

# Commentary on *Moral Obligation, Evidence, and Belief* (20170621)<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In *Moral Obligation, Evidence, and Belief*, Jonathan Spelman attempted to defend subjectivism about moral obligation. In other words, he claims, “an agent’s action is morally obligatory if and only if she believes it is best.”

In doing so, Spelman provided an excellent defense of the proposition that the truth of moral syllogisms depends in an important way on the beliefs of the agent. This means that moral prescriptions are prescriptions that tell us to consider an agent’s beliefs in determining what an agent ought to do. This defeats certain types of moral theories such as actualist or objective act-consequentialism.

However, Spelman falls short of showing that the truth of those moral prescriptions themselves depend on belief. There is a difference between saying that a person with those beliefs is obligated to do X and saying that a person with those beliefs is obligated to do whatever she thinks she is obligated to do. Spelman provides strong evidence that morality takes the first form, but little evidence in favor of the second, even though it is the second form he seems to be wanting to defend.

In fact, Spelman writes about moral obligations, while I will be writing about propositions. Specifically, I will be writing about propositions being objectively or subjectively true – whether those propositions are the conclusion of a moral syllogism or the prescriptive premise of a moral syllogism. Spelman wrote about moral obligations being objective or subjective.

An obligation is not the same thing as a proposition. Consequently, one may wonder whether Spelman and I are talking about the same things.

I would say to say that moral obligations are objective (or to defend objectivism about moral obligations) is to say that moral obligation claims are objectively true. To say that moral obligations are subjective is to say that moral obligation claims are subjectively true. There is a logical equivalence between a proposition about the objectivity of an obligation and the objectivity of a proposition that reports on that obligation.

## Moral Arguments

To assess Spelman’s claims, I want to begin by presenting what I take to be the parts of a moral argument.

One way to understand a moral argument is in terms of a general prescription, accompanied by some facts about the world in a given case, which yields an action to be performed in that given case.

In other words, a general account of a moral syllogism is as follows:

*Premise 1: A prescriptive premise. A general account of what an agent ought to do.*

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<sup>1</sup> Spelman, Jonathan, *Moral Obligation, Evidence, and Belief*, PhD dissertation University of Colorado, Boulder, May 31, 2017.

*Premise 2: A descriptive premise: The facts that are relevant in a given situation.*

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*Conclusion: What the agent ought to do in that given situation.*

In mentioning this moral syllogism, I do not mean to suggest that this is a precisely accurate account of all moral reasoning. In fact, I will deny that. I am simply stating that moral reasoning contains these parts, though they may be very complex and difficult to separate.

The prescriptive premise would mention both the obligation to help the injured child and the obligation to meet her father for lunch – perhaps giving some idea of how to measure the different weights.

The descriptive premise might include a great many facts such as the severity of the injuries, the availability of other help, and the nature of the reason for meeting one's father for lunch. Perhaps the father and child are spies who need to transport some information that could save millions of lives.

The relevant fact that this model makes note of is that moral reasoning consists of both prescriptive and descriptive premises. From these, they yield a conclusion about what an agent ought to do.

Using this model, I can put my overall assessment of Spelman's argument in other terms. Spelman made a strong case that the truth of a moral conclusion depends on the agent's beliefs. This implies that the prescriptive premise often takes the form, "If the agent believes that P, then the agent ought to do A." That is to say, they make claims about what a person with certain beliefs ought to do.

Because the prescriptive premise references the agent's beliefs, the agent's beliefs are among the relevant facts included in the descriptive premise. This is how the agent's beliefs become relevant to the truth of the conclusion of what an agent with those beliefs ought to do.

However, Spelman appears to want to go further and argue that, not only does the truth of the conclusion depend on the agent's beliefs, but the truth of the prescriptive premise depends on the agent's beliefs as well. However, his arguments fail to support that further conclusion. When Spelman tries to jump from the importance of the agent's beliefs to the truth of a moral conclusion to the belief-relevance of the prescriptive premise, he tries to jump a gap that logic does not allow him to cross.

## Moral Conclusions

Now that I have described the problem, let us look at some of the details.

The first detail to examine is Spelman's argument that the truth of the conclusion of a moral argument depends on the agent's belief. In making this case, Spelman draws on an example that comes from Frank Jackson:

*Jill is a physician who has to decide on the correct treatment for her patient, John, who has a minor but not trivial skin complaint. She has three drugs to choose from: drug A, drug B, and drug C. Careful consideration of the literature has led her to the following opinions. Drug A is very likely to relieve the condition but will not completely cure it. One of drugs B and C will completely cure the skin condition; the*

*other though will kill the patient, and there is no way that she can tell which of the two is the perfect cure and which the killer drug. What should Jill do?”<sup>2</sup>*

The answer is that Jill should prescribe Drug A. She is not warranted in risking her patient’s life so that she could try to cure a disease where she could relieve its symptoms. The important point to note here is that this conclusion depends on Jill’s beliefs or, more precisely, her ignorance over which drug will cure the patient and which will kill him.

If we put this argument in the form that I recommended above we may end up with something like this:

*S1P1: Jill has an obligation to cure her patient or, at least, to relieve his symptoms if attempting to cure him puts his life at risk.*

*S1P2: Jill believes that drug A will relieve her patient’s symptoms and, of drugs B and C, believes that one will cure the patient and the other will kill him, but does not know which is which.*

*S1C: Jill has an obligation to give her patient drug A.*

We can see in this formulation that the proposition that Jill’s beliefs are relevant to the truth of the moral conclusion is true. Jill’s partial ignorance of the facts regarding the effects of drugs B and C is a relevant fact in determining what Jill ought to do. If Jill had different beliefs – for example, if she knew that drug B would cure the disease and drug C would kill the patient – then her obligations would change. She would then have an obligation to give the patient drug B.

However, we cannot get from here to the further conclusion that the truth of the prescriptive premise S1P1 also depends on the agent’s beliefs. The belief that this is possible likely comes from noting that both the conclusion and the prescriptive premise are prescriptions, then assuming that if one prescription is dependent on belief that the other must be dependent on belief as well. However, when we note the actual relationship between the conclusion and the prescriptive premise, we see that we cannot make this inference. It is quite possible for the truth of the conclusion to depend on belief while the truth of the prescriptive premise remains independent of the agent’s belief.

### The Prescriptive Premise

The form of this argument does not allow us to draw the conclusion that the truth of the prescriptive premise depends on the agent’s belief. However, it does allow us to draw a different conclusion about the prescriptive premise – that the prescriptive premise makes the beliefs of the agent relevant to the truth of the conclusion.

In other words, the prescriptive premise takes the form, “For the agent who has belief B, the agent ought to do A.” Now, the descriptive premise adds, “The agent has belief B”, from which we draw the conclusion “Therefore, the agent ought to do A.”

It may be considered odd that the prescriptive premise takes this form.

Yet, a prescriptive premise would take a form that is very similar to this if it was concerned with the agent’s desires. A “desire that P” would motivate the agent to perform act A if the agent also believes

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<sup>2</sup> Jackson, Frank. 1991. “Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection.” *Ethics* 101: 461-482.

that doing A will realize P. If the agent with these beliefs did not do A, then we would have reason to suspect that she really did not desire that P.

It would be too much a diversion to develop these ideas here. I simply want to note that this analysis is consistent with the idea that the purpose of morality is to promote certain desires and aversions using the social tools of reward and punishment, including praise and condemnation. The prescriptive premise looks at the agent's desires. If the agent does not act as a person with good desires would act (given the agent's beliefs) then there is reason to subject the agent to "punishment" of some sort – even if only in the form of condemnation – to push those desires closer to where they ought to be.

This model would explain why an agent's beliefs are relevant to that agent's actions. Our ultimate interest in moral evaluation is to determine if the agent acted as a person with good desires would have acted. How a person with any desires acts depends on that person's beliefs. We must factor in what an agent believes to determine the desires that motivated an action, which is what we need to know to determine whether we have reason to praise or condemn – to reward or to punish – such a person.

I do not wish to devote any space to developing these ideas. Fortunately, I do not think such a treatment will be necessary for what I wish to accomplish in this paper – which is merely to show that a reference to an agent's beliefs do not support any strong form of moral subjectivism.

### Two Types of Subjectivism

On the question of whether morality is objective or subjective, this analysis suggests that the question is ambiguous, and that this ambiguity contributes significantly to the conflict between the two camps. In fact, there are two types of moral objectivism.

Objectivism-1: The truth of a proposition is independent of beliefs

Objectivism-2: The truth of a proposition is independent of beliefs about the truth of that proposition.

To illustrate the difference, take, for example, the proposition, "Jim believes that Helena is the capital of Montana."

The truth of this statement is obviously dependent on belief – specifically, on Jim's belief that Helena is the capital of Montana. The proposition is true if Jim believes that Helena is the capital of Montana. It is false if Jim believes that Billings (or some other city) is the capital of Montana. Change or eliminate Jim's belief and we can change the truth value of the proposition. In this sense, the proposition is not objective in the sense of being independent of belief.

However, the proposition remains objective in the sense of being independent of the agent's belief that the proposition is true. In this case, a belief that the proposition is true means a belief that "I believe that Helena is the capital of Montana" is true. The proposition "Jim believes that Helena is the capital of Montana" remains true even if everybody in the world (including Jim – if we assume that believing something to be true does not imply believing that one believes that it is true) were to doubt it. It is true in the same way that any proposition studied in science is true.

Indeed, we use beliefs to explain and predict the movement of matter in the universe. For example, we would use it to explain why Jim books a flight to Helena when he is told to fly to the capital of Montana. The statement, "Jim has a belief that Helena is the capital of Montana" is as true as the statement as

"Jim is currently in Denver", "Jim has a scar on his right thumb", "Jim's blood pressure at his last checkup was 127 over 82". If any of these statements are objectively true, they all are.

These two types of objectivism correspond to two different types of subjectivism.

Subjectivism-1: The truth of a proposition is dependent on beliefs

Subjectivism-2: The truth of a proposition is dependent on beliefs about the truth of that proposition.

I have already given an example of a proposition whose truth is dependent on beliefs. This set includes, "Jim believes that Helena is the capital of Montana." Change or eliminate Jim's belief and the proposition becomes false.

Examples of statements that are subjective in the second sense are beliefs about the rules of a game, the value of money, the definition of words, and the legitimacy of political leaders. If people ceased believing propositions in these areas, they would cease to be true.

Please note that, on this account, it is possible for objectivism and subjectivism to both be true at the same time – or both appear to be true – if we do not keep the distinction between the two types of objectivism and subjectivism clear in our minds. The proposition, "Jim believes that Helena is the capital of Montana" is both, at the same time, subjectively true (its truth depends on whether Jim actually believes that Helena is the capital of Montana) and objectively true (it is an objective fact about Jim – as objective as any other fact about Jim – that he has a belief that Helena is the capital of Montana).

I want to take this discussion of two types of objectivism/subjectivism and apply it to what I said about two types of prescriptive statement – the type that exists as the conclusion of a moral argument and the prescriptive premise in that argument.

Recall the parts of a moral argument:

*Premise 1: A prescriptive premise. A general account of what an agent ought to do.*

*Premise 2: A descriptive premise: The facts that are relevant in a given situation.*

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*Conclusion: What the agent ought to do in that given situation.*

One type of moral subjectivism admits that the truth of a moral conclusion depends on the beliefs of the agent. The truth of the proposition that Jill ought to give her patient drug A depends on Jill's beliefs that drug A will relieve the symptoms and each of drugs B and C have a 50% chance of killing the patient.

The other type of moral subjectivism states that Jill's obligation to care for her patient is a matter of opinion. This type of subjectivism says that Jill can have the same beliefs about the drug, and still come to the conclusion that she should flip a coin between drugs B and C, or even give the patient both drugs B and C in the hopes of hilling him, if that is what Jill concludes is the right thing to do.

A person can be a type 1 subjectivist and still, at the same time, a type 2 objectivist as well.

## Honesty

We can see this distinction most clearly if we look at honesty, which is commonly understood as the obligation to tell the truth.

We find a place for honesty in virtue theory, where honesty itself is a virtue. We can also express it as a deontological principle, or as a “rule of thumb” that, if generally followed, would promote overall utility.

Though we usually say that honesty represents an obligation to tell the truth, it has never actually been taken that way. Consider, for example, the case of Bill, who witnessed a car speeding through an intersection causing a fatal accident. Moments earlier, Bill saw Sam and Edward get into the car, with Sam getting in the driver’s side and Edward getting in the passenger side. Edward and Sam were both thrown from the vehicle, with Edward dying as a result.

In our example, let us assume that Bill reports to the police that Edward was driving. Let us assume that Sam is Bill’s brother, and Bill wants to protect Sam from a charge of negligent homicide.

However, let us assume that Edward was driving the car. After watching Sam and Edward get in the car, Bill became distracted for a moment. While he was distracted, Sam and Edward changed seats. When Bill told the police that Edward was driving the car, he was actually telling them the truth.

However, he was still being dishonest. He still violated his obligation “to tell the truth”. The moral obligation “to tell the truth” is not an obligation to tell the truth at all. It is an obligation to report what one believes to be true. In this case, Bill believed that Sam was driving the car and, when he reported that Edward was driving, he lied to the police.

We see in this example that determining what Bill is morally obligated to tell the police requires determining what Bill believed. The truth of the proposition, “Bill is obligated to tell the police that Sam was driving the car” depends crucially in Bill’s belief that Sam was driving the car. If we were to change that belief, we would change what Bill is obligated to do.

So, Bill’s obligation to tell the police that Sam was driving the car was subjective-1. The truth of this proposition is grounded on Bill’s belief that Sam was driving the car.

However, we cannot infer from this that the truth of the proposition that Bill has an obligation to tell (what he believes to be) the truth depends on the beliefs of the agent. It may be true that Bill only has an obligation to tell the truth if he believes he has such an obligation. However, we cannot prove this from the fact that Bill’s obligation to tell the police that Sam was driving the car is derived from Bill’s belief that Sam was driving the car.

We can express Bill’s situation using the same form of argument we have used above.

*S2P1: Bill has an obligation to tell the police what he believes to be true.*

*S2P2: Bill believes that Sam was driving the car.*

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*S2C: Bill has an obligation to tell the police that Sam was driving the car.*

The truth of S2C depends on Bill’s belief that Sam was driving the car. That makes the argument subjective-1 – the truth of the moral conclusion is dependent on the agent’s beliefs. However, we cannot infer from this fact that the truth of S2P1 also depends on the agent’s beliefs. This is a separate claim, and it will require a separate argument to establish its truth.

## Epistemic Responsibility and Prospectivism

The account given above suggests that an agent's actual beliefs are relevant to determining what an agent ought to do. Jill's actual beliefs about the relative consequences of giving drugs A, B, or C determine her obligation to give her patient drug A. Bill's actual beliefs about who was driving the car determine his obligation to tell the police that Sam was driving.

This does not imply that we must accept an individual's beliefs "as is" – no matter how foolish and irresponsible the agent was in acquiring those beliefs. An argument still exists for epistemic responsibility.

The argument so far states that the prescriptive premise takes the form, "Given that the agent believes B, the agent ought to do A." However, it is quite possible – in fact, it is quite commonly the case – that the obligation to do A consists in an obligation to get more and better information.

Let us assume, in the case of Jill, that a common reference manual tells of a test that Jill could run to determine whether drug B or C would kill the patient. In this case, Jill's obligation – given her beliefs – would be to consult this reference book and determine which treatment would cure the disease without harmful side-effects. She is obligated to find more information.

Spelman mentions something that seems similar to the issue of epistemic responsibility under the name of "prospectivism". Prospectivism is the view that what matters is not what is true, or what the agent believes, but the agent's evidence. Evidence can support a false belief. For example, seeing Jim's car parked in front of Emma's house suggests that Jim is inside Emma's house – even though Jim had simply loaned Emma his car when hers broke down. Yet, this idea of evidence does rule out the idea just any old belief counts – no matter how carelessly or recklessly adopted. It also frees the agent of the burden of being morally governed by truths she has no evidence for – truths that are, perhaps, hidden or too complex for her to understand. There is, at least, a close relationship between the requirements of prospectivism and the requirements of epistemic responsibility.

Prospectivism and epistemic responsibility are not exactly the same thing. People's beliefs are governed in part by what they want to believe. People are prone to biases. This means that saying that people ought to desire certain things, is going to imply that they ought to believe certain things. One of the things that people ought to desire is true belief – so there is going to be a strong correspondence between what people ought to believe based on this sentiment and what reason suggests is most likely true. However, truth is not the only thing that people value, so truth will not be the only measure of what they ought to believe.

I can use a hypothetical case to show that it is at least conceivable that the demands of epistemic responsibility may be different from the demands of prospectivism. This case is drawn by the impression that if a group of people have confidence in their abilities that they can sometimes accomplish things against great odds. We can consider a military unit facing a situation where they are outnumbered, the survivors of an airplane crash or the sinking of a ship surviving through their own efforts, or a sports team facing certain disadvantages.

For the sake of illustration, let us assume that, if the members of this team believe that they have a 5% chance of success, then they have a 5% chance of success. However, if they believe in themselves – if

they believe that through their hard efforts, they have a 50% chance of success, then they have a 10% chance of success.

If what is at stake is important enough – survival or victory – than this may be a case in which the realist – the person who draws the conclusion that is most reasonable given the evidence – is somebody that the rest of the team has reason to condemn. A rational belief based on the evidence – the prospective attitude – is not what the people need. Instead, they have reason to demand of each other the belief, unsupported by evidence, “We can do this!”

However, for the most part – and throughout our everyday world, we have reason to promote in others a love of truth. In these cases, the demands of epistemic responsibility and the demands of prospectivism will yield very similar conclusions.

Within the context of these distinctions, I am disposed to treat prospectivism and epistemic responsibility as two species of subjectivism-1. Subjectivism-1 states that truth of the conclusion of a moral syllogism depends on beliefs. Prospectivism and epistemic responsibility provide answers to the question of “which beliefs?” Prospectivism says that the answer is, “beliefs that it would be reasonable to adopt given the evidence.” The concept of epistemic responsibility says, “Those beliefs that a person with good desires would embrace.” Whereas a person with good desires would have a preference for beliefs grounded on the available evidence, these two systems would yield very similar results in most circumstances. But not always.

## Conclusion

Spelman’s dissertation defends a number of points that are favorable to desirism. I have discussed above how his arguments suggest that the prescriptive premise in moral syllogisms relativized right action to the beliefs of an agent. Desirism relativizes right action to belief by asking what a person with good desires would do given the agent’s beliefs.

Elsewhere in his dissertation, Spelman argues that punishment is tied to wrongdoing. Desirism links punishment (and condemnation) to wrongdoing as tools for molding malleable desires.

Spelman believes that his arguments support subjectivism generally. However, this only happens because Spelman confuses the prescription that is the conclusion of a moral syllogism from the prescriptive premise in that syllogism. He infers that the importance of the agent’s beliefs to the truth of the conclusion implies an importance of the agent’s beliefs to the truth of the prescriptive premise. In fact, the former does not imply the latter.

A moral theory such as desirism can have objectively true prescriptive premises that yield moral conclusions that link right actions to the beliefs of the agent.