Is Morality Objective?

Morality in Life

Consider three hypothetical situations:

1. You clean up after your party and find your friend's wallet. It contains $100. She had told you she lost it while shopping. Because she is so confused, you are confident that you can keep it without her knowing. But you know you should not, and return the wallet to her.

2. Someone breaks into your apartment and steals your laptop. Luckily you are insured. Still, you are annoyed at the inconvenience of getting a new one. But beyond the annoyance, you are indignant. You have not merely been inconvenienced; you have been wronged.

3. You want to buy a shirt. But you learn that the company that made it is hiring people desperate for work who will accept $5/hour. Is it wrong to pay so little? The company did not put the people they are hiring in desperate circumstances. And the employees are better off taking the jobs than turning them down. But is the company exploiting vulnerabilities by paying so little? Are you complicit in the exploitation if you buy the shirt? You think about the issue and discuss it with friends. Maybe you decide that it is permissible to pay the low wage. Maybe you decide that they ought to pay more. In either case, you feel the force of the idea that you should not exploit vulnerability.

In each of these cases, you are concerned about what is right: about doing the right thing and about being treated rightly. That moral concern is part of our ordinary experience, woven into our thought, feeling, conversation, and action. It shows in your decision to return the wallet, your indignation at the person who has stolen your laptop, your pause before buying the shirt.

One aspect of that experience is that moral considerations, reasons, and requirements strike us as objective. Think about your friend's wallet. You ought to return it. That thought about what you ought to do—what anyone in your situation should do—does not strike you as an invention, or convention, or a matter
of feeling and attitude. It is not like a local cultural rule against eating peas with a fork. You ought to do it, whatever your feelings, beliefs, and social and cultural circumstances happen to be. At least that is how it strikes you.

Sometimes, as in the case of buying the shirt, moral questions are complicated. Are you complicit in exploiting vulnerability when you buy it? Or are you helping someone who is willing to take a job and would be better off if he took it? These considerations pull you in different directions. You need to think about the issue, not simply apply a crisp rule. But even when the questions get complicated, the considerations, reasons, and requirements do not strike you as optional.

In life, then, moral considerations present themselves as objective. But are they what they seem to be?

J. L. Mackie says “no.” “There are,” he says, “no objective values.” Mackie agrees that we experience moral requirements—like the requirement to return the wallet—as objective. The objectivist understanding, he says, has “a firm basis in ordinary thought, and even in the meanings of moral terms.” But this understanding is in error. The truth about morality, Mackie argues, is a “skepticism” or “subjectivism” that denies the objectivity of moral considerations, reasons, and requirements.

Philosophy and Life

Does it matter if morality is objective? The answer might seem obvious. If morality is not objective, then isn’t it fine to do whatever you want? The answer is not so easy and is a subject of considerable philosophical disagreement.

To clarify the disagreement, let’s distinguish first-order and second-order moral views. First-order moral views are claims, both specific and general, about what you ought to do: you ought to return the wallet; you ought to keep your promises; you ought to do what maximizes human welfare. Second-order moral views are claims about the nature of morality. The view that morality is objective is a second-order view, as is Mackie’s moral skepticism. So, too, is Sharon Street’s “mind-dependent” conception of value, according to which there are no truths about what is good or what is right that are independent of our attitudes.

One answer to the question about the importance of objectivity, then, is based on the claim that first-order and second-order views are completely independent from one another. Call this the Independence Thesis. According to the Independence Thesis, for example, moral subjectivism (a second-order view) has no implications for first-order moral views. Even if you are convinced of moral subjectivism, you should still think it is right to return the wallet and you should still return the wallet; you just should not think that that requirement is objective. Mackie endorses the Independence Thesis. Philosophy, he believes, teaches us that morality is not really objective. But when we close our philosophy books, we should go about our lives just as before.
Critics of the Independence Thesis (including Thomas Nagel and Street) deny that we can keep our first- and second-order views so neatly separated. Moral skepticism, they argue, undermines our first-order beliefs about what we ought to do.¹

Suppose, for example, you believe that slavery is wrong. You take that to be an objective matter. Now imagine you are persuaded of the second-order view that the wrongness of slavery is not objective. You continue to think that slavery is wrong, but now you think, say, that the wrongness of slavery is a matter of attitude or social convention.

If, however, you think the wrongness is a matter of social convention, then don’t you also think that if social conventions approved of slavery, then slavery would be permissible? But you started out thinking that slavery would still be wrong even if people (mistakenly) thought it was right: even if social conventions endorsed slavery. So your first-order conviction that it is wrong seems to be in tension with the second-order idea that its wrongness is a matter of social convention.

If the Independence Thesis is true, then skepticism about moral objectivity is an interesting intellectual challenge to our ordinary views about morality, though it does not have practical implications. If the Independence Thesis is wrong, then skepticism is consequential for how we should live.

So should we be skeptics about moral objectivity? Much of the philosophical debate about this question focuses on the merits of three arguments for skepticism—a metaphysical argument, a motivational argument, and an argument from disagreement.

The Metaphysical Argument

You think that returning the wallet is right. But you find yourself wondering whether it is really right. Not that you think keeping the wallet is right. Instead, you wonder whether any action is really right or wrong. Rightness, you think, is not something in the world.

The world includes social conventions, religious texts, parental admonitions, social pressures, traditions, and personal attitudes instructing you to return the wallet. But when you scrutinize the world, you do not detect rightness anywhere. These doubts are metaphysical because they arise from a concern about whether rightness is among the constituents of the world. “Permissibility, rightness, wrongness, or blameworthiness,” as R. Jay Wallace says, “do not seem to correspond to any objects or properties in the natural world.”¹

The problem is not that we have yet to locate rightness in the way that particle physicists had not located the Higgs particle until 2012. The physicists knew what they were looking for—a zero-spin particle that decays very fast into a variety of other particles—and how to look for it. The problem, according to the metaphysical argument, arises from the odd kind of property that rightness would need to be. It would have to be, Mackie says, a “to be-doneness” that is present in an action, that imposes a demand on us, and that we can recognize through our powers of intuition and perception. How could there be such “intrinsic to-be-doneness”? The property is too bizarre to take seriously. (Mackie calls this the “argument from queerness.”) Because there is no such property of moral rightness, morality is not objective.

Critics of the metaphysical argument think it is founded on a misconception of moral rightness. They say that what makes it right to return the wallet is not a special property possessed by the act of returning the wallet. When I think that I ought to return the wallet, I am thinking that a kind of reasoning supports my returning it. Nagel describes the reasoning as “impersonal” practical reasoning. When I reason impersonally, I stand back from my desires and circumstances and ask not just about me, but about what “one should do—and that means not just what I should do but what this person should do. The same answer should be given by anyone to whom the data are presented.” I reflect on the rightness of the action by considering what the balance of reasons supports, given the circumstances.

This conception of moral thought as an exercise in impersonal practical reasoning arguably defuses the metaphysical argument for skepticism. It does not, however, provide any assurance of objectivity. We could pursue impersonal reasoning and find that it does not give any definite answers to practical questions. What it does tell us is that moral objectivity depends on where we are led by practical reasoning, not on the results of a metaphysical expedition.

Motivational Argument

Suppose you are tempted to keep the wallet. You pause, think about it, conclude that you ought to return it, and hand it over. How does this work? How does the thought that an action is right motivate you to do it? Can a thought alone have that practical effect?

The questions are prompted by the observation that thoughts alone do not typically issue in action. When you are thirsty and drink some water, you do not drink simply because you have the belief that your body needs water. There is a thirst: an urge or impulse or desire to drink. The belief that you need water alone does not suffice. Is that really right? Suppose your doctor tells you to drink even when you have no thirst. Still it is not the belief alone that results in drinking. There also needs to be a desire to be healthy.
Suppose it is the same with morality. When you decide to return the wallet, what really happens is that you have formed a desire to return the wallet; that—not the thought that it is right—explains why you return it. This line of thinking leads to the "subjectivism" about morality that Wallace explores. The subjectivist argues—in a more or less complicated way—that when I say "I ought to give back the wallet," what I am doing is revealing my desire to return the wallet. Having the conviction that I ought to return it is really a matter of having a desire to return it. That explains how morality motivates.

Is the subjectivist right in thinking that moral thought is really a matter of feelings and desires? Suppose the wallet left at my party belongs to a stranger. I wonder if I should return it. I need $100. I did not invite the stranger. I am annoyed that he came. He was a pain. All my feelings are negative. I don't want to give the wallet back. But I think that I ought to and that all my feelings are leading me astray. Can subjectivism make sense of this thought, which stands opposed to my feelings about returning the wallet? "The challenge," as Wallace says, "is to explain how we can achieve critical distance from our motivating attitudes, within a framework that understands moral thought essentially in terms of those attitudes."

These observations about "critical distance" may create troubles for the subjectivist criticism of moral objectivity. But they do not solve the puzzle about how morality motivates. One line of response urges that moral thoughts do motivate without depending on prior attitudes and desires, that I can be motivated to return the wallet simply by the thought that returning it is the right thing to do. Nagel and Wallace suggest this line of argument, pointing to parallels between moral motivation and the motivation to act in ways that promote our long-term happiness.

Argument from Disagreement

In 1864, Abraham Lincoln wrote: "If slavery is not wrong, then nothing is wrong." Lincoln thought that slavery was objectively wrong. He did not simply think that he hated it or that his party or section of the country opposed it. But Lincoln knew well that this judgment was not universally embraced. Consider Aristotle. He was a deeply reflective person and he did not think that slavery is wrong.2 This diversity of moral convictions may suggest problems for moral objectivity.

Perhaps moral judgments are like judgments of taste—about who is good looking, what food is delicious, and which colors make good companions. As Philippa Foot observes, "we find wide variations in [such] judgements between different cultures and different generations." In these cases, it is very tempting to think that the

judgments are somehow relativistic. Broccoli is delicious to me but repellent to you, in something like the way that Bill is behind me but in front of you. There is no issue about whether broccoli is really delicious or repellent, any more than there is an issue about whether Bill is really in front or behind. The reason for that confidence is not merely that people disagree. We can see no way to argue that one judgment is right and the other is wrong: so much varies between distant cultures that we may have no basis for argument. But with judgments of taste—say, judgments of attractiveness—no trouble is created by the diversity of views because disagreement about attractiveness does not challenge our own standards.

With morality things seem different. Because we experience moral judgments as objective, we cannot simply allow that what is morally right in one place is not morally right in another place. For this reason, Mackie thinks that the relativity of moral judgments undercuts their objectivity. Diverse moral standards reflect different "ways of life," he says. They are not insights into what is morally required.

Nagel and Foot resist this step from disagreement to lack of objectivity. Writing in a Kantian spirit, Nagel says that facts about moral disagreement do not undermine impersonal moral reasoning; instead, they provide additional materials for such reasoning to wrestle with. Writing in an Aristotelian spirit, Foot begins with the thought that genuine moral requirements have some connection to what is good for people. Moreover, when it comes to the core elements of a good life, human beings share a great deal: "All need affection, the cooperation of others, a place in the community, and help in trouble. It isn't true to suppose that human beings can flourish without these things—being isolated, despised or embattled, or without courage or hope. We are not, therefore, simply expressing values that we happen to have if we think of some moral systems as good moral systems and others as bad." Rather, we are asserting that some moral systems are defensible by arguments based on what is good for human beings, and some are not. Lincoln knew well that some people disagreed with him about the morality of slavery. He thought they were wrong. In addition, he thought he could defend his view with forceful arguments.

So we should be cautious about jumping too quickly from observed disagreements to the relativist idea that what is right for them and what is right for us are different. Why, Foot asks, are we so sure that we know where our reflection on moral standards and human good might lead? The problem with "relativists, and subjectivists generally," she says, "is that that they "are ready to make pronouncements about the later part of moral arguments, and moral reviews, without being able to trace the intermediate steps."

Though they draw on different philosophical traditions, Nagel and Foot converge here. We experience moral requirements as objective. But are they really objective? Nagel and Foot agree that we will not find the answer in second-order arguments about the nature of moral thought. The only way to answer this question, they think, is to do the hard work of substantive, first-order, moral reflection—to think about what you ought to do and see whether that thinking leads to compelling conclusions. If it does, then you have a strong case for moral objectivity.