

## MORALITY

“Man is the measure of all things: of things that are, that they are; of things that are not, that they are not.”

-*Protagoras (On Truth)*

“[Protagoras] was saying, in other words, that each individual’s private impression is absolutely true. But if that position is adopted, then it follows that the same thing is and is not, that it is both good and bad, and similarly for other contradictions; because, after all, a given thing will seem beautiful to one group of people, and ugly to another, and by the theory in question each of the conflicting appearances will be ‘the measure.’”

-*Aristotle, (Metaphysics 1062a13)*

### 1. VALUES VS FACTS

**Definition 1.** A fact (or factual belief) involves a description of the way the world is (empirically, metaphysically, religiously, etc.)

In this way, facts are defined as “true statements,” in connection with the previous discussion of truth.

**Definition 2.** A value (or value belief) involves the adherence to some moral proposition that is prescriptive.

Using these two definitions, an important distinction can be made between facts and values. First of all, some facts can have nothing to do with morality, such as “the lamp is on the desk.” However, if a descriptive statement does involve morality, then it is a statement *about* morality; for example, “most people in the United States believe that racism is wrong.” In contrast, value beliefs involve what “ought” to be; they are statements *of* morality. For example, “racism is wrong,” or “racism ought not be permitted.” Therefore, the difference between the assertion that the “world is round” and that “racism is wrong” is that the latter also carries a prescriptive component. This is simply to say that things which are “wrong” should not be done (or should be prohibited), while things that are “right” should be done (or should be permitted). However, value beliefs also contain a descriptive aspect in that the statement “racism is wrong” must also be true (i.e. correspond to the actual state of affairs).

### 2. OBJECTIVISM VS RELATIVISM

**Definition 3.** *Objective moral relativism* is the belief that moral values are true for all people in all places at all times.

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**Example.** To say that the Holocaust was objectively wrong is to say that it was wrong even though the Nazis who carried it out thought that it was right, and that it would still have been wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and succeeded in exterminating or brainwashing everyone who disagreed with them.

**Definition 4.** *Moral Relativism* is the belief that moral values are not objective; that is to say that they are not true for all people in all places at all times.

### 3. DO OBJECTIVE MORAL VALUES EXIST?

This section will consider several arguments for and against the existence of objective moral values. Important here is that this is a discussion of the factuality of the *descriptive* statement that objective moral values exist.

#### 3.1. Three Arguments Against the Existence of Objective Moral Values<sup>1</sup>.

##### 3.1.1. *Argument from tolerance (or compassion):*

- (1) It is intolerant (or uncompassionate) to claim that objective moral values exist
- (2) Intolerant (or uncompassionate) statements are always false
- (3) Therefore objective moral values do not exist

*Remark.* One big problem with this argument is that it misunderstands the nature of tolerance. Tolerance means to put up with something which one believes is false. Thus, the raw truth claim (descriptive statement) that objective moral values exist can be neither tolerant nor intolerant. This is because tolerance is actually a moral value; it is a prescriptive statement concerning the behavior of someone in the face of another person who holds a different set of beliefs. Therefore, the first premise has a built-in contradiction since it depends upon the existence of at least one objective moral value, namely, that it is intolerant to claim that objective moral values exist. So it is false. Furthermore, the second premise is also false. This is simply because the moral state of an individual has nothing to do with the truth or falsehood of a particular claim. This follows immediately from the previous discussion on the nature of truth. Therefore, both premises are false and the conclusion is not valid.

##### 3.1.2. *Argument from Disagreement.*

- (1) If people disagree on something, there is no underlying standard
- (2) People disagree on questions of morality
- (3) Therefore, there is no underlying standard of morality (i.e. objective moral values do not exist)

*Remark.* The first premise is obviously false. For one thing, the fact that people disagree about something does not mean that there can be no underlying standard. Going back to our familiar example, people can disagree over whether the Earth is round or flat. However, their disagreement does not mean that there is no underlying standard of truth: the Earth is still round. Or, more directly, if one simply disagrees with the truth of *this* premise, it is false on its own terms. The second premise is not as immediately self-refuting, but it certainly objectionable. Upon examination, the degree of disagreement on questions of morality is often exaggerated. Take a hot issue like abortion. Both sides agree that killing a human

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<sup>1</sup>This is not an exhaustive list. Rather, it aims to capture the most common arguments presented in this vein.

being is wrong, however, they disagree on the scientific question of when an embryo can be called a human being. Furthermore, no one praises cowardice, disrespect towards parents, and rape as morally right, and at the same time condemns truth-telling, love of one's wife, and courageous patriotism as morally wrong. Again, this argument does not hold.

### 3.1.3. *Argument from Social Influence or Upbringing*<sup>2</sup>.

- (1) Moral values are learned through one's upbringing
- (2) That which is learned through one's upbringing cannot exist objectively
- (3) Therefore objective moral values do not exist

*Remark.* This argument commits the genetic fallacy (described below). Therefore it is not valid.

**The Genetic Fallacy:** A critic commits the genetic fallacy if the critic attempts to discredit or support a claim or an argument because of its origin (genesis)

**Example.** "I believe the statement 'the earth is round' is true, because that is what my parents taught me. Therefore, the statement must be false." Clearly, the origin of that belief is not relevant to its truth or validity

**3.2. Arguments for Objective Moral Values.** First, an experiential argument concerning objective moral values is presented, followed by four positive arguments for the existence of objective moral values. These arguments all tend to take a similar form, which amounts to highlighting the implications of rejecting the truth of this claim.<sup>3</sup>

3.2.1. *Practical Undeniability*<sup>4</sup>. The existence of objective moral values is "practically" undeniable.<sup>5</sup> When one affirms that objective moral values do not exist, he almost always values his right to make that assertion.

**Example.** Consider a student who claims that objective moral values do not exist. Upon hearing this, his professor responds, "no one cares what you think, you fool." Of course, the student would rightly complain that the professor had violated his right to his opinion, and his right to express it. However, such a response demonstrates a contradiction of the claim that objective moral values do not exist.

### 3.2.2. *Argument from Human Rights.*

- (1) If objective moral values do not exist, human rights do not exist
- (2) Human rights do exist
- (3) Therefore objective moral values exist

### 3.2.3. *Argument from Injustice.*

- (1) If objective moral values do not exist, injustice does not exist
- (2) Injustice does exist (i.e. starving children, corporate fraud, the Holocaust)
- (3) Therefore objective moral values exist

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<sup>2</sup>This also applies to arguments which claim that moral values are the product of natural, biological processes such as evolution.

<sup>3</sup>As a reminder, the purpose of this sort of argumentation is to formulate a consistent argument based on premises which are more plausible than their negation. In this way, one aims to make the "price" of rejecting one of these premises as "high" as possible.

<sup>4</sup>This is not technically a full-blown argument.

<sup>5</sup>Here "practically" is taken to mean "in practice," rather than the alternative of "almost"

### 3.2.4. *Argument from Moral Distinctions.*

- (1) If objective moral values do not exist, it is impossible to make moral distinctions
- (2) It is possible to make moral distinctions (i.e. Mother Teresa vs. Adolf Hitler)
- (3) Therefore objective moral values exist

### 3.2.5. *Argument from Social Dissent.*

- (1) If objective moral values do not exist, there are no moral grounds for political or social dissent
- (2) There are moral grounds for political and social dissent
- (3) Therefore objective moral values exist

## 4. IMPLICATIONS

The most common method of avoiding the conclusion of the existence of objective moral values is by simply rejecting the second premise in each of the above arguments. However, this leads to a number of “unlivable” implications, which are worth listing here, in addition to some others that can be introduced in a similar manner.

If objective moral values do not exist:

- (1) Human rights do not exist
- (2) Injustice does not exist
- (3) It is not possible to make moral distinctions (or comparisons)
- (4) There are no moral grounds for social or political dissent
- (5) There is no such thing as moral progress
- (6) It is not wrong to kill someone for no other reason than for fun

Upon considering these few implications that follow from denying the existence of objective moral values, one can more easily see how this claim does not correspond with reality. Ultimately, a denial of the existence of objective moral values amounts to an assertion that all moral claims are no different than preference claims (such as “vanilla ice cream is good”). In order to maintain intellectual integrity when making this assertion, one must be prepared to accept that people are not obligated to act in any particular way. Thus, the only way to ensure that people act according to certain prescriptions is to make them do so by force. This amounts to asserting that “might makes right.” Power is the basis for morality. In contrast, if objective moral values exist, then power has nothing to do with what is right. The more powerful can be just as wrong as the less powerful. As an example, think of an event such as the Holocaust, when the most powerful group was nevertheless wrong.

## 5. TWO COMMON CONFUSIONS

As has been touched upon above, there are several common confusions which tend to pervade discussions of objective morality. Here, two of these confusions are addressed directly.

**5.1. Objective Morals vs. Changing Perceptions of Facts.** The perception of a moral situation is relative, but the moral values involved in the situation are not. This is best articulated through examples.

**Example.** In the late 1700's witches were sentenced as murderers, but now they are not. Doesn't this show that morals can change, and therefore not be objective (true at all times)? This confuses the difference between objective morals and changing perceptions of facts. What has changed here is not the moral principle that murder is wrong, but rather the perception of whether witches can really murder people by their curses. People no longer believe they can.

Failure to acknowledge this distinction can also lead to beliefs that cultural differences reflect essential differences in core moral values.

**Example.** Some revere cows and others eat them. Therefore, there is an essential difference between the moral values of these two individuals. However, the reason that some people revere cows is often because they believe that cows possess the souls of deceased human beings, so they won't eat them. Others reject this belief, and therefore freely eat cows. But both individuals would likely agree that it is wrong to eat people; therefore, there is really not any essential difference in morality. The difference lies in their beliefs concerning reincarnation.

**5.2. Absolute Morals vs. Applying them to Particular Situations.** The fact that the morally right thing to do in a particular situation may be difficult to determine does not disprove the existence of objective moral values.

**Example.** There are five people trying to survive on a life raft designed only for four. If one person isn't thrown overboard, then everyone will die. Often used to support relativism, this situation actually supports the existence of objective moral values. This is because *there would be no dilemma here if morality were relative*. Without objective moral values, one could simply claim that the outcome of the above scenario is immaterial; why not just throw all five people overboard? The very reason that everyone struggles with this dilemma is because he recognizes how valuable life is.