliefs. Still, it's important to get the starting points right. So it's important to understand the deep ways in which rejecting morality's objectivity is unappealing. What I want to do, then, is to highlight the ways in which accepting morality's objectivity is appealing, and to briefly address some common worries about it, worries that may lead some to reject—or to think they reject—such objectivity. In the final section, I comment on the (not obvious) relation between the underlying concerns about morality's objectivity and the directions in which current discussion in metaethics are developing. As it will emerge, things are not (even) as simple as the discussion below seems to suggest. This is just one reason why metaethics is so worth doing.

Why Objectivity? Three (Related) Reasons

In the next section we're going to have to say a little more about what objectivity is. But sometimes it's helpful to start by engaging the underlying concerns, and return to more abstract, perhaps conceptual, issues later on.

1.1 The Spinach Test

Consider the following joke (which I borrow from Christine Korsgaard): A child hates spinach. He then reports that he's glad he hates spinach. To the question "Why?" he responds: "Because if I liked it, I would have eaten it, and it's yucky!"

In a minute we're going to have to annoyingly ask why the joke is funny. For now, though, I want to highlight the fact that similar jokes are not always similarly funny. Consider, for instance, someone who

grew up in the twentieth-century West and who believes that the earth revolves around the sun. Also, she reports to be happy she wasn't born in the Middle Ages, "because had I grown up in the Middle Ages, I would have believed that the earth is in the center of the universe, and that belief is false!"

To my ears, the joke doesn't work in this latter version (try it on your friends!). The response in the earth-revolves-around-the-sun case sounds perfectly sensible, precisely in a way in which the analogous response does not sound sensible in the spinach case.

We need one last case. Suppose someone grew up in the United States in the late twentieth century and rejects any manifestation of racism as morally wrong. He then reports that he's happy that that's when and where he grew up, "because had I grown up in the eighteenth century, I would have accepted slavery and racism. And these things are wrong!" How funny is this third, last version of the joke? To my ears, it's about as (un) funny as the second one, and nowhere nearly as amusing as the first. The response to the question in this last case (why he is happy that he grew up in the twentieth century) seems to me to make perfect sense, and I suspect it makes sense to you too. And this is why there's nothing funny about it.

OK, then, why is the spinach version funny and the others are not? Usually, our attitude towards our own likings and dislikings (when it comes to food, for instance) is that it's all about us. If you don't like spinach, the reason you shouldn't have it is precisely that you don't like it. So if we're imagining a hypothetical scenario in which you do like it, then you no longer have any reason not to eat it. This is what the child in the first example gets wrong: he's holding fixed his dislike for spinach, even in thinking about the hypothetical case in which he likes spinach. But because these issues are all about him and what he likes and dislikes, this makes no sense.

But physics is different: What we want, believe or do—none of this affects the earth's orbit. The fact that the earth revolves around the sun is just not about us at all. So it makes sense to hold this truth fixed even when thinking about hypothetical cases in which you don't believe it. And so it makes sense to be happy that you aren't in the Middle Ages, since you'd then be in a situation in which your beliefs about the earth's orbit would be false (even if you couldn't know that they were). And because this makes sense, the joke isn't funny.

And so we have the spinach test: About any relevant subject matter, formulate an analogue of the spinach joke. If the joke works, this seems to

indicate that the subject matter is all about us and our responses, our likings and dislikings, our preferences, and so on. If the joke doesn't work, the subject matter is much more objective than that, as in the astronomy case. And when we apply the spinach test to a moral issue (like the moral status of racism), it seems to fall squarely on the objective side.

(Exercise: Think about your taste in music, and formulate the spinach test for it. Is the joke funny?)

1.2 Disagreement and Deliberation

We sometimes engage in all sorts of disagreements. Sometimes, for instance, we may engage in a disagreement about even such silly things as whether bitter chocolate is better than milk chocolate. Sometimes we disagree about such things as whether human actions influence global warming. But these two kinds of disagreement are very different. One way of seeing this is thinking about what it feels like from the inside to engage in such disagreements. In the chocolate case, it feels like stating one's own preference, and perhaps trying to influence the listener into getting his own preferences in line. In the global warming case, though, it feels like trying to get at an objective truth, one that is there anyway, independently of our beliefs and preferences. (Either human actions contribute to global warming, or they don't, right?)

And so another test suggests itself, a test having to do with what it *feels like* to engage in disagreement (or, as we sometimes say, with the *phenomenology* of disagreement).

But now think of some serious moral disagreement—about the moral status of abortion, say. Suppose, then, that you are engaged in such disagreement. (It's important to imagine this from the inside, as it were. Don't imagine looking from the outside at two people arguing over abortion; think what it's like to be engaged in such argument yourself—if not about abortion, then about some other issue you care deeply about.) Perhaps you think that there is nothing wrong with abortion, and you're arguing with someone who thinks that abortion is morally wrong. What does such disagreement feel like? In particular, does it feel more like disagreeing over which chocolate is better, or like disagreeing over factual matters (such as whether human actions contribute to global warming)?

Because this question is a phenomenological one (that is, it's about what something feels like from the inside), I can't answer this question for you. You have to think about what it feels like for you when you are engaged in moral disagreement. But I can say that in my case such moral disagreement

feels exactly like the one about global warming—it's about an objective matter of fact, that exists independently of us and our disagreement. It is in no way like disagreeing over the merits of different kinds of chocolate. And I think I can rather safely predict that this is how it feels for you too.

So on the phenomenology-of-disagreement test as well, morality seems to fall on the objective side.

In fact, we may be able to take disagreement out of the picture entirely. Suppose there is no disagreement—perhaps because you're all by yourself trying to make up your mind about what to do next. In one case, you're thinking about what kind of chocolate to get. In another, you're choosing between buying a standard car and a somewhat more expensive hybrid car (whose effect on global warming, if human actions contribute to global warming, is less destructive). Here, too, there's a difference. In the first case, you seem to be asking questions about yourself and what you like more (in general, or right now). In the second case, you need to make up your mind about your own action, of course, but you're asking yourself questions about objective matters of fact that do not depend on you at all—in particular, about whether human actions affect global warming.

Now consider a third case, in which you're trying to make up your mind about having an abortion, or advising a friend who is considering an abortion. So you're wondering whether abortion is wrong. Does it feel like asking about your own preferences or like an objective matter of fact? Is it more like the chocolate case or like the hybrid car case? If, like me, you answer that it's much more like the hybrid car case, then you think, like me, that the phenomenology of deliberation too indicates that morality is objective.

(Exercise: think about your taste in music again. In terms of the phenomenology of disagreement and deliberation, is it on the objective side?)

Would It Still Have Been Wrong If...?

Top hats are out of fashion. This may be an interesting, perhaps even practically relevant, fact—it may, for instance, give you reason to wear a top hat (if you want to be special) or not to (if not). But think about the following question: Had our fashion practices been very different—had we all worn top hats, thought they were cool, and so on—would it still have been true that top hats are out of fashion? The answer, it seems safe to assume, is "no."

Smoking causes cancer. This is an interesting, practically relevant, fact—it most certainly gives you a reason not to smoke, or perhaps to stop smoking. Now, had our relevant practices and beliefs regarding smoking been different—had we been OK with it, had we not banned it, had we

thought smoking was actually quite harmless—would it still have been true that smoking causes cancer? I take it to be uncontroversial that the answer is "yes." The effects of smoking on our health do not depend on our beliefs and practices in anything like the way in which the fashionability of top hats does. Rather, it is an objective matter of fact.

And so we have a third objectivity test, one in terms of the relevant "what if" sentences (or *counterfactuals*, as they are often called), such as "Had our beliefs and practices been very different, would it still have been true that so-and-so?" Let's apply this test to morality.

Gender-based discrimination is wrong. I hope you agree with me on this (if you don't, replace this with a moral judgment you're rather confident in). Would it still have been wrong had our relevant practices and beliefs been different? Had we been all for gender-based discrimination, would that have made gender-based discrimination morally acceptable? Of course, in such a case we would have *believed* that there's nothing wrong with gender-based discrimination. But would it *be* wrong? To me it seems very clear that the answer is "Yes!" Gender-based discrimination is just as wrong in a society where everyone believes it's morally permissible. (This, after all, is why we would want such a society to change, and why, if we are members, we would fight for reform.) The problem in such a society is precisely that its members miss something so important—namely, the wrongness of gender-based discrimination. Had we thought gender-based discrimination was okay, we would have been mistaken. The morality of such discrimination does not depend on our opinion of it. The people in that hypothetical society may accept gender-based discrimination, but that doesn't make such discrimination acceptable.

In this respect too, then, morality falls on the objective side. When it comes to the counterfactual test, moral truths behave more like objective, factual truths (like whether smoking causes cancer) than like purely subjective, perhaps conventional claims (say, that top hats are unfashionable).

(Exercises: Can you see how the counterfactual test relates to the spinach test? And think about your favorite music, the kind of music that you don't just like, but that you think is *good*. Had you not liked it, would it still have been good?)

What's At Issue?

We have, then, three tests for objectivity—the spinach test, the phenomenology-of-disagreement-and-deliberation test, and the

counterfactual test. And though we haven't yet said much about what objectivity comes to, these tests test for something that is recognizably in the vicinity of what we're after with our term "objectivity."

Objectivity, like many interesting philosophical terms, can be understood in more than one way. As a result, when philosophers affirm or deny the objectivity of some subject matter, it's not to be taken for granted that they're asserting or denying the same thing. But we don't have to go through a long list of what may be meant by morality's objectivity. It will be more productive, I think, to go about things in a different way. We can start by asking, why does it matter whether morality is objective? If we have a good enough feel for the answer to this question, we can then use it to find the sense of objectivity that we care about.

I suggest that we care about the objectivity of morality for roughly the reasons specified in the previous section. We want morality's objectivity to support our responses in those cases. We want morality's objectivity to vindicate the phenomenology of deliberation and disagreement, and our relevant counterfactual judgments. We want morality's objectivity to explain why the moral analogue of the spinach test isn't funny.

Very well, then, in what sense must morality be objective in order for the phenomenology of disagreement and deliberation and our counterfactual judgments to be justified? The answer, it seems to me, is that a subject matter is objective if the truths or facts in it exist independently of what we think or feel about them.

This notion of objectivity nicely supports the counterfactual test. If a certain truth (say, that smoking causes cancer) doesn't depend on our views about it, then it would have been true even had we not believed it. Not so for truths that do depend on our beliefs, practices, or emotions (such as the truth that top hats are unfashionable). And if moral truths are similarly independent of our beliefs, desires, preferences, emotions, points of view, and so on—if, as is sometimes said, moral truths are *response-independent*—then it's clear why gender-based discrimination would have been wrong even had we approved of it.

Similarly, if it's our responses that make moral claims true, then in a case of disagreement, it seems natural to suppose that both sides may be right. Perhaps, in other words, your responses make it the case that abortion is morally permissible ("for you," in some sense of this very weird phrase?), and your friend's responses make it the case that abortion is morally wrong ("for her"?). But if the moral status of abortion is response-*in*dependent, we understand why moral disagreement feels like factual

disagreement—only one of you is right, and it's important to find out who. And of course, the whole point of the spinach test was to distinguish between caring about things just because we care about them (such as not eating spinach, if you find it yucky) and caring about things that seem to us important independently of us caring about them (such as the wrongness of racism).

Another way of making the same point is as follows: Objective facts are those we seek to discover, not those we make true. And in this respect too, when it comes to moral truths, we are in a position more like that of the scientist who tries to discover the laws of nature (which exist independently of her investigations) than that of the legislator (who creates laws).

Now, in insisting that morality is objective in this sense—for instance, by relying on the reasons given in the previous section—it's important to see what has and what has not been established. In order to see this, it may help to draw an analogy with religious discourse. So think of your deeply held religious beliefs, if you have any. (If, like me, you do not, try to think what it's like to be deeply committed to a religious belief, or perhaps think of your commitment to atheism). And try to run our tests—does it make sense to be happy that you were brought up under the religion in which you deeply believe, even assuming that with a different education you would have believed another religion, or no religion at all? What do you think of the phenomenology of religious deliberation and disagreement? And had you stopped believing, would the doctrines of your faith still have been true?

Now, perhaps things are not obvious here, but it seems to me that for many religious people, religious discourse passes all these objectivity tests. But from this it does not follow that atheism is false, much less that a specific religion is true. When they are applied to some specific religious discourse, the objectivity tests show that such discourse *aspires* to objectivity. In other words, the tests show what the world must be like for the commitments of the discourse to be vindicated: if (say) a Catholic's religious beliefs are to be true, what must be the case is that the doctrines of the Catholic Church hold objectively, that is, response-independently. This leaves entirely open the question whether these doctrines do in fact hold.

Back to morality, then. Here too, what the discussion of objectivity (tentatively) establishes is just something about the *aspirations* of moral discourse: namely, that it aspires to objectivity. If our moral judgments are to be true, it must be the case that things have value, that people have rights and duties, that there are better and worse

ways to live our lives—and all of this must hold objectively, that is, response-independently. But establishing that moral discourse *aspires* to objectivity is one thing. Whether *there actually are* objective moral truths is quite another.

And now you may be worried. Why does it matter, you may wonder, what morality's aspirations are, if (for all I've said so far) they may not be met? I want to offer two replies here. First, precisely in order to check whether morality's aspirations are in fact fulfilled, we should understand them better. If you are trying to decide, for instance, whether the commitments of Catholicism are true, you had better understand them first. Second, and more importantly, one of the things we are trying to do here is to gain a better understanding of what we are already committed to. You may recall that I started with the hypothesis that you may think you're a relativist or a subjectivist. But if the discussion so far gets things right (if, that is, morality aspires to this kind of objectivity), and if you have any moral beliefs at all (don't you think that some things are wrong? do we really need to give gruesome examples?), then it follows that you yourself are already committed to morality's objectivity. And this is already an interesting result, at least for you.

That morality aspires in this way to objectivity also has the implication that any full metaethical theory—any theory, that is, that offers a full description and explanation of moral discourse and practice—has to take this aspiration into account. Most likely, it has to accommodate it. Less likely, but still possibly, such a theory may tell us that this aspiration is futile, explaining why even though morality is not objective, we tend to think that it is, why it manifests the marks of objectivity that the tests above catch on, and so on. What no metaethical theory can do, however, is ignore the very strong appearance that morality is objective. I get back to this in the final section, below.

Why Not?

As I already mentioned, we cannot rule out the possibility that under argumentative pressure we're going to have to revise even some of our most deeply held beliefs. Philosophy, in other words, is hard. And as you can imagine, claims about morality's objectivity have not escaped criticism. Indeed, perhaps some such objections have already occurred to you. In this section, I quickly mention some of them, and hint at the ways in which I think they can be coped with. But let me note how incomplete the

discussion here is. There are, of course, other objections, objections that I don't discuss here. More importantly, there are many more things to say—on both sides—regarding the objections that I do discuss. The discussion here is meant as an introduction to these further discussions, no more than that. (Have I mentioned that philosophy is hard?)

3.1 Disagreement

I have been emphasizing ways in which moral disagreement may motivate the thought that morality is objective. But it's very common to think that something about moral disagreement actually goes the other way. For if there are perfectly objective moral truths, why is there so much disagreement about them? Wouldn't we expect, if there are such objective truths, to see everyone converging on them? Perhaps such convergence cannot be expected to be perfect and quick, but still—why is there so much persistent, apparently irreconcilable disagreement in morality, but not in subject matters whose objectivity is less controversial? If there is no answer to this question, doesn't this count heavily against morality's objectivity?

It is not easy to see exactly what this objection comes to. (Exercise: Can you try and formulate a precise argument here?) It may be necessary to distinguish between several possible arguments. Naturally, different ways of understanding the objection will call for different responses. But there are some things that can be said in general here. First, the objection seems to underrate the extent of disagreement in subject matters whose objectivity is pretty much uncontroversial (think of the causes and effects of global warming again). It may also overrate the extent of disagreement in morality. Still, the requirement to explain the scope and nature of moral disagreements seems legitimate. But objectivity-friendly explanations seem possible.

Perhaps, for instance, moral disagreement is sometimes best explained by noting that people tend to accept the moral judgments that it's in their interest to accept, or that tend to show their lives and practices in good light. Perhaps this is why the poor tend to believe in the welfare state, and the rich tend to believe in property rights.

Perhaps the most important general lesson here is that not all disagreements count against the objectivity of the relevant discourse. So what we need is a criterion to distinguish between objectivity-undermining and non-objectivity-undermining disagreements. And then we need an argument showing that moral disagreement is of the former kind. I don't know of a fully successful way of filling in these details here.

Notice, by the way, that such attempts are going to have to overcome a natural worry about *self-defeat*. Some theories defeat themselves, that is, roughly, fail even by their own lights. Consider, for instance, the theory "All theories are false," or the belief "No belief is justified." (Exercise: Can you think of other self-defeating theories?) Now, disagreement in philosophy has many of the features that moral disagreement seems to have. In particular, so does metaethical disagreement. Even more in particular, so does disagreement about *whether disagreement undermines objectivity*. If moral disagreement undermines the objectivity of moral conclusions, metaethical disagreement seems to undermine the objectivity of metaethical conclusions, including the conclusion that disagreement of this kind undermines objectivity. And this starts to look like self-defeat. So if some disagreement-objection to the objectivity of morality is going to succeed, it must show how moral disagreement undermines the objectivity of morality, but metaethical disagreement does *not* undermine the objectivity of metaethical claims. Perhaps it's possible to do so. But it's not going to be easy.

3.2 But How Do We Know?

Even if there are these objective moral truths—for instance, the kind of objective moral truth that both sides to a moral disagreement typically lay a claim to—how can we ever come to know them? In the astronomical case of disagreement about the relative position and motion of the earth and the sun, there are things we can say in response to a similar question—we can talk about perception, and scientific methodology, and progress. Similarly in other subject matters where we are very confident that objective truths await our discovery. Can anything at all be said in the moral case? We do not, after all, seem to possess something worth calling moral perception, a direct perception of the moral status of things. And in the moral case it's hard to argue that we have an established, much less uncontroversial, methodology either. (Whether there is moral progress is, I'm sure you've already realized, highly controversial.)

In other words, what we need is a moral epistemology, an account of how moral knowledge is possible, of how moral beliefs can be more or less justified, and the like. And I do not want to belittle the need for a moral epistemology, in particular an epistemology that fits well with an objectivist understanding of moral judgments. But the objectivist is not without resources here. After all, morality is not the only subject matter where perception and empirical methodology do not seem to be relevant. Think, for

instance, of mathematics, and indeed of philosophy. But we do not often doubt the reality of mathematical knowledge. (Philosophical knowledge is a harder case, perhaps. Exercise: Can you see how claiming that we do not have philosophical knowledge may again give rise to a worry about self-defeat?)

Perhaps, then, what is really needed is a general epistemology of the a priori—of those areas, roughly, where the empirical method seems out of place. And perhaps it's not overly optimistic to think that any plausible epistemology of the a priori will vindicate moral knowledge as well.

Also, to say that there is no methodology of doing ethics is at the very least an exaggeration. Typically, when facing a moral question, we do not just stare at it helplessly. Perhaps we're not always very good at morality. But this doesn't mean that we never are. And perhaps at our best, when we employ our best ways of moral reasoning, we manage to attain moral knowledge.

(Exercise: There is no *uncontroversial* method of doing ethics. What, if anything, follows from this?)

3.3 Who Decides?

Still, even if moral knowledge is not especially problematic, even if moral disagreement can be explained in objectivity-friendly ways, and even if there are perfectly objective moral truths, what should we do in cases of disagreement and conflict? Who gets to decide what the right way of proceeding is? Especially in the case of intercultural disagreement and conflict, isn't saying something like "We're right and you're wrong about what is objectively morally required" objectionably dogmatic, intolerant, perhaps an invitation to fanaticism?

Well, in a sense, no one decides. In another sense, everyone does. The situation here is precisely as it is everywhere else: no one gets to decide whether smoking causes cancer, whether human actions contribute to global warming, whether the earth revolves around the sun. Our decisions do not make these claims true or false. But everyone gets (roughly speaking) to decide what they are going to believe about these matters. And this is so for moral claims as well.

How about intolerance and fanaticism? If the worry is that people are likely to become dangerously intolerant if they believe in objective morality, then first, such a prediction would have to be established. After all, many social reformers (think, for instance, of Martin Luther King, Jr.) who fought *against* intolerance and bigotry seem to have been inspired by the

thought that their vision of equality and justice was objectively correct. Further, even if it's very dangerous for people to believe in the objectivity of their moral convictions, this doesn't mean that morality isn't objective. Such danger would give us reasons not to let people know about morality's objectivity. It would not give us a reason to believe that morality is not objective. (Compare: even if it were the case that things would go rapidly downhill if atheism were widely believed, this wouldn't prove that atheism is false.)

More importantly, though, it's one thing to believe in the objectivity of morality, it's quite another to decide what to do about it. And it's quite possible that the right thing to do, given morality's objectivity, is hardly ever to respond with "I am simply right and you are simply wrong!" or to be intolerant. In fact, if you think that it's wrong to be intolerant, aren't you committed to the objectivity of this very claim? (Want to run the three tests again?) So it seems as if the only way of accommodating the importance of toleration is actually to *accept* morality's objectivity, not to *reject* it.

Conclusion

As already noted, much more can be said—about what objectivity is, about the reasons to think that morality is objective, and about these (and many other) objections to morality's objectivity. Much more work remains to be done.

And one of the ways in which current literature addresses some of these issues may sound surprising, for a major part of the debate *assumes* something like morality's aspiration to objectivity in the sense above, but refuses to infer from such observations quick conclusions about the nature of moral truths and facts. In other words, many metaethicists today deny the most straightforward objectivist view of morality, according to which moral facts are a part of response-independent reality, much like mathematical and physical facts. But they do not deny morality's objectivity—they care, for instance, about passing the three tests above. And so they attempt to show how even on other metaethical views, morality's objectivity can be accommodated. As you can imagine, philosophers disagree about the success (actual and potential) of such accommodation projects.

Naturally, such controversies also lead to attempts to better understand what the objectivity at stake exactly is, and why it matters (if it matters) whether morality is objective. As is often the case, attempts to evaluate

answers to a question make us better understand—or wonder about—the question itself.

Nothing here, then, is simple. But I hope that you now see how you are probably a moral objectivist, at least in your intuitive starting point. Perhaps further philosophical reflection will require that you abandon this starting point. But this will be an *abandoning*, and a very strong reason is needed to justify it. Until we get such a conclusive argument against moral objectivity, then, objectivism should be the view to beat.

David Enoch: Why I am an Objectivist about Ethics (And Why You Are, Too)

1. In what ways does our attitude to morality seem to be different from our attitude to matters of taste?
2. In what ways does our attitude to morality seem to be different from our attitude to matters of convention, like fashion?
3. How can the phenomenon of moral disagreement count against the objectivity of morality?
4. Can the dangerousness of belief in moral objectivity give us reason to believe that morality is not after all objective? If so, how? If not, why not?
5. In what ways do we treat our aesthetic commitments and our moral ones on a par? In what ways do they seem to differ?