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Is morality ultimately subjective or objective?

“You’re wrong and I am right”, “I’m wrong and you’re right”, “It doesn’t matter, we are all right universally”, and “Right and wrong do matter universally”. This tug-of-war between subjective morality and objective morality is discussed a lot in topics of philosophy, business, religion, and much more. It is one ethical issue that has intrigued me the most ever since being introduced to it. My position stands on the fact that morality is not subjective to what society makes it to be but rather morality is separate from what society deems to be true and it is objective truth. Ultimately, my position stems from my experience of everyday life but my belief in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior also support and has always supported this claim since the beginning of time. If there is no God there is no good and evil! We will dive into more of this later in the composition as we look at both sides of the spectrum in this discussion.

To begin with, “Morality consists of rules of human behavior and specifies that certain actions are wrong or immoral and that others are right or moral.”(DeGeorge, 6) A lot of our day-to-day decisions that we make as human beings stem from our comprehension of what we perceive to be right and what we perceive to be wrong. These actions lived out consistently begin to form our character as individuals. Thus making up a society that consists of a collection of individuals that have their sense of morality different from one another. For example, stealing as a whole may be viewed as immoral to some while others may think differently depending on the

circumstance in which stealing occurred. Now I'll admit, certain issues are grayer than they are black and white that all boils down to one's sustained moral compass.

One quick note to add before we move on, the concept of business is not something separate that is from society. Having said that, this discussion about where morality is objective or subjective plays into how businesses operate as well. Our textbook covers this well as it states, "Because business activity is human activity, it can be evaluated from the moral point of view, just as any other human activity can be so evaluated."(DeGeorge, 6)

As an employer or manager of some type, there needs to be a level of trust present in the employees you lead so that the decisions they make align with the business moral code which is normally an objective one. For instance, a cashier employee of a business must not steal money because of two reasons. One, that takes money away from the profit the business is supposed to make ultimately producing negative effects on the workplace. Second, being that stealing is objectively wrong creates distrust as well in the work environment that may be hard to or never earned back by the superior.

Now, where do the terms 'subjective morality and 'objective morality come from? As defined in our textbook, "An action is subjectively right if a person believes that the action is moral. An action is objectively right if the action is in conformity with the moral law."(DeGeorge, 25) In other words, subjective morals are solely based on the individual but objective morals are made universally not up to interpretation by the individual. These two terms 'subjective' and 'objective' were first introduced in European medieval philosophy. Surprisingly they meant the total opposite of what they mean now. According to JRank Articles, "Their meanings then were nearly the reverse of their current use: *subject* meant that which exists,

whereas *object* referred to what is perceived in consciousness.” It was not until the eighteenth century that philosopher Immanuel Kant spearheaded the debate on objectivity. “Kant concluded that it is impossible to have knowledge of the world as it is, independent of human observers, beyond our categories, or to use later terminology, objectively.”(JRank Articles, 1).

After Kant’s efforts to discuss this reality, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and phenomenology attempted this distinction between the two terms. Thinking it would rather reunite the world by viewing them as aspects of an ideal world spirit that we can know by an act of self-consciousness. To add to that, the studies of Edmund Husserl point to the claim that “prior to cognitive processes, such as scientific abstraction, that distinguish the objective from the subjective, we live in an immediate a subjective "life-world." (JRank Articles, 1)

Nonetheless, after the analysis of him and his colleagues, they found a new division between the universal immediate human consciousness and the objective scientific worldview. Other well-known philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx also happened to oppose the objectivity belief with concepts like economic interests and power relations.

Transitioning to the argument for subjective morality, David Hume plays a pretty big role in affirming this reality. Hume being a well-known philosopher and having produced several works like, *A Treatise of Human Nature* , the *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals* , and *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, claims first that the foundations of morality has nothing to do with God. “Hume’s claim entails a rejection of the idea that moral distinctions between good and evil are instituted by divine command, as argued by voluntarists such as Pufendorf, Luther, or Calvin.”(Wilson and Denis, 1) He is known

to be a skeptic of the human ability to even know about a high reality. Adding to his belief that the issue of morality is distinctly and entirely a human phenomenon.

Now, G.E. Moore's thinking is in alignment with Hume's on this particular issue. Author of the popular philosophical book, *Principia Ethica*, Moore introduces the idea of the term 'naturalistic fallacy' and the indefinability of "good". His position is highlighted even more in this article entitled, "Moral Objectivity and Responsibility in Ethics: A Socratic Response to Hume's Legacy in the 20th Century." by Owen J Anderson. "Some things (beauty, relationships) are good in themselves and one must simply 'see' this. Here is the influence of Hume: Moral claims cannot be said to be more or less rational, one simply has them."(Anderson, 182)

Essentially, G.E. Moore's position of what is good or pleasurable is just as it is simply in the secularist perspective. By this logic, objectivity is in trouble because "if the individual is the final arbiter of what is good, then disagreements about beauty or relationships are incommensurable – there is no hope for a universal moral law based on a universal good grounded in a universal human nature."(Anderson, 182) Moore's ethical philosophy points to a mind-dependent account of morality.

Having said that, the same article describes the scientific context brought forth by Moore's position. By setting aside the God or the "good" argument, Gilbert Harman sought to find out how morality is established solely relative to an individual's mind. Like Moore, Harman saw a problem with objectivity. "Objectivity requires a subject independent standard that can be confirmed by others...If objectivity means 'mind independent,' yet moral sensibility can be explained in light of the person making the moral observation, then moral sensibility is not objective."(Anderson, 182) What Harman is trying to get at here is that the moral principles of an

individual can help to explain the action as being immoral or moral but the deeper thought of the observation cannot be objective. Although, I would have to admit this argument may be on to something here, let's dive into what I believe to be true.

When it comes to defending my position on the concept of morality being objective, I am going to point attention to what our textbook states on this subject matter. There are three characteristics associated with the judgments of right and wrong, and good and bad. "First, moral judgments about the rightness or wrongness of an action are held to be universally applicable...Second, moral judgments are important...Third, moral praise can properly accompany the doing of morally right actions, and moral blame can properly accompany acting immorally." (DeGeorge, 24) I believe these are the most fundamental yet powerful aspects of morality that objective truth falls under.

Can subjective morality be universally applicable? The answer is no and is found in almost every evil act performed in history. Let's discuss the terrible time of the Holocaust. From the subjective morality perspective, the Nazi society headed by Adolf Hitler did nothing wrong nor did they do anything right, they just did. And if you felt that there was a problem with their action you would be responding from an objectively moral perspective. You see, my belief is that we as human beings cannot live the subjective moral life out with consistency and universally day in and day out.

In a blog post from California Baptist University, Leonard points out that the argument for common sense aids the position for objective morality. "If morality is subjective (and thus relative to society), then there is really nothing wrong with slavery. But that's nuts! Slavery is

obviously wrong (and objectively so!). Therefore, it follows by logic alone that morality is not subjective.”(Leonard, 1)

Secondly, our ability to distinguish between what is morally right and wrong is essential to how we live as human beings. With that being said, objective morality supports that claim through and through. In “Moral Objectivity and Responsibility in Ethics: A Socratic Response to Hume’s Legacy in the 20th Century.”, Socrates points out that we as humans have a responsibility to make this determination. “Humans are responsible to know what is good because they are responsible to know what it is to be a human.”(Anderson, 181)

Subjective morality presents a real danger to the human species if we allow it to do so. Brenden Morino Carbonell points this out in his article, “Education’s Shortcomings, Says Who?”. “The subjectivity, or relativity, of morality that has flourished in American society in the past 50 years has gradually trickled down into the universities, and eventually into the high schools and elementary schools. While experimentation with social values may be appropriate for college students, it is not necessarily beneficial to encourage younger, less experienced students to find their own morality.”(Carbonell, 1)

Thirdly, being that morality is purely objective, we have the opportunity to praise but also place blame on others who perform morally and immorally. Now, if morality was purely subjective, who are we to say what is right or wrong if moral principles vary from person to person, ultimately no one is right or wrong. The Cal Baptist blog post entitled, ‘The Call’, gets at this issue by using an example of the wife of the writer thinking chocolate ice cream is better than vanilla while he thinks the opposite. “Ask yourself this, though: if we were to have an argument about which is better (chocolate or vanilla), would we really be disagreeing about an

objective fact in the world? No. Clearly not. That's because this whole dispute boils down to a matter of taste. And taste is subjective.”(Leonard, 1)

You see we can't truly disagree on important moral issues if morality was truly subjective. if morality is subjective, then no two people could ever really disagree about a particular moral issue (in the same way that my wife and I don't really disagree about an objective fact in the world when it comes to taste). (Leonard, 1)

To think that I brought forth all this evidence in support of my position on morality being objective and I haven't even implemented biblical Scripture surprised even me. We as humans were created for God and by God with a purpose that He has ordained for us specifically as Genesis 1:27 states “ So God created man in His own image”. Everything in life points to a creator and life, like the mind, being so abstract and complex, points to an even greater mind behind it. So my belief stands on the idea that even the thought of morality and things in this world being right and wrong come from God. He is the one that sets the standard of good and bad, and right and wrong. Romans 13:1-7, reveals God as being our ultimate authority and that even all authorities that exist on Earth have been instituted by Him and Him alone.

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