

Caius Philosophy Essay

Are moral values objective or subjective?

(~2000 words, excluding bibliography and footnotes)

In this essay, it is my purpose to argue for the subjective nature of moral values as opposed to their potential objective nature. This is achieved through an analysis and rejection of theories concerning the notion that moral values are objective, namely utilitarianism (and its types) and Kant's deontology, specifically his use of categorical imperatives. Contrastingly, I shall support theories suggesting that moral values are subjective, namely Foot's use of hypothetical imperatives and the metaethical viewpoint of error theory espoused by Mackie, to conclude whether moral values can even be classified as objective or subjective; whether they are liable to such a label. Details of the extracts from Mackie's and Enoch's texts shall also be examined.

Firstly, however, it is necessary to define morality, and the difference between a subjective and objective perception of it. Morality concerns the principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong; as such, many have been able to argue either for its subjective or objective nature. Objective morality suggests that there are universal moral laws, such as the concepts of 'good' and 'bad', or 'right' and 'wrong', that exist independently of the mind (moral realism). By contrast, subjective morality is the idea that moral laws are based on personal feeling and thought, and are thus flexible; there is no rigid, underlying order to which morality must conform. Taken further, this theory suggests that, without humans, morality would not exist; the concept only exists within our minds (moral anti-realism).

Let us now examine viewpoints suggesting that morality is objective. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist ethical theory that uses the outcomes of actions to determine their morality (whether they are right or wrong), stating that actions that maximise pleasure and minimise pain are right, whereas the converse is wrong. There are various strands to this theory, each of which I shall explore. *Act utilitarianism* attempts to quantify happiness in an objective manner; Bentham's 'felicific calculus' relies on the notion that an action's morality depends solely on its consequences and that happiness is the only good consequence, using seven 'circumstances' to calculate the outcome of an action: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent.¹ This is, in essence, a highly impractical, and thus implausible, technique; how would one go about quantifying each factor? Or how could one compare the value of one factor with another? The future cannot be predicted, either; an action that seems to provide the greatest pleasure at one point may itself induce a far worse fate later. Additionally, the decision of which beings to include

¹ Bentham, Jeremy. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (a New Edition, Corrected by the Author)*. 1789. Reprint, Oxford, GB: Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907.

is not covered. Having to make this calculation for every act is, essentially, impossible, thus leading to a rejection of this theory and closing an argument in favour of objective moral values. Act utilitarianism also lends itself to the tyranny of the majority, sacrificing minorities for the greater good, and devalues moral relationships, instead stating that greater net happiness could be achieved by committing deeds outside of personal relationships, for example, donating £10 to charity instead of using it for a gift. This further disproves the theory, displaying its over-idealistic nature, as well as its being a ‘doctrine... of swine’², reducing humans’ value to that of animals’ simple pleasures. Mill’s qualitative counterargument, distinguishing the ‘higher pleasures’ of mind from the ‘lower pleasures’³ of body and sense, may seem a worthy defence of utilitarianism, but this inadvertently supports the notion of subjective moral values; this distinction creates a disparity between Bentham’s quantitative, objective approach and Mill’s qualitative view, for the latter is made subjective by its not being able to fully classify actions and their consequences, only group them. What some may view as a ‘higher pleasure’ may, in fact, be perceived as a ‘lower pleasure’ by others; the distinction, while attempted by Mill to be made objective, is, rather, in my opinion, subjective. This supports my argument that moral values are subjective, not objective.

There are two more prominent strands of utilitarianism: *rule* and *preference*. The former focusses on the consequences of general rules, as compared to evaluating each action, thus providing a response to the ‘tyranny of the majority’ objection above. Each rule is objective, and thus this theory was propagated by Mill. Returning to the definition of objective morality above, the concept has tied to it the notion of moral realism. However, if these utilitarian rules were present in a society, would they be mind-independent or dependent? If they had been conceived by the society’s members, surely the rules would be subjective, according to the members’ preferences? And if they were truly independent of humanity, and thus objective, how would they have been discovered? These arguments form the basis of Mackie’s error theory, which we shall discuss later. In any case, rule utilitarianism is flawed in its inability to conclude whether its own rules are subjective or objective; either side can be supported, and I shall stay firmly with the former. Preference utilitarianism is non-hedonistic, seeking to maximise people’s preferences, not net happiness, providing a response to Nozick’s experience machine objection to act utilitarianism, in which he gives a scenario in which ultimate happiness could be experienced permanently by entering a machine, and, while some may choose not to enter due to the unsettling concept, act utilitarianism, in its hedonistic attempts to purely maximise happiness, would force them to enter, and classify this as a morally good act. Preference utilitarianism states that respecting a person’s preference to live in the real world is the morally good act. However, there are several flaws to this; what makes the preference of a potential murderer to kill any more valid than that of a potential victim to live? This theory returns to quantitative analysis, rejected above, or Mill’s qualitative

² Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. United Kingdom: Parker, Son and Bourn, 1861.

³ Ibid.

distinction of pleasure. Objectivity loses any semblance here; moral values are thus fully subjective. Ultimately, utilitarianism is an interesting, but, I believe, flawed approach to morality; its attempts to classify morals as objective are inherently incorrect, thus leading to the conclusion that morals are subjective.

We shall now visit Kant's deontology, albeit in a concise manner. Kant presents morality as a purely objective set of rules, but I believe that his main argument is, overall, flawed. A summary of his argument is as follows: the only thing that is good without qualification is good will, which is acting for the sake of duty; one has a duty to follow moral laws, which are universal; maxims are universal if they pass the categorical imperative, consisting of two tests: contradiction in conception and contradiction in will; and one must not treat people as means to an end (the humanity formula). Kant creates the idea of the 'categorical imperative'⁴: if a law does not result in a contradiction of conception nor will, it may be considered morally valid; this is an objective test. For example, the maxim 'one should steal' creates a contradiction of conception: if stealing is morally good, and thus universally acceptable, private property has no meaning; however, without private property, stealing cannot occur. Thus, this maxim is false. The contradiction of will depends on the concept of 'imperfect duty', wherein an action may be done by various means. However, I believe that within this rigid, objective framework, this is a subjective notion; Kant's dense literature, however, slightly clouds the difference between objectivity and subjectivity here. An example is self-improvement. Kant says that this is a universal maxim, as, in order to develop oneself, one needs help from experts. However, experts are only created by their own having self-improved; thus, in order for progress, some maxims are needed. They are obligations, but not constant obligations. The objectivity of the categorical imperative creates many issues: it ignores the consequences of actions, however devastating they may be (e.g. stealing is always wrong, so stealing food to save a starving family is also wrong, and they should starve), ignores other valuable motivations (e.g. visiting a friend for goodwill rather than duty), and creates conflicts of duties, although Kant argues against each objection. This objectivity is, I believe, inadequate, and impractical; a subjective view of morality is far more lenient, and, thus, acceptable.

Philippa Foot gives an example of this. She argues for the use of hypothetical imperatives⁵, rather than categorical ones. The latter are universal, and thus subject to rigorous contention based on circumstance, but the former fully avoids the issue by qualifying maxims with underlying conditions, in order to allow any maxim to be morally good. Instead of the categorical imperative 'do not steal', the hypothetical imperative 'do not steal, if you wish to not upset the person from whom you were planning to steal' is used. Morality is, thus, subjective; each maxim can be

⁴ Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. S.L.: Oxford Univ Press, 1785.

⁵ Foot, Philippa. *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy (Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives)*. Oxford Clarendon Press, 2002.

constructed lexically as per circumstance. Of course, this argument may be taken to the extreme, and the objection raised that even acts intuitively seen as bad, such as baseless murder, could be justified as morally good, should the maxim be manipulated as such, but I maintain my position in favour of subjectivity with regards to moral behaviour, for the objections to objective morality are, in my view, far more potent than those towards subjective morality; the former is not a plausible system in which morality can be defined and espoused.

A metaethical view may help to clear the path of morality and help us arrive at a conclusion. Some key terms are necessary: moral realism and moral anti-realism, as aforementioned, and cognitivism, which suggests that moral judgements express cognitive mental states (i.e. beliefs), aim to describe reality, and can be true or false, as well as anti-cognitivism, the converse, stating that moral judgements cannot be true nor false; they do not describe reality. Mackie was a firm advocate of error theory, a cognitivist view adhering to anti-realism. Error theory states that moral judgements are beliefs that are intended to be true or false (cognitivist). However, error theory also states that moral properties don't exist (anti-realism), and thus all moral judgements are false. In his 'Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong', he initially provides arguments to support cognitivism, explaining how moral philosophy generally assumes objectivity, as well as ordinary language doing so: his example of 'someone in a state of moral perplexity, wondering whether it would be wrong for him to engage, say, in research related to bacteriological warfare'⁶ who would not care about 'whether this is an action of a sort that he can happily and sincerely recommend in all relevantly similar cases'; 'he wants to know whether this course of action would be wrong in itself' assumes as such. Having established moral arguments' being cognitive, attempting to be true or false, and thus objective, he proceeds to shatter the notion by using anti-realism in his argument from relativity. I find this to be a particularly strong argument, supporting my own argument of subjective morality. He explains how variations in moral beliefs between cultures, such as with regards to monogamy and polygamy, disprove moral objectivity; 'disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect people's adherence to and participation in different ways of life'⁷ - either one group has found objectively correct morality, which is unlikely, or there is no objectivity. He determines that the maxim 'stealing is wrong' is false, as the property of 'wrongness' does not truly exist. I take this argument further, determining that morals are merely subjective constructions of a society; morality is subjective.

Enoch's argument for objectivity is, I hold, somewhat flawed. Within the extract, his gradual evolution of the joke into a question of morality is unwarranted, and I think that the application of the 'spinach test'⁸ to moral issues simplifies them far beyond their nuanced and multifaceted parts.

⁶ John Leslie Mackie. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. 1977. Reprint, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1990.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Enoch, David. *The Ethical Life (Why I Am an Objectivist about Ethics)*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

It provides what may seem (to most acquainted with modern culture) a method of easily distinguishing moral issues as good or bad, but the arguments of many moral philosophers throughout the centuries still stand, as do any respective objections, especially Mackie's notion of morals' not being susceptible to even being labelled as 'right' or 'wrong'; the notion of objectivity completely leaves the question, and is too rigid a viewpoint to be applied to modern usages. In conclusion, moral values are subjective; the opinions of those perceiving them as objective are, after all, only subjective.

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