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Is Morality a Matter of Taste?

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This text is an edited transcript of Leslie Allan's address to the Humanist Society of Victoria on Thursday 23rd February, 2017 at Hawthorn Community Precinct, Hawthorn, Victoria, Australia.

Published online: 4 March 2017

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It may seem that a naturalistic view of humankind renders ethics as a matter of taste. Science seems to dictate that there can be no objective standards for how we ought to behave. In fact, both of these positions misconstrue the nature of ethical reasoning and greatly impoverish our view of ourselves and of our social norms. In this talk, Leslie Allan invites you to consider how both objectivity and subjectivity are essential elements of moral discourse.

To cite this essay:

Allan, Leslie 2017. Is Morality a Matter of Taste?, URL =
<<http://www.RationalRealm.com/philosophy/ethics/is-morality-matter-taste.html>>

To link to this essay:

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1. Introduction

For those who don't know my history, let me say a little about my background. I became interested in religion and science from an early age. My first interest was astronomy and then progressed to chemistry. My next interest in electronics became my first career. In my early years and having a scientific outlook, I was always intrigued by those around me who expressed a religious view of life and the universe. At the age of 12, my fascination led me to undergo the weeks of preparation required to receive Confirmation in the local Catholic Church. I did that completely under my own steam. A few years later, I continued attending the local Protestant Church even after my parents, who were only nominally religious at best, ceased attending.



Presenter: Leslie Allan

At the Institute where I was studying, I would often get into debates on religious matters with a colleague of mine. I remember him always ending the conversation with the advice that I should read so-and-so. My interest in philosophy was so piqued that I studied philosophy and history formally at La Trobe University throughout the 1980s. Although I did spend some time studying the history and philosophy of religion in particular, my main interests were in two key fields. The first was Ethics, both meta-ethics and normative ethics. The second area of study was epistemology, especially the sub-discipline of the history and philosophy of science.

Now that my business responsibilities have diminished substantially, I am able to devote time to my primary loves; science and philosophy. Much of my time is now absorbed in contributing to my local secular humanist chapter, the [Humanist Society of Victoria](#), and to publishing essays to my [Rational Realm](#) web site.

This talk is based on one of those essays that I wrote one year ago. And that essay is the result of a long dialogue with a Professor of Astrophysics in America named Coel Hellier. Coel is absolutely adamant that there is nothing fundamentally objective about moral reasoning and wrote a piece to prove it. His view that ethics all comes down to personal preferences and nothing else is a view shared by many who adopt a scientific outlook. [You can find the references to Coel's original essay, [Six Reasons Why Objective Morality Is Nonsense](#), my essay, [Is Morality Subjective?](#) and my response to objections, [Is Morality Subjective? – A Reply to Critics](#), at the end of this essay. I also include here some suggested reading.]

The purpose of my talk tonight is to present to you three key ideas. These are:

1. Secular humanists who label themselves as 'subjectivists' put themselves at a significant social and political disadvantage.
2. Ethics is neither exclusively 'objective' nor 'subjective'. It has both an important subjective and objective dimension.
3. Recognizing this objective dimension has a long and distinguished tradition in moral philosophy among scientific naturalists and secular humanists.

2. Subjectivists in Hellfire

I studied philosophy formally for near on a decade. Among professional philosophers, pedantry is a finely-honed skill that I realized few in the general public appreciate. The other day I came across a quote from Philippa Foot. Professor Foote was a well-known and well-respected moral philosopher. She once said this:

You ask a philosopher a question and after he or she has talked for a bit, you don't understand your question any more.

[Steve Pyke, [Philosophers](#)]

I hope tonight I'm not going to be like that. I hope to bring some clarity to the question of the role of objectivity and subjectivity in ethics.

The longer title to this first section of my talk is *How Our Opponents Cast Subjectivists to the Flames*. Why does the question of objectivity in ethics matter to a humanist, secularist or atheist? Well, because I think that arguing that morality is subjective weakens us in the social and political arena. Arguing this way exposes a soft underbelly that is attacked gleefully by our opponents. We want to campaign for a woman's right to an abortion, against blasphemy laws, for the right to a peaceful death, against gross inequalities in wealth, and so on. But by arguing that morality is just a matter of taste, we lose the high moral ground. Our opponents can and do claim that we have no legitimate place in the public sphere of social and political discourse. Here are just three examples of why we ought to worry.

1. Writing in *The Huffington Post*, well-known Christian philosopher, William Lane Craig, had this to say about moral subjectivism:

In a world without God, there can be no objective right and wrong, only our culturally and personally relative, subjective judgments. This means that it is impossible to condemn war, oppression, or crime as evil. Nor can one praise brotherhood, equality, and love as good. For in a universe without God, good and evil do not exist—there is only the bare valueless fact of existence, and there is no one to say you are right and I am wrong.

[[The Absurdity of Life without God](#), *TheHuffingtonPost.com*, December 18, 2013]

2. In their book, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, Norman Geisler and Frank Turek had this to say:

. . . atheists have no moral grounds to argue for their pet political causes. There is no right to an abortion, homosexual act, or any of their other political sacraments because in a nontheistic world there are no rights. . . [atheists'] positions are nothing more than their own subjective preferences. And no one is under any moral obligation to agree with mere preferences or to allow atheists to legislatively impose them on the rest of us.

[[I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist](#), 2004: 181]

3. As my final example, take the famous Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis. In his book, *Christian Reflections*, he railed against (and I quote)

. . . the fatal superstition that men can create values, that a community can choose its 'ideology' as men choose their clothes.

Note how Lewis here explicitly depicts subjectivists choosing their values in the same way they choose their wardrobe; simply as a matter of taste.

Lewis then goes on about the subjectivists' moral indignation against the Axis' powers during World War 2. He objects that (quote)

. . . this indignation is perfectly groundless if we ourselves regard morality as a subjective sentiment to be altered at will. Unless there is some objective standard of good, overarching Germans, Japanese, and ourselves alike whether any of us obey it or no, then of course the Germans are as competent to create their ideology as we are to create ours.

[The Poison of Subjectivism, [Christian Reflections](#), 1967: 73]

I think these examples show that labelling ourselves as 'subjectivists' gives far too much ground to the religious and other purveyors of superstitious ideas. Adopting this label only confirms for them that all secular humanists and atheists are at bottom nihilists and egotists. When you call yourself a 'subjectivist', I think you convey the impression to the public as well that you think that moral preferences are just about what *you* want.

In addition to the consequences noted here, I think this view is just plain mistaken. Let me now present the case for why I think this is so.

3. Nature of Moral Reasoning

In this section, I want to paint a scenario of a moral discussion. Picture this scene. Three friends are sitting around the coffee table arguing over a moral question that is very much in the news—voluntary euthanasia. They are discussing whether people enduring unbearable pain much of the time while suffering a terminal illness ought to be able to end their lives as they choose.

1. The first friend, Fred, says: ‘The terminally ill ought to have that right as people have a right to act autonomously unless the act harms someone else.’
2. Mary, the second friend, objects: ‘The terminally ill ought not as instituting such a right will lead to abuse with some elderly coerced into ending their lives.’
3. John, the third friend, says baldly: ‘The terminally ill should be prevented from choosing the manner of their death.’

Fred and Mary ask John why he thinks so. After a brief pause, John replies: ‘I just like it that way.’ Fred and Mary press John further, ‘Why do you want to prevent people from choosing how they die?’ John pushes back, simply insisting, ‘That is just what I want.’

I want to pause here for a moment and ask you to reflect on what you think of John’s contribution to the moral discussion. Note that I’m not asking you whether you think John’s conclusion is right or wrong, but about his style of reasoning for his conclusion—about the nature of his contribution.

I want to propose that Fred and Mary are offering a *moral* reason for their judgment. Their reasons are based on considerations broader than their own personal wants and preferences. Of course, we may disagree with one or both of their justifications, but I think it natural to say that they are advancing a *moral* argument.

Regarding John, however, I propose that he is not offering a *moral* reason for his judgment at all. Recall that John replied, when he was pressed to support his judgment, ‘I just like it that way.’ and ‘That is just what I want.’ By exclusively appealing to his own personal preferences, he seems not to have engaged in the moral debate at all. He may be advancing a *prudential* reason for his view. However, I think it’s natural to insist that he is *not* putting forward a moral justification for his position. His stated reason is outside the bounds of moral discourse.

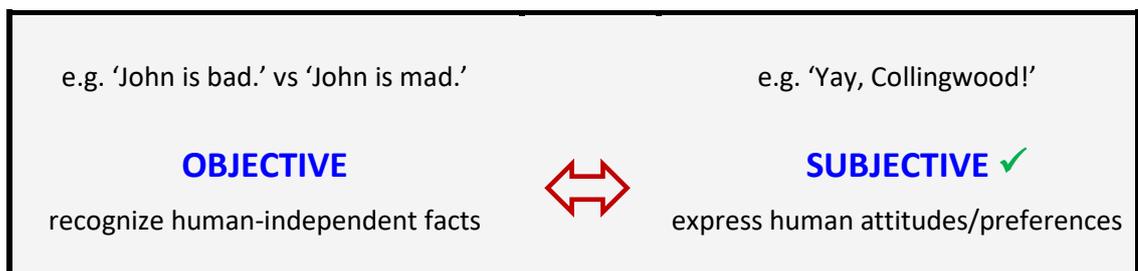
4. Objectivity in Ethics

I think this scenario shows that for a reason to be a *moral* reason for action, we expect it to be impartial; without appeal to the speaker's peculiar interests or the interests of their favoured group. We think people who give a partial or selfish reason for a moral judgment as being conceptually confused about what constitutes a *moral* reason for action. This requirement for *impartiality*, I want to say, is built into the very concept of morality.

Most moral philosophers down the ages have felt than morality is objective in some sense. And here they are in agreement with the person on the street. However, in their attempt to explain this sense of objectivity, some philosophers and most theologians have been looking for this objectivity in the wrong place. They have been looking for it in some mind-independent or human-independent metaphysical realm. And I think this project has failed. Here are four prominent examples:

1. Theists tried to identify the good and the right with God's preferences and commands.
2. Intuitionists mistakenly conflated moral attributes with some mysterious realm of non-natural properties and transcendent rules.
3. Neo-Aristotelians and Natural Law theorists relied on a dubious teleology of life's evolution on earth.
4. Lastly, Kantian Rationalists tried to derive moral rules from the demands of pure reason.

Their mistake, I think, is in thinking that 'objectivity' in ethics must be contrasted with 'subjectivity', where 'subjectivity' is meant in the sense of being grounded in people's attitudes and preferences. Their mistake is in thinking that ethics is objective only in the epistemic sense; that ethics is about human-independent facts that are there to be discovered and known. Let me illustrate this way of thinking.



However, as humanists and naturalists, we know that morality is somehow intimately grounded in people's attitudes and preferences. Moral judgments can't just be about facts. Otherwise, how do we explain the queerness of someone saying, 'Torturing babies is morally abominable, but I don't really care whether some people do it or not.' Let me place a tick, then, next to 'SUBJECTIVE' in our diagram. So, this kind of counterpoising of 'objective' and 'subjective' can't be right.

We also know that morality is not *just* about what we like or personally prefer. There is more to saying torturing children is morally abominable than just saying I don't like or approve of such torture. Our scenario with Fred, Mary and John concretely brings this point home. The puzzle is solved, I suggest, by thinking of 'objectivity' in ethics as more correctly contrasted with 'subjectivity', where 'subjectivity' is meant in the sense of being partisan, selfish and parochial. Think of the inappropriateness of John's response in our scenario. Being 'objective' in ethics, then, is more like this:



So, being 'objective' in our moral judgments is not about tapping into some transcendental realm of moral facts. It's about being impartial/non-partisan in our moral judgments. Let me place a tick, then, next to 'OBJECTIVE' in this diagram. Conversely, when we accuse someone of being 'subjective' in their moral reasoning, we are not calling them out for expressing their preferences and attitudes. We are accusing them of basing their moral judgments on their own selfish interests or on those of their favoured group. This, then, is how we properly contrast objectivity in ethics with subjective preferences.

Contrasting now the two ways of viewing ethical discourse, we can say the initial view, the view of many theists, the intuitionists, the Natural Law theorists, and so on, is mistaken. I will put a big cross next to that view (see below). I will also now put a big tick next to the second of our considered approaches that contrasts objectivity in ethics with partisanship.



5. Definitions and Use of 'Objective'

5.1 Dictionary Definitions

Some critics have claimed that I have misappropriated the word 'objective' to suit my own philosophical position. I want to say just a few brief words on this point. All of the major dictionaries give a central sense of the word 'objective' as pertaining to things external to the mind. This is true and I accept this.

However, the major dictionaries list a second central meaning of the term as 'impartial' and 'unbiased'. For example, the *British Dictionary* lists the second adjectival sense of 'objective' as 'undistorted by emotion or personal bias'. Likewise, the *Penguin Macquarie Dictionary* defines the second adjectival sense as 'free from personal feelings or prejudice; unbiased'.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives the third full definition as:

expressing or dealing with facts or conditions as perceived without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations . . . <an objective judgment>

In its Synonym Discussion of objective, it goes on to say:

FAIR, JUST, EQUITABLE, IMPARTIAL, UNBIASED, DISPASSIONATE, OBJECTIVE mean free from favor toward either or any side. . . . OBJECTIVE stresses a tendency to view events or persons as apart from oneself and one's own interest or feelings <I can't be objective about my own child>.

In common parlance, we sometimes ask people to 'be objective' in this sense as they think through making an important decision. Here are two examples:

1. A good friend of ours is contemplating whether to accept a marriage proposal.
2. Our neighbour is working through how to distribute her worldly goods after she dies.

In these circumstances, we advise our friend and neighbour to 'think objectively' about their decision. Of course, we aren't appealing to some metaphysical realm of 'objective' transcendent truths. We are asking them to reflect on their most settled and important preferences and to not be swayed by short-term feelings that will prejudice the outcomes they want. It is in this sense of 'impartiality' that ethics is objective.

5.2 Historical Examples

A study of history affords us more examples of how the concept of ‘impartiality’ is central to ethics. In many religions, God is seen as the impartial judge. Consider the three Abrahamic religions as a case in point:

1. Judaism (Ezek 18:30): ‘Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct,’ declares the Lord GOD.
2. Christianity (2 Cor 5:10): For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive his due for the things done in the body, whether good or bad.
3. Islam (Quran 2:281): And be conscious of the Day on which you shall be brought back unto God, whereupon every human being shall be repaid in full for what he has earned, and none shall be wronged.

In these three religions, justice is about the nature of the deeds and not about who committed them.

Nearer to the modern era, the Roman goddess, *Justitia* (or Lady Justice), appears as the statue blindfolded with scales and a sword outside of many courthouses. *Wikipedia* summarizes well the significance of the blindfold:

Since the 15th century, Lady Justice has often been depicted wearing a blindfold. The blindfold represents objectivity, in that justice is or should be meted out objectively, without fear or favour, regardless of money, wealth, fame, power, or identity; blind justice and impartiality.



Justitia at Court of Final Appeal, Hong Kong
(Reprinted with permission under CC-BY-SA-3.0)

[*Wikipedia*, [Lady Justice](#), 2016]

It’s precisely in this sense that our laws are held to the ideal of being applied ‘objectively’.

5.3 False Dichotomy

Thinking more broadly about our two definitions of 'objective' and our two definitions of 'subjective' (in §4 above), I think we can say that ethics has both an 'objective' and a 'subjective' dimension. To say that it is either one or the other is to cast a false dichotomy. Let's look at each of these in turn.

The **subjective** dimension encapsulates the human-centeredness of morality. I think it captures two aspects:

1. the evolutionary underpinning of our behaviours. Here, I include the writing of kin altruism in our genes and the social learning aspect of reciprocal altruism (refer to Richard Dawkins, [*The Selfish Gene*](#)/Peter Singer, [*The Expanding Circle*](#))
2. how our moral norms are historically grounded in social contracts, customs and laws

The **objective** dimension, on the other hand, encapsulates the impartial nature of morality. This dimension explains these two key aspects:

1. our appeal to reason and argument based on general principles
2. the barring of appeals to parochial interests (Think again of John in our scenario saying, 'I just like it that way.')

6. Impartiality in Moral Philosophy

I want to talk now about this idea of ‘impartiality’ as it has appeared throughout the history of moral philosophy. This is not a new idea. There is a strong philosophical tradition in incorporating this notion of impartiality as essential to the nature of ethics. Here are five prominent examples:

1. **David Hume’s (1711–76) Ideal Observer** — For Hume, when we make moral judgments, we are trying to stand in the shoes of a dispassionate observer, without regard for self and our particular social group. Even though our judgments are fundamentally based on sentiment (that is, personal feelings), they are formulated from what he called a ‘general’ point of view.
[David Hume, [*A Treatise of Human Nature*](#): book III, part III, §I; [*Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*](#): 228f]
Henry Sidgwick, writing some 100 years later, called this the ‘point of view of the universe’.
2. **Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1804) Categorical Imperative** — Kant tried to capture this idea of universality in his categorical imperative. This was his notion that a moral rule necessarily must be such that it is willed for all; that it be universally applied.
[Immanuel Kant, [*Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*](#)]
3. **Richard Hare’s (1919–2002) Prescriptivism** — Hare built into his theory of universal Prescriptivism the idea that moral judgments are prescriptions that we want to apply to everyone. [Richard Hare, [*The Language of Morals*](#)]
4. **Henry Sidgwick’s (1838–1900) Utilitarianism** — Sidgwick and other prominent Utilitarians, such as and [*John Stuart Mill*](#) (1806–73), encapsulated moral objectivity with their ‘principle of impartiality’. This famous principle is translated as the requirement for the equal consideration of all interests.
[Henry Sidgwick, [*The Methods of Ethics*](#); John Stuart Mill, [*Utilitarianism*](#)]
5. **John Rawls’ (1921–2002) Social Contract** — Refining the work of earlier social constructivists, such as Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Rawls put the requirement for ‘impartiality’ at the centre of his view of the social contract. For Rawls, our moral norms are rules agreed upon by actors communicating behind a veil of ignorance about one’s wealth, gender, nationality, etc. [John Rawls, [*A Theory of Justice*](#)]

The significance and influence of these five giants in moral philosophy should not be underestimated. They demonstrate the pre-eminence of this concept of impartiality in the thinking of the seminal philosophers of the Enlightenment through to the modern era.

8. Conclusion

To wrap up this talk, let me summarize what I've tried to show:

- I began by pointing out instances of how secular humanists and naturalists calling themselves 'subjectivists' leaves them open to the charge of moral relativism, nihilism and egotism. This labelling potentially isolates them from public debates on social policy.
- I introduced the scenario of three friends discussing the ethics of voluntary euthanasia to illustrate how the notion of impartiality fits in our everyday moral reasoning.
- Next, I argued that it is a mistake to think that because it turns out that ethics is not grounded in some mysterious metaphysical or religious realm, that choosing our moral values is simply a matter of subjective preference.
- I suggested that subjectivists fall into the same trap as metaphysicians and religionists of confusing 'objectivity' in ethics with mind- or human-independence.
- I then properly contrasted being 'objective' in ethics with its antithesis; that is, being 'subjective' in the sense of being self-serving, parochial and biased.
- I offered five examples showing how 'objectivity', in the sense of 'impartiality', has a long and distinguished tradition in moral philosophy. I also gave three examples from the mono-theistic tradition extolling the virtue of impartiality in ethics.
- I concluded by showing how my two criteria (sociality and impartiality) avoided the subjectivists' inability to distinguish judgments of personal taste from moral valuations.

What do I call myself when I try to encapsulate what ethics is about? I don't think the labels 'objectivist' and 'subjectivist' are particularly helpful. Moral philosophers draw the objectivist/subjectivist divide in a variety of ways and to label us one way or the other only promotes confusion. I think other distinctions made by moral philosophers are more instructive; in particular, the cognitivism/non-cognitivism and realist/anti-realist divides. [For more on categorizing moral theories, see my [Meta-ethics: An Introduction](#) and my more detailed treatment in [A Taxonomy of Meta-ethical Theories](#).] If I had to choose one word to describe my outlook, I'd say it is 'naturalism', understood in its broad sense.

To find out more about impartiality in ethics, I encourage you to check out my original short essay, [Is Morality Subjective?](#), and my [Is Morality Subjective? – A Reply to Critics](#). The first two chapters of Peter Singer's book, [Practical Ethics](#), also explain in plain language this view of 'objectivity' in ethics as 'impartiality' of judgment.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to what I had to say.

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