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Is Morality Subjective? – A Reply to Critics

Leslie Allan

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Leslie Allan defends his thesis that ethics is objective in the sense of requiring moral agents to offer impartial reasons for acting. Radical subjectivists have attacked this requirement for impartiality on a number of grounds. Some critics make the charge that Allan's thesis is simply a version of subjectivism in disguise. He responds by showing how a broadly naturalist view of ethics accommodates objective moral constraints. Allan also counters cases in which impartiality is purportedly not morally required and considers the subjectivists' response to the problem of demarcating moral from non-moral judgements.

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1. Introduction

Since publishing my short essay, [Is Morality Subjective?](#) [Allan 2015a], I received a lot of interest and engaged in a number of conversations about the ideas I presented. Unsurprisingly, my argument for objectivity in ethics garnered a pleasing level of support while at the same time attracting a level of criticism. In this essay, my intention is to collect up the major criticisms of my thesis and respond to them. I have not identified the authors of each objection in order to respect their privacy and because the objections considered here were advanced by two or more people. The objections were also of a general nature, so knowing the author of particular criticisms does not aid understanding the point of each objection.

In my original essay, I argued that for a reason for action to be a moral reason, that reason must appeal to interests beyond that of the agent and the agent's preferred social group. It is in this sense of 'impartiality', I argued that morality is objective. I supported my case with two scenarios drawn from real life in which moral agents unsuccessfully attempt to support their actions with personally biased reasons. These two scenarios are of a similar vein to the following. I add it here to further illustrate the case I am making.

Imagine three friends in discussion over a vexed moral issue. 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. One friend argues that they ought to have that right as people have a right to act autonomously unless the act harms someone else. The second friend argues that they ought not as instituting such a right will lead to abuse with some elderly coerced into ending their lives. The third friend also opines that the terminally ill should be prevented from choosing the manner of their death. When asked the reason for his view, the third friend replies, 'I just like it that way'. When pressed further by his other two friends, he insists that is just what he wants.

If we were observers to this conversation, we would readily acknowledge that the first two friends 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 we readily concede that they are advancing a moral argument.

Regarding the third friend, however, we would concede he is not offering a moral reason for his judgement at all. By exclusively appealing to his own personal preferences, he seems not to have engaged in the moral debate at all. We admit he may be advancing a prudential reason for his view. However, we would insist that he is not putting forward a moral justification for his position.

These kinds of scenarios demonstrate, I argued, that trying to underpin the objectivity of ethics with God's commands, intuited non-natural properties and the like is misguided. Objectivity in ethics, I argued, should not be contrasted with dismissing some supposedly 'objective' mysterious metaphysical realm. Objectivity is more properly contrasted with biased and prejudicial reasoning when deciding what we should do.

Many objections to my view attempted to reinstate the radical subjectivist view that the requirement for objectivity has no place in moral theory. Some critics attempted to

show by way of counterexamples that it is sometimes morally excusable to act impartially. When I explained how the critics' notion of impartiality is overly simplistic and that a more nuanced and practical interpretation of the principle of impartiality actually warrants preferential treatment in some circumstances, some critics went on to charge me with duplicity. These critics claimed that my argument for impartiality is inconsistent with my warranting preferential treatment based on valuing human welfare.

Some critics agreed that impartiality figures highly in most people's moral reasoning, but objected that this was only a contingent feature of moral thinking. Other commentators simply pointed to the fact that a preference for impartiality is a personal opinion, and hence necessarily subjective. Others accepted that there is a logic to moral argumentation, but pointed out that there are a multiplicity of moral frameworks, each with their own inbuilt logic and with no meta-level criterion to choose between them. Another type of objection highlighted my promotion of sophisticated emotivism as a moral theory. These objectors argued that this position's focus on preferences showed my view to be essentially subjectivist. I deal with all of these objections in this rejoinder.

Drawing another scenario in my original essay, I went on to make another substantive point against the radical subjectivists' view. I argued that by treating all moral judgements simply as personal preferences, subjectivists fail to make a distinction that we all make naturally; the distinction between moral valuations and non-moral valuations. In my essay, I used the example in which Mary bakes a cake for her friends one time and regularly performs voluntary work for the disadvantaged. Whereas we recognize that saying Mary's cake is 'good' is a non-moral judgement while saying her volunteer work is 'good' is a moral valuation, the radical subjectivist is left in the unenviable position of not being able to draw this same distinction.

In response, critics adopt one of two replies. Some critics bite the bullet, maintaining that we don't need to make a distinction between moral and non-moral judgements at all. The other line of reply is to propose a fuzzy demarcation between the two based on interpersonal behaviour. I respond to both of these lines of attack.

All up, in the following sections, I consider seven objections in these two areas of criticism; the requirement for impartiality and the need for demarcation. Responding to these objections allows me to further clarify and expand on the thesis that the notion of impartiality is embedded within the concept of ethics.

2. Acting Morally Sometimes Requires Acting Impartially

Objection

Critics expressing this objection proffer counterexamples showing cases in which basic moral principles do not always align with the requirements for acting impartially. I will repeat here the two most common counterexamples offered. The first counterexample focuses on filial affection; the preference we have as parents for the well-being of our own children. If two children were drowning, the objection states, no-one would seriously consider it immoral for a parent to try and save their own child first, even if the chances of saving the other child were slightly higher. Some critics make the more general point that it is morally acceptable, even morally obligatory, for a parent to care for their own child more than for some unknown and randomly selected child of another parent.

The second counterexample draws on our preference for national and local loyalties. Many countries, the objection runs, have developed social welfare systems to provide a cushion for their citizens in times of sickness, unemployment and other such times of stress. However, these welfare systems are not tasked with aiding the citizens of other countries who are in need of similar assistance. The citizens of each country have a preference for aiding their own citizens, and we readily accept this bias as morally benign.

Response

I will begin by making the important point that the requirement for impartiality in ethical reasoning is a very general and necessarily imprecise requirement. My argument for objectivity in ethics is a meta-ethical argument. Normative theories fill in the detail about how impartiality is cashed out in practical terms.

That being said, some normative systems do require the abolition of filial preference. Shared child-rearing, for example, was practiced in some communes in the United States in the 1960s and '70s. These child-rearing practices turned out to be failures and, perhaps, mostly for the reason that filial bonds are so deeply ingrained in us genetically. So, on normative grounds, I agree with the critics that filial preference, at least to a large extent, needs to be accommodated and even encouraged within our social norms.

The lesson here is that to be effective, our social norms need to take account of our genetic makeup and our inbuilt dispositions. Filial preference serves a highly useful social function in that if parents are largely held responsible for the welfare and upbringing of their own children, this leaves enough shared resources for use in other high-impact communal institutions that serve social utility. Such social norms can even leverage off the already strong feelings parents have for their own children.

Normative systems that rely the most heavily on the notion of impartiality build in this moral preference for aiding our own children. [Peter Singer](#) [2011] does so with his preference utilitarianism using the kind of evolutionary argument I referred to above: kin altruism is ingrained in our genes, and so for social norms to push against this tide of heredity would create more social harm than benefit. [R. M. Hare](#) [1972] allows for filial affection in that saving one's own children is what people would make as a universal rule that applies impartially to all parents. For [John Rawls](#) [1972], the special responsibilities of

family members towards each other are an essential part of the institution of the family; a bedrock institution required for any stable society.

What these three examples from leading moral thinkers show is that social norms and moral rules are not particularized to each individual. Saving one's own child from drowning in preference to saving another's child is morally permissible as our moral rules allow filial preference at the level of these wider social norms and laws. We tolerate a parent who saves their child while allowing another to drown not because he is John and has a daughter called Mary. We accept this choice because having a social norm and laws that allow parents to preferentially save their children has greater social utility than having norms and laws that prohibit it. It's how the requirement for impartiality is applied at the wider social level that counts.

Consider the inverse situation. Imagine if parent, John, were to argue that it's morally right for him to save his daughter, Mary, while allowing another child to drown because, and only because, Mary is his daughter. Singer's, Hare's and Rawls' application of the requirement of impartiality would bar John's reason as a morally relevant reason. Singer, Hare and Rawls frame impartiality differently, but they all do it in a way that excludes preferential treatment just because you are so-and-so or belong to so-and-so group. This parallels closely my notion that impartiality in ethics is the antithesis of selfishness and parochialism.

Let me state in more formal language how John saving his child, Mary, from drowning at the expense of allowing another person's child to drown satisfies the requirement for impartiality in the above kinds of normative systems.

Firstly, consider a prudential or expedient defence of John's action:

- (1) It is permissible for John to save his child, Mary, from drowning at the expense of another person's child in situations where it is not possible for John to save both because John is the father of Mary.

Consider next a moral defence of John's action:

- (2) For every parent, it is permissible for that parent to save their child from drowning at the expense of another person's child in situations where it is not possible to save both because instituting this rule creates less suffering than instituting the opposite rule.¹

Note how the second defence makes no mention of John or Mary or any other person in particular and so satisfies the weak requirement of impartiality. Accordingly, this defence is counted as a moral defence of his action (although not necessarily the best one).

I'll now address the second counterexample to the requirement for impartiality. This counterexample cites the fact that the social welfare systems of many nations are not mandated with aiding citizens of other countries. Firstly, I do not accept the premise of the argument; that citizens only look after their own. Most, if not all, developed nations devote

¹Depending on the normative ethic defended, the term 'suffering' can be replaced with the term 'preference dissatisfaction', 'unhappiness', 'personal constraints', or some other type of disvalue.

a part of their GDP to foreign aid for developing countries. Also, there are a number of major international initiatives funded through the United Nations that specifically help underdeveloped regions. WHO, UNICEF, UNRWA and UNHCR are perhaps the major ones. The international community have just completed the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals for 2015 with great success and have now, moving forward, committed to a new set of goals; the Sustainable Development Goals. Even poor countries chip in when a developed nation experiences a major disaster. In addition, there are the many private international charities to which citizens contribute as individuals that I have not mentioned.

That said, it is true that each country focuses predominantly on the welfare of its own citizens—although the level of parochialism has reduced significantly since the end of the Second World War. However, as with filial preference discussed above, this national preferentialism is accommodated, and even encouraged, by normative theories based on impartiality. Modern nation states are accorded by international covenants sovereignty over its citizens and special responsibility for their welfare, just as parents are granted rights over and responsibilities for their own children.

If each nation state was held equally responsible for the welfare of the citizens of all other nation states, important resources would be diverted away from national institutions that more efficiently satisfy local needs. Covenants that focus nations on the welfare of their own citizens first and foremost also tap into the natural sense of belongingness and loyalty citizens have for their own state. As with filial preference, authors of normative systems based on impartiality (e.g. Singer, Hare and Rawls) account naturally for this preferential treatment for a nation state's own citizens.

I think these two cases of preference for one's children and for one's fellow citizens illustrate an important point about the impartiality thesis. And that is that the requirement for impartiality in moral reasoning is not necessarily about treating everyone equally in all respects. How the requirement for impartiality cashes out in practical moral deliberation is a normative question. In fact, on the normative theories referred to above, the application of the principle of impartiality requires the opposite of treating everyone the same in some circumstances. I will have more to say on this later.

3. Impartiality Principle Contradicts Valuing Feelings

Objection

In discussions with some critics, these critics have latched on to my point that our moral laws and legal systems need to take into account our strong genetic predispositions, such as our feelings of affection for our own children and our fellow citizens. They object that I cannot have it both ways; that I cannot regard the notion of impartiality as central to ethics at the same time as elevating the importance of feelings in making moral deliberations. Justifying differential treatment of human beings, they argue, by appealing to human emotions and the minimization of suffering is just an *ad hoc* manoeuvre to avoid the difficulties of my position.

Response

I think it a mistake to counterpose the notion that impartiality is central to ethics with the view that ethics is primarily about human feelings. To be clear, I advocate a sophisticated emotivist position in meta-ethics. This position is a version of semi-cognitivism. Semi-cognitivism is a class of theories that hold that the central meaning of moral terms, such as 'good' and 'right', is their emotive meaning of expressing and commending the speaker's attitudes and preferences. In particular, the 'semi-cognitivist' aspect of this position allows for a variable descriptive component to moral terms. (I defend this position in my essay, [A Defence of Emotivism](#) [Allan 2015b]).

There is one cognitive component of moral judgements, however, for which I argue is not variable. And that is the requirement that the moral judgement is impartial. So, when a speaker says that 'Killing is wrong', for example, they may be classing killing as an act prohibited by God, as against our fundamental nature, as a cause of suffering, etc. What a particular speaker means descriptively will depend on the identity of the speaker. However, whoever the speaker may be, in making a moral judgement, they are implicitly accepting that the prohibition against killing was arrived at impartially.

This marrying of the recognized centrality of impartiality in ethics with the view that ethics is fundamentally about feelings (or, as I prefer to put it, attitudes) has a long tradition in moral philosophy. The synthesis of these two ideas can be traced back at least to one of the principal founders of empiricism, [David Hume](#). This Enlightenment philosopher conjoined the two notions that moral judgements are fundamentally based on sentiment (personal feelings) while at the same time being formulated from a general point of view (objectivity). Hume [1739: book III, part III, §I, 1777: 228f], notably, is one of the principle forerunners of the Ideal Observer Theory in meta-ethics.

An allied objection is that the principle of impartiality clashes with the principle of reducing overall suffering. In fact, there is no contradiction involved in accepting both. Utilitarianism is what you get when you combine a consequentialist theory of obligation with a hedonistic theory of value. [Peter Singer](#) and [R. M. Hare](#) are two contemporary examples of philosophers who choose both. And they are at the end of a long line of utilitarian thinkers throughout history, including [Henry Sidgwick](#), [Jeremy Bentham](#) and [J. S. Mill](#). How are these two principles married from a utilitarian perspective? For a utilitarian, our obligation is to maximize happiness and minimize suffering impartially. That

is, we are obliged to consider the interests of everyone equally, without fear or favour, when deciding how to maximize human welfare.

A conflict between the principle of impartiality and the principle of maximizing human welfare only arises if we accept the highly simplistic notion of impartiality assumed by critics. This naïve notion of impartiality requires us to treat everyone, everywhere, exactly the same. Consider, for a moment, how such a simplistic view of impartiality would work in practice. Applying the principle this way, each of us would encounter debilitating problems from the moment we woke up in the morning. When you give your partner or child your usual morning salutation, this ethic would require you to give a morning salutation to everyone else. Concurrently, it would require everyone else to give whatever salutation they give to everyone else as well. So, on normative grounds, I agree with my critics that applying the principle of impartiality in this form is manifestly overly burdensome and unworkable. Now, it's open to a moral theorist to argue on the basis of this simple, single-level interpretation of the principle. However, nobody I know or have read has seriously advocated that everyone should treat everyone else exactly the same.

Classical and modern utilitarians do not treat the notion of impartiality (and also [John Rawls](#), for that matter) in the way naïve commentators would want. For each of these thinkers, the existence of specific social roles (e.g. parent, citizen), each with their own set of special rights and responsibilities, is a consequence of applying their highest-level principle of impartiality in conjunction with a maximizing principle. The important point here is that the principle of impartiality is applied at multiple levels.

At the highest level, the principle helps define specific social roles and responsibilities. The two principles in conjunction warrant only those roles and responsibilities that provide extensive social utility. (Rawls does it somewhat differently, but the result is almost the same.) At this level, groups of individuals ask what roles and responsibilities should be set up that will provide optimum utility. The requirement for impartiality demands that the defining of each role is made without regard to the identity of specific individuals and interest groups. Examples of these specially defined social roles include that of law court judge and teacher.

At the next level down, the principle of impartiality helps to determine how the rights and obligations of an individual role-bearer are to be exercised. For example, in requiring a judge to act impartially, the body politic requires them to decide sentences without consideration of the specific identity of the accused. Similarly, with teachers, their role requires them to award grades without consideration of the identity of the student. So, the two principles combined warrant roles with specific responsibilities at the social level and warrant particular acts at the level of a specific role-bearer.

Roles with a social imprimatur also have a defined scope that limits the proper exercise of power. Part of the scope of a role defines to whom the role-bearer is responsible in the exercise of their duties. So, for example, law court judges are prescribed to only have primary authority over the accused brought before their court. Similarly, the primary responsibility of teachers is limited to children assigned to their class. The scope of a particular role is cast in a way that maximizes the public good from an impartial perspective without causing confusion and diffusion of resources.

With this explanation of how the principle of impartiality works at both the societal level and the level of an individual, I think we can better assess the critics' charge that my appeal to considerations of human welfare is an *ad hoc* attempt to salvage the principle of impartiality. With this in mind, consider the previous scenario in which a parent is forced to decide between saving their own child from drowning and saving someone else's child. Labouring under the overly simplistic reading of the principle of impartiality, the critic complains that this principle would have us reprimand the parent for wanting to save their own child first.

The foregoing considerations show that this condemnation of the parent is akin to reprimanding a judge, on the one hand, for not trying cases that are assigned to a different judge and a teacher, on the other, for not teaching children enrolled with a different teacher on the grounds that the judge and the teacher did not act impartially. When the judge and the teacher try to justify this differential treatment by appealing to their special responsibilities incumbent to their role, the critic simply dismisses their protestations as feeble *ad hoc* excuses.

This narrowing of the scope of special social roles for reasons of impartial optimization of value applies not only to parents favouring their own children, but also to citizens assisting their fellow citizens, elected officials looking after their own constituency, lawyers siding with their clients, and so on. The special responsibilities entrusted to these roles are warranted at the level of the social application of the principle of impartiality and the principle of maximizing utility. The complex question of how social roles should be defined, established and maintained is a normative one and is of a different kind to that which I am discussing here. However, in considering the relationship between the principle of impartiality and the principle of maximizing utility, it pays to have a more nuanced view of how the principle of impartiality operates at various levels.

4. People Disagree in Their Moral Judgements

Objection

With this objection, critics point out that there is a multiplicity of moral frameworks. These critics acknowledge that within some of these frameworks, the principle of impartiality is an ordering principle that defines ‘objectively’ allowable reasons for action. However, they argue, no framework itself, considered as an entirety, has an objective warrant. Each individual has adopted their own framework and each society has adopted its own ordering principles, they say, with each of these frameworks different in certain respects. What is considered moral within one framework is not considered moral within another framework, with there being no independent standpoint from which to judge one more objective than the other.

An example to illustrate this objection is the enslavement of Yazidi girls by Islamic militants. These fundamentalist Islamic fighters claim that their sexual enslavement of these young girls is morally allowable. In justifying their actions, they make no appeal to considerations of impartiality. Even though the weight of world opinion considers their actions morally depraved, critics insist, these fighters have not abused moral language in making their claims.

Response

The scenario of the captured and enslaved Yazidi girls is an excellent illustration of my thesis that for a reason for action to be a moral reason, it necessarily needs to appeal to considerations outside of the individual’s interests and that of the individual’s favoured group. *Contra* the critics claim, the Islamic fighters *are* appealing to an impartial authority. In this case, the Islamic fundamentalists are appealing to the ultimate impartial arbitrator; their God Allah. Of course, their reasoning is a bastardization of an appeal to impartiality and I stand with my critics in objecting to the fundamentalists’ rationalizations.

However, notice how we counter-argue against the soldiers’ moral position. We reason that if Allah were truly impartial, he would count the feelings of the enslaved girls equally with that of the soldiers. In addition, we would advance evidence that their trust in a supremely powerful and intelligent moral arbitrator of the universe is misplaced.

The way religious fundamentalists implicitly rely on a supreme impartial arbitrator in the face of a seemingly capricious God reminds me of how some Divine Command Theorists respond to the Euthyphro dilemma. When challenged with the seeming changeability and arbitrariness of God’s preferences, these theists insist that God would never command that we murder innocents, for example, because this would be contrary to his ‘loving’ nature. When caught on the horns of this dilemma, even the Divine Command Theorist relies on the notion that God tends to the welfare of everyone.

A final important point that I want to make here concerns how we regard the moral status of the divergent moral frameworks pointed out by my critics. I’ve argued that the reason advanced by the Islamic fundamentalists is a moral reason because it appeals to a notion of impartiality. In meta-ethical terms, the religious fighters are using moral language correctly. Contrast this with the overtly self-centred justification for opposing voluntary

euthanasia given by the third friend placed in the opening scenario described in my Introduction (§1). Precisely because it is self-centred, his justification is not counted as a moral justification.

Even though the justification given by the fundamentalist warriors is a moral reason while that given by the friend is not, the warriors' justification may not be the best moral reason. Which is the best ethical framework for judging actions is an open question. This is a normative question and not a meta-ethical question. However, the range of normative answers is constrained by what it is to be an ethical framework (as opposed to, say, a prudential, customary or aesthetic framework). This constraint means that for a framework to be an ethical framework, it necessarily allows only impartial reasons for moral action. This meta-ethical requirement is normatively quite weak. How this requirement for impartiality plays out in practice is a normative question that has exercised moral philosophers for centuries and will continue to do so for some time to come.

5. Impartiality Is a Personal Opinion

Objection

This objection centres on the point that the requirement for impartiality is only a personal preference about what ought to be the case. This requirement for impartiality is, the critic maintains, a normative view held by individuals and so does not detract from the subjectivist's thesis that all moral views are personal opinion.

Response

Whereas the previous objection highlights the diversity of moral views, this criticism relies on the fact that moral judgements are always made by people and reflect their subjective standpoint. Many critics voicing this objection either misunderstand the semantic significance of impartiality to ethical discourse or ignore it completely. Some objectors fail to appreciate the role meta-ethical theories play in analysing moral language; in clarifying the meanings of the various moral words, the structure and logic of moral reasoning and the social function of moral discourse. For these critics, non-subjectivist meta-ethical views are simply masquerading as just another normative opinion.

I think the critics relying on this objection suffer from two fundamental misconceptions. The first mistake is to think that the notion of objectivity in ethics necessarily precludes the personal nature of moral judgements. The critics' muddle here is to think that the requirement for objectivity in ethics and the grounding of values in subjective judgements are mutually exclusive. This mistake is founded on the notion that 'objective' can only mean 'independent from mind and personal feelings'. However, there is another meaning of 'objective' that is just as common. In this sense, 'objective' means 'free of prejudice and bias'.

In common parlance, we sometimes ask people to 'be objective' as they think through making an important decision. When a good friend is contemplating whether to accept a marriage proposal and when a neighbour is working through how to distribute her worldly goods after she dies, we advise them 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. Utilizing this important meaning of 'objective', there is no contradiction between a person expressing their personal value judgement while at the same time objectively considering all relevant interests.

The second major misconception this type of critic labours under is to think that because all moral judgments are personal opinion, *ipso facto*, no judgement can be objective. The critic's conclusion does not necessarily follow from their premise. Consider a parallel case; the realm of human knowledge and beliefs. All of our beliefs about nature are 'personal opinion'. However, that fact alone does not count against the view that there are objective facts about nature.

To be clear, I'm not saying that there are objective facts about morality in the same way that there are objective facts about nature. I don't think there are. What I am saying is that simply pointing out that our moral values are 'personal' does not lend support to the view that there are no objective constraints on our values. Just as the fact that our beliefs are 'personal' does not validate the view that there are no rational constraints on our beliefs.

6. Demarcation Is an Answer without a Problem

Objection

In my original essay [Allan 2015a], I raised the demarcation problem faced by subjectivists; the problem of demarcating moral valuations from non-moral valuations. Some critics object that this is a problem of the objectivists' own making. These critics claim that we don't need a precise distinction between the two kinds of valuations as all valuations, in the end, are grounded in personal preference. Similarly, they say, we regularly make artistic judgments without relying on objective criteria for what counts as 'art'. Less strident critics propose the fuzzy demarcation criterion that 'moral' judgements are those that express preferences about how we treat fellow human beings.

Response

I will deal first with the proposal that a sufficiently precise demarcation between moral and non-moral valuations is the divide between those judgements, respectively, that are about how human beings treat each other and those that are not. I don't think this will do as this demarcation criterion easily breaks down. My friend asks me whether he should go out with Joan or June and I respond, 'Go out with Joan as she is more fun'. This valuation is about how my friend treats Joan and June, but this is about a prudential choice and not a moral choice.

Considering next our need to have a precise distinction, I agree with my critics that it is acceptable for the moral/non-moral divide to be fuzzy around the edges. Many of our philosophical concepts and everyday notions are imprecise, including the criterion of impartiality that I advocate. However, it's another thing to not be able to make a meaningful distinction at all. Returning to the example above, my friend could have asked me instead whether he should bash Joan or June. For the subjectivist, it seems, there is no moral distinction between my friend deliberating on whom to date and his deciding on whom to bash. For the subjectivist, both decisions have the same moral significance.

Many moral philosophers argue that the key reason we make a distinction between purely prudential choices (such as who we date) and moral choices (such as who we bash) is that it is only the latter type of choice we reserve for public condemnation and commendation and reward and punishment. On a simple subjectivist account, this crucial distinction is missed entirely.

In the field of aesthetics, philosophers and art critics similarly debate where the dividing line between art and non-art lies. Drawing this dividing line clearly is important in the interests of both human communication and social policy. In ordinary language, we label a sunflower painting by Van Gogh a work of art, but not the number '8' or sodium iodide. Politically, governments allocate the budget for 'the Arts' as a different bucket of money to the one allocated to public infrastructure. To be sure, the art/non-art distinction is fuzzy around the edges. However, it's not the case that any person's personal opinion about what counts as art is as competent as any other.

A meta-ethical theory that cannot explain our natural language distinction between moral normativity and other forms of normativity is, I think, highly problematic. Any

convincing meta-ethical theory needs to explain a number of key features of moral language. Questions that any competent theory needs to answer include, Why are we motivated to do what we think is right and how do we come to know what is good? It also needs to give an adequate account of our feeling that morality is independent of our personal preferences, our conviction that moral judgements are true or false and the role that facts and logic play in moral argument. The demarcation between moral judgements and non-moral judgements is another one of these important features of moral discourse that a competent and comprehensive meta-ethical theory needs to explain in a convincing way. The subjectivists' failure to provide such an explanation remains a serious limitation of their view.

7. Impartiality Is Only a Contingent Feature of Ethics

Objection

The simpler version of this objection is that I am factually in error in contending that everyone agrees that impartiality is a necessary requirement for ethical thinking. Critics espousing a more sophisticated version accept that most people favour the principle of impartiality in their moral thinking, but object that this is only a contingent fact about human preferences. This sociological fact, these critics argue, cannot then be masqueraded as an ‘objective’ truth about the nature of morality itself. This descriptive generalization about what people prefer, they continue, does not entail anything about the meaning of ethical terms. The critics’ case is illustrated with a counter-example: even if 99% of people opine, ‘Ice cream is delicious’, this fact does not make ‘ice cream is delicious’ objectively true. If one person exclaims, ‘Ice cream is awful’, this person is not wrong. They only have different tastes.

Response

Dealing with the simpler version of this objection first, I’m not contending that it is a fact that everyone agrees that impartiality is a necessary requirement for ethical thinking. For me or any student of meta-ethics to say that would be clearly overstretching the mark. What I am advancing is the linguistic component of a broader meta-ethical thesis about how moral language functions. Like any linguistic thesis, it relies on informed analysis. However, it can’t be expected that every man and woman in the street will agree with the thesis. Take the linguistic analysis of the English words ‘the’ and ‘a’. A linguist will tell you that these are, respectively, the definite and indefinite articles that function to point out a specific referent and a class of referents. Ask the man and woman in the street what these words mean and you will be met with an array of answers and some quizzical looks. Of course, these varied responses do not invalidate the linguist’s analysis of these words.

For contentious linguistic analyses and for meta-ethical theories in general, there will be an absence of agreement even among the experts. However, to get to the truth of these matters, the least helpful thing to do is to take a poll to gauge what every person in the street thinks. Students of meta-ethics, of course, should take heed of the way moral terms function in ordinary language. That was my purpose in presenting the two scenarios in my earlier essay, [Is Morality Subjective?](#) [Allan 2015a]. I used these scenarios (about bribing a politician and beating up a bystander) in order to show that impartiality is built into the concept of morality. The additional scenario I painted in the Introduction (§1) to this essay (about friends discussing voluntary euthanasia) further advances this same purpose.

I will now address the more sophisticated version of the objection. *Contra* the claim of these critics, my method was not to generalize the normative views of the populace and then declare the result ‘objective’. I will illustrate my defence using the critic’s ice cream example. Consider first the recognized semantic constraints to what the word ‘delicious’ can apply and the logic behind the use of the word. If I said, ‘The sky is delicious’, you would think me, on a generous interpretation, simply ignorant of what the word means or, on a less generous interpretation, delusional. That’s because, although the word ‘delicious’ may have wide descriptive meaning, it has some ‘thin’ descriptive content that restricts its use to apply to only what we eat. That’s part of the logic of the usage of the term ‘delicious’.

The critics are correct in pointing out that whether something is 'delicious' is a subjective judgement. However, that truism has no bearing on the fact that the word is reserved for describing and commending the taste of the food we eat. Lexicographers find out this fact about the range of the word by observing how competent English speakers use the word in ordinary discourse. I can agree with the critics who argue that the proportion of the populace who judge ice cream to be delicious compared with how many don't is irrelevant to the meaning of the word 'delicious'. In the same way, how many people think enslaving the Yazidi girls discussed in §4 is right compared with how many think it's wrong is irrelevant to the meaning of the word 'right'. Once we understand how semantic constraints work, we can see how the fact that people apply words such as 'delicious' and 'right' to different things does not count against my thesis.

So, to sum up, the veracity of my thesis does not rely on counting up how many people morally approve of impartiality and then objectifying the result. It is a mistaken analogy to liken my chain of argument to counting up how many people think ice cream is delicious. My reasoning is more akin to evaluating how many competent users of the English language think that the blueness of the sky is either a reason for thinking that it is delicious or that it is not delicious. These sorts of enquiries help to map out the semantic scope of a word in a way that elucidates its meaning.

The foregoing discussion crystallizes an important point about my thesis. The kind of objectivity in ethics that I am advocating is not the kind that ascribes to ethics some kind of spooky metaphysical truth or ontological reality outside of human preferences. I think it is this prospect that engenders in the less sophisticated subjectivist an automatic reaction against any kind of suggestion that ethics has an objective aspect to it. This discussion shows that the 'objectivity' (in the sense of 'impartiality') for which I am arguing is a linguistic constraint on how a competent user of moral language justifies their moral judgments. I am not contending that this constraint is imposed by some mysterious property of the universe or some divine being.

8. Sophisticated Emotivism Is a Subjectivist Meta-ethic

Objection

Critics voicing this objection seek to expose a glaring inconsistency between my advocacy for an objective element to ethics and my acceptance of a subjectivist meta-ethic. For this objection to have effect, these critics lean on a particular criterion for demarcating objectivist and subjectivist meta-ethical views. For them, an ‘objectivist’ meta-ethic regards the rightness and wrongness of an action as entirely independent of human judgement. A ‘subjectivist’ meta-ethic, on the other hand, considers the moral status of an action to be dependent on personal human valuations. The sophisticated emotivist view I advocate, they claim, is a paradigm example of a subjectivist meta-ethical view.

Response

The first point to note is that in the field of meta-ethical enquiry, moral philosophers draw the objectivist/subjectivist divide in a variety of ways. The terms ‘objectivism’ and ‘subjectivism’ mean different things in different texts, depending on which author you are reading. This lack of agreement on meanings leads to some confusion. Many definitions are unclear or not particularly helpful. For example, classifying ‘sociological report’ type subjectivism as ‘objectivist’ for the reason that group psychological reports have a robust truth value is confusing. Categorizing Ideal Observer and Divine Command Theories, on the other hand, as ‘subjectivist’ because they are mind-dependent is similarly confounding.

The demarcation criterion adopted by proponents of this objection is another case in point. One could argue that on these critics’ definition of ‘objective’, my scheme is objective because whether it is true or not that a particular moral decision is impartially arrived at is entirely independent of human judgement. The ascription of this truth value is akin to how we assign a truth value to other statements about human feelings. For example, the statement, ‘The British feel hot when the temperature surpasses 30 degrees Celsius’, is true or false independently of whether we believe the statement to be true or not.

Given this confusing fluidity and ambiguity in what moral philosophers take ‘objectivism’ and ‘subjectivism’ to mean, there is no compulsion to call a broadly naturalist view of ethics, such as mine, ‘subjectivist’. This multiplicity in classification schemes also means that anyone who advocates some form of ‘objectivity’ in ethics is not, *ipso facto*, a promoter of some mysterious metaphysical realm. What I am advocating is that we regard morality to be objective not in some spooky sense of being commanded by God or being part of the fabric of the universe, but in the sense of requiring impartiality of judgement. Pronouncing that ethics is ‘subjective’ only confuses the sophisticated naturalist view that grounds our moral systems in our evolutionary history and social organization with a naïve subjectivist meta-ethic that simply identifies moral judgements with introspective psychological reports or sociological records.

I want to turn now from a general consideration of how moral philosophers classify meta-ethical theories to the view I advocate in particular. Sophisticated emotivism is one of a number of theories that provide a broadly naturalist account of ethics. In that respect, it may be described as a ‘subjectivist’ moral theory. On the other hand, the sophisticated emotivist recognizes that moral terms, such as ‘good’ and ‘right’, have a variety of

descriptive meanings, depending on the identity of the speaker. Along with many noted philosophers throughout history, I'm contending that the descriptive import of moral terms is not entirely variable. Terms such as 'good' and 'right' are semantically constrained in a way that requires their application to be universalized. I explain this by saying that a moral reason for action must be impartial.² It is in this sense that objectivity is a necessary requirement for a reason to be a moral reason and why I argue that labelling ethics as 'subjective' is misleading.

That moral terms have a minimal logic and descriptive semantics built into them is best illustrated by likening them to our term 'democracy'. Fundamentally, this term refers to a system of government that represents the interests of the people. The term 'democracy' is a good example to illustrate my point as it is a term that C. L. Stevenson [1963: ch. III, 1976: ch. IX] calls a 'persuasive definition'. In giving a persuasive definition of 'democracy', a speaker is commending that system of government (constituting the emotive meaning of the term) in addition to stating what 'true' or 'real' democracy is about.

Political thinkers propose different factors as distorting the representative will of the people. These advocates even have different ideas about which people should be represented. So, the early Greeks defined 'democracy' as excluding women and slaves. Some modern liberals think that a 'real' democracy excludes private donations to election campaign funds. Others think it necessitates dispersed media power or a plebiscite for every major decision or the exclusion of gerrymandered electorates.

However, even with all of these different definitions of 'true democracy', the central descriptive meaning of 'representative government' cannot be ignored by a speaker on pain of speaking gibberish. If a speaker announces, for example, that a 'real democracy' is a song with 3/4 timing, we would say that they did not understand the meaning of 'democracy'. We would rightly conclude that the speaker is not a competent user of the term.

The same semantic constraints apply to the meanings of our moral terms. Even though each of our moral words has wide descriptive meaning, as with the emotive term 'democracy', they each have minimal descriptive content. This 'thin' content becomes apparent in the logic of moral justification I describe in my original essay, [Is Morality Subjective?](#) [Allan 2015a]. That we don't allow my neighbour to morally justify bribing a politician by appealing only to his own interests demonstrates that there is this logic to moral justification. This logic of justification, I argue, is predicated on the requirement of impartiality that is built semantically into moral terms and governs their correct application.

The upshot here is that sophisticated emotivism sits comfortably with the notion that the 'thin' descriptive content contained in generic moral terms, such as 'good' and 'right', give an element of objectivity to ethics. Furthermore, this moral theory is also consistent with allowing other moral terms to have 'thick' descriptive content. These include terms such as 'justice', 'benevolent', 'charitable' and 'fair'. Terms such as these necessarily include additional notions of reward distribution, punishment, empathy, and so on. As I argued in §6, without allowing for such 'thin' and 'thick' descriptive content in our moral words, it becomes theoretically impossible to distinguish moral from non-moral judgements. This is the challenge faced by 'subjectivist' moral theories.

²I also note here that this aspect of impartiality explains the supervenience of moral qualities in a way that a simple 'subjectivist' account fails to do. If action *X* in circumstances *A* is morally right because it treats interests impartially, then any identical act *Y* in circumstances *A* is, *ergo*, also morally right.

9. Epilogue

In this essay, I responded to a number of key objections to the thesis I presented in my [Is Morality Subjective?](#) [Allan 2015a]. Here, I will make a few concluding remarks on the status of the debate and progress made. Many critics were adamant that the position I took in my essay really amounted to a subjectivist view in disguise. Although the subjectivist outlook defended by these critics is a relatively unsophisticated version of a naturalist ethic, it is a view that dominates the public domain, especially in forums and blogs. Because of its wide public exposure and acceptance, I think it a view worth challenging. This version of moral subjectivism is generally expressed as the idea that moral utterances are either a simple psychological or sociological report of what some person or social group prefers.

More sophisticated varieties of a naturalist ethic could be described as ‘subjectivist’ using a very broad sense of the term. In this broad sense, a meta-ethic is ‘subjectivist’ if it regards moral judgements as fundamentally grounded in human preferences and eschews notions of supernatural and non-natural entities and properties. My own view falls into this category. Overtly labelling all such naturalist positions as ‘subjectivist’, though, is to miss a fundamentally important aspect of moral discourse; the requirement for impartiality. Philosophically speaking, including the more sophisticated naturalist positions under the ‘subjectivist’ moniker only confuses this view with the naïve subjectivist view that simply identifies moral judgements with introspective psychological or sociological reports.

There is another very important motivation for refraining from using the ‘subjectivist’ label for views such as mine that so-called ‘subjectivists’ fail to appreciate. Accepting the ‘subjectivist’ moniker gives far too much ground to the religious and other purveyors of superstitious ideas. Adopting this label only confirms for them that all naturalists are at bottom nihilists and egotists. Calling ourselves ‘subjectivists’ conveys the impression to the public as well that all naturalists think that moral preferences are just about what I want. It gives the mistaken impression that for all naturalists, a moral choice is akin to choosing which tie or scarf to wear. I much prefer the label ‘naturalism’ for describing the general view that grounds our moral systems in our evolutionary history and social organization.

In my discussions with ‘subjectivists’, I sensed a missed opportunity for them to delve into some of the complexity of moral theory. In the light of my replies to their objections, some ‘subjectivists’ simply dug in their heels, insisting that if a moral valuation is expressed by a human being, it is by definition subjective. These critics missed a more nuanced understanding of moral discourse and the role played by impartial reasoning. To a large extent, the implications I drew from my scenarios about the semantics and logic of moral language were simply ignored. I saw from ‘subjectivists’ little appetite to engage with the case studies I presented. The same was true with discussions about how the principle of impartiality should be applied to concrete moral situations. Here again, critics missed a more nuanced and politically informed notion of equal treatment.

I will end this epilogue with some additional comments clarifying the role of objectivity in ethics and the logic of moral discourse. I can summarize my position by first saying what it is not. The requirement for objectivity in ethics does not mean that moral obligatoriness is somehow written into the fabric of the universe or commanded by some

supernatural entity. Accepting the constraint of impartiality in our legitimate use of moral language is akin to our recognition of the semantic constraint on the way we use the term 'democracy'. That the term 'democracy' can only apply to forms of representative government doesn't mean that the democratic ideal exists in some transcendental realm. Similarly, the constraints on our use of ethical terms are just linguistic constraints.

How do these constraints give us moral reasons to act? In my view, they don't do this directly. The psychopath is not constrained by the universe to act morally or with regard to the interests of other human beings. It helps to liken our system of moral norms to the game of chess. The psychopath is free to not play the game of morality at all—just as she is free not to play the game of chess. But if she chooses to play the game of chess, then she is bound by the rules of chess. She can't opt in to the game of chess and then decide 'subjectively' that she will move her King three places in one move. Committing to abiding by the rules is, precisely, what it means to opt in to playing the game of chess.

This constraint to play by the rules applies equally when the psychopath or any other rational agent opts in to the practice of behaving morally. Once the psychopath decides to act in accord with moral norms, certain justifications are no longer permissible. Once opted in, she is barred from morally justifying her behaviour with self-serving reasons. Just as a chess player can't decide to move his King three spaces with the reason that he felt like it. If he did move his King that way, he would no longer be playing chess. That's a question of logic.³

³I say more on comparing moral with other non-moral normative systems (e.g. chess) in my Allan [2015d].

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