

# Moral Subjectivism vs Moral Objectivism

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Moral subjectivism is not self-defeating, contrary to what moral objectivists claim. Ockham's Razor favours moral subjectivism over moral objectivism. It is circular for moral objectivists to say that since we construct sound and cogent arguments out of moral statements, moral statements are true. Moral subjectivism acknowledges the role that arguments play in our moral lives, contrary to what moral objectivists contend. The way in which moral objectivists attempt to establish moral objectivism ironically supports moral subjectivism.

**Keywords:** moral objectivism, moral properties, moral subjectivism, Ockham's Razor

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## INTRODUCTION

Do moral properties and moral facts exist in the world? Are moral statements expressions of emotions or descriptions of the world? Are moral statements true or false in the way factual statements are true or false? Do we use the faculty of practical reason to acquire moral truths? What is proven by the fact that we construct arguments for and against moral judgments? Moral subjectivism and objectivism offer opposing answers to these questions, and the debates between them rage on in the literature. This paper jumps into the debate, defending moral subjectivism and criticising moral objectivism.

This paper unfolds the debate as follows. In Section 2, I enunciate moral subjectivism and objectivism. In Section 3, I defuse moral objectivists' criticism that moral subjectivism is self-defeating. In Section 4, I point out that moral objectivism multiplies faculties and properties beyond necessity. In Section 5, I critically respond to moral objectivists' argument that since we construct sound and cogent arguments out of moral statements, moral statements are true. In Section 6, I argue that the way in which moral objectivists justify moral objectivism ironically supports moral subjectivism. Overall, moral subjectivism is a better meta-ethical theory than moral objectivism.

## MORAL SUBJECTIVISM AND OBJECTIVISM

Moral subjectivism holds that moral statements express emotions, and that moral properties and moral facts do not exist in the world, i.e. they are not part of the physical universe. For example, when we make the moral judgment that eating meat is moral, we express a positive emotion toward eating meat, and when we make the moral judgment that eating meat is immoral, we express a negative emotion toward eating meat. Our judgments about eating meat are neither true nor false. They can at best be appropriate or inappropriate. In addition,

the properties of being moral and immoral do not inhere in the action of eating meat. As D. Hume claims, you cannot find moral properties ‘till you turn your reflexion into your own breast’ (Hume 1888/1978: 468–469).

In contrast to moral subjectivism, moral objectivism asserts that ‘objective moral values are values that exist independently of humans’ (Alvaro 2020: 22). On this account, the world is inhabited by moral properties and moral facts. Moral judgments express beliefs rather than emotions, so they are true or false. They are true if and only if they correspond to moral facts in the world, and they are false if and only if they do not correspond to any facts in the world. In this sense, moral judgments are not different from factual judgments. C. Alvaro offers the following apt analogy:

Two individuals may have different opinions on whether the Empire State Building is in Paducah or whether it is in New York City. But the objective fact is that it is in New York City. One is right and the other is wrong. Similarly, it does not follow that abortion is moral and immoral at the same time (Alvaro 2020: 35).

This analogy between the location of the Empire State Building and the morality of abortion indicates that for moral objectivists, a moral judgment is true or false in exactly the way a factual judgment is true or false. In other words, a moral statement is true just in case the world is as it says it is, and is false just in case the world is not as it says it is.

In contrast to moral objectivism, moral subjectivism asserts that the moral statement ‘Torturing a cat is immoral’ is profoundly different from the factual statement ‘Continents move around’. Specifically, the moral statement expresses an emotion, so it is neither true nor false, while the factual statement expresses a belief, i.e. it describes the world, so it is either true or false. On the moral subjectivist account, a moral judgment is not the kind of mental state that is capable of being true or false, and there is nothing in the world that renders a moral judgment true or false.

## INCOHERENT?

Alvaro raises an intriguing objection to moral subjectivism: he claims that ‘subjectivism is self-refuting’ (Alvaro 2020: 22). On his account, moral subjectivism is incoherent because moral subjectivists take moral subjectivism to be objective. If moral subjectivism is objective, as moral subjectivists claim, then moral subjectivism, which claims that all judgments are moral subjective, is false. This criticism against moral subjectivism is incisive and appears to be a lethal strike against moral subjectivism.

In response to this strike, I distinguish between the two variants of moral subjectivism that I call ‘general subjectivism’ and ‘moral subjectivism’. General subjectivism asserts that all judgments, whether moral or factual, are subjective. By contrast, moral subjectivism asserts that moral judgments are subjective, but that factual judgments are objective, i.e. that moral statements express emotions, so they are neither true nor false, but that factual statements describe the world, so they are either true or false. For example, it is a subjective judgment that torturing a cat is immoral, but it is an objective judgment that continents move around. General and moral subjectivists have different strategies to get around Alvaro’s objection that subjectivism is self-defeating. Let me unpack their strategies one by one.

General subjectivists cheerfully grant that general subjectivism is subjective. Since they deny that general subjectivism is objective, their position does not fall prey to Alvaro’s criticism that it is self-defeating for subjectivists to take subjectivism to be objective. In response,

moral objectivists would reject general subjectivism, pointing out that it is subjective, and that a subjective position only deserves to be rejected. However, general subjectivists would also reject moral objectivism, pointing out that it is subjective, and that a subjective position only deserves to be rejected. Their rejection of moral objectivism is in line with their tenet that all views, including moral objectivism, are subjective. As a result, moral objectivists and general subjectivists would be on a level playing field.

Let me turn to moral subjectivists. Recall that they are subjectivists about moral judgments, but objectivists about factual judgments. An interesting question arises. Should moral subjectivists be subjectivists or objectivists about moral subjectivism? My answer is that they should be objectivists about moral subjectivism. After all, moral subjectivism is not an expression of emotion about moral judgments, but rather a description of moral judgments and thus it is either true or false. It is true if and only if moral statements are expressions of emotions and hence it is neither true nor false; it is false if and only if moral statements are descriptions of the world and hence they are either true or false. It is coherent for moral subjectivists to take moral subjectivism to be objective on the grounds that it is a description of moral judgments.

### MULTIPLYING FACULTIES AND PROPERTIES

Some combatants kill prisoners of war during the war. Moral subjectivism has a convincing explanation of why they kill prisoners of war: it says that their anger toward their enemies defeats their feeling of repulsion toward their actions of killing prisoners of war. By contrast, moral objectivism cannot offer a convincing explanation of their behaviour. Moral objectivists would claim that the combatants kill prisoners of war because they fail to detect the property of being immoral in their actions of killing prisoners of war. This explanation is implausible. Imagine that moral objectivists watch the combatants kill prisoners of war, and say to them, 'What happened to your eyes? Don't you see the property of being immoral in your action?' The combatants would confidently say, 'There is nothing wrong with my eyes; my ophthalmologist checked my eyes today. He said there was nothing wrong with my eyes. Yet I don't see the moral property in my action.'

Moral objectivists might reply that the combatants see the property of being immoral in their actions, but their anger toward their enemies outweighs their feeling of repulsion toward their actions; as a result, they behave as they do. However, this explanation is not different from moral subjectivists' explanation above. After all, the moral objectivist hypothesis that the property of being immoral is immanent in the combatants' actions does not do any explanatory work, i.e. it contributes nothing to the explanation. Only the moral subjectivist hypothesis that the combatants' anger toward their enemies is more powerful than their feeling of repulsion toward killing prisoners of war does the explanatory work. Therefore, it is otiose to posit the existence of the property of being immoral that allegedly inheres in the combatants' actions.

Moral objectivists would retort that we do not use the faculty of perception to detect moral properties in the world, but rather we use the faculty of *practical reason*<sup>1</sup> to know that moral properties exist in the world. In this vein, J. Rachels and S. Rachels state that 'Moral

<sup>1</sup> The faculty of practical reason is an alleged mental faculty that specialises in producing moral knowledge. It contrasts with the faculty of theoretical reason, which produces scientific knowledge.

truths are truths of reason; that is, a moral judgment is true if it is backed up by better reasons than the alternatives' (Rachels, Rachels 2010: 41). Similarly, Alvaro claims that 'we can use reason and our moral experience of objective moral values and duties to determine that certain values are moral and immoral' (Alvaro 2020: 32).

Is this account of how we acquire moral truths adequate? In my view, it is to multiply faculties and properties beyond necessity to suggest that we use the faculty of practical reason to know that moral statements are true or false, and hence that certain actions have the properties of being moral or immoral. Consider the gustatory judgment that an apple is sweet. Gustatory objectivists, those who believe that gustatory properties inhere in physical objects, might say that gustatory truths are truths of *gustatory reason*, and that we use the faculty of gustatory reason to know that gustatory judgments are true or false, and hence that gustatory properties exist in the world. Just as it goes against Ockham's Razor for gustatory objectivists to postulate the existence of the faculty of gustatory reason and gustatory properties, so it goes against Ockham's Razor for moral objectivists to postulate the existence of the faculty of practical reason and moral properties.

In case readers are not yet convinced of this objection, I invite them to consider the following confrontation between vegetarians and omnivorians. Vegetarians claim that we use the faculty of *vegetarian reason* to know that the property of being immoral inheres in the action of eating meat. By contrast, omnivorians claim that we use the faculty of *omnivorian reason* to know that the property of being moral inheres in the action of eating meat. This confrontation between vegetarians and omnivorians indicates that both vegetarians and omnivorians postulate the existence of the faculties and moral properties exclusively for their own self-serving theoretical purposes of justifying their positions.

In my view, the same is true of moral objectivists. Moral objectivists postulate the existence of the faculty of practical reason and moral properties exclusively for their own self-serving theoretical purpose of justifying moral objectivism. Just as it is *ad hoc* for vegetarians and omnivorians to postulate the existence of the faculties and moral properties, so it is *ad hoc* for moral objectivists to postulate the existence of the faculty of practical reason and moral properties. Moral objectivists' story that we use the faculty of practical reason to acquire moral truths is music only for those who are already predisposed to believe that we have moral truths.

The only way for moral objectivists to get around this objection is to provide an independent reason for thinking that the faculty of practical reason and moral properties exist. It is *a priori* unlikely that they could provide such a reason, for the faculty of practical reason is queer.<sup>2</sup> According to moral objectivists, the faculty of practical reason can tell us what moral properties our actions have. This allegation about the faculty of practical reason invites perplexing questions. How does the faculty of practical reason work? What mechanism does it use to issue the moral judgment that eating meat is moral or immoral? Is there a causal relationship between a moral property and a moral judgment? In addition, consider that the faculty of practical reason cannot tell us how many people there are in the world. Why is it that it cannot tell us how many people there are in the world, but it can tell us whether eating meat has the property of being moral or the property of being immoral? Moral objectivists owe us answers to all of these questions.

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<sup>2</sup> John Mackie (1997: 36–42) famously claims that moral properties are queer.

Moral objectivists might suggest that we should use the faculty of perception, not the faculty of practical reason, to determine how many people there are in the world. However, moral subjectivists would counter-reply that there is no relevant difference between the issue of whether eating meat is moral or immoral and the issue of how many people there are in the world, in that they both concern what exists in the physical universe. Therefore, just as we use the faculty of perception to determine how many people there are in the world, so we should use the faculty of perception to determine whether eating meat is moral or immoral.

## CONSTRUCTING ARGUMENTS

It is a standard strategy for moral objectivists to ground moral objectivism in the fact that we construct arguments to support or to undercut moral judgments (Thomson 2008: 13; Pojman 2008: 21; Rachels, Rachels 2010: 39–40). In this tradition, Alvaro (2020) argues that we can construct sound and cogent arguments to show that an action is moral or immoral, so moral properties exist in the world. He offers the following example:

Murder is the unlawful and malicious act of killing a human being.  
 Unlawful and malicious acts of killing a human being are morally wrong.  
 It follows that murder is morally wrong.  
 Hitler committed murder.  
 Therefore, Hitler is morally wrong (Alvaro 2020: 26).

Alvaro claims that this argument ‘is a deductively valid and sound moral argument’ (Alvaro 2020: 26). He also states, ‘It is the very power of sound and cogent argumentation that provides moral justification. It follows that moral statements can be true, and they are because they refer to objective standards of right and wrong’ (Alvaro 2020: 27).

Moral subjectivists can grant that the argument about Hitler above is deductively valid, but they would deny that it is sound. In order to be sound, its premises and conclusion must be true. However, the second premise, the third premise, and the conclusion are neither true nor false because they do not describe the world, but rather express emotions. Moreover, error theorists (Mackie 1977) would grant that the premises and the conclusion describe the world, but they would argue that they are false because moral properties do not inhabit the world. Consequently, it is problematic to say that the argument is sound.

There is a more fundamental problem with Alvaro’s method to establish moral objectivism. He claims that since we construct sound and cogent arguments out of moral statements, moral statements are true. However, to say that an argument is sound and cogent entails that its premises and conclusion are (likely to be) true. Therefore, it is circular to say that since we construct sound and cogent arguments out of moral statements, moral statements are true.

Alvaro launches a related objection to moral subjectivism, claiming that if moral subjectivism were true, there could be no rational arguments concerning moral matters:

‘...we also have good rational arguments independent of personal preference that can serve to show that Hitler was objectively wrong. If there were no objective moral values, moral statements could not be true. Then, arguing logically about morality would be impossible’ (Alvaro 2020: 26).

It is a plain fact that we engage in rational argumentation regarding moral matters. Therefore, moral subjectivism is false. Alvaro seems to have made a strong case against moral subjectivism.

However, it is wrong to think that we cannot construct arguments for and against moral judgments within the framework of moral subjectivism. Consider the following deductively valid and inductively correct arguments concerning moral matters:

Your action involves a deception of others.

It is immoral to deceive others.

Therefore, your action is immoral.

Your action involves a deception of others.

It is likely to be immoral to deceive others.

Therefore, your action is immoral.

Moral subjectivists would argue that these two arguments have some persuasive force, and that such arguments play an important role in our moral lives. However, they would deny that the two arguments are sound and cogent, because to affirm that they are sound and cogent is to make the ontological commitment that the property of being immoral inheres or is likely to inhere in the action of deceiving others. In short, moral subjectivists can admit that we can engage in rational argumentation regarding moral matters while denying that moral statements are true and that moral properties exist in the world.

The same holds for gustatory subjectivists, those who believe that gustatory statements are expressions of taste, and that gustatory properties do not exist in the world. They can admit that we can be engaged in rational argumentation regarding gustatory matters, while denying that gustatory statements are true and that gustatory properties reside in the world. We can construct the following deductively valid and inductively correct arguments concerning the taste of apples:

Apples of different varieties taste differently.

Cripps Pink and Gala are apples of different varieties.

Therefore, Cripps Pink and Gala taste differently.

Apples of different varieties are likely to taste similarly.

Cripps Pink and Gala are apples of different varieties.

Cripps Pink is sweet.

Therefore, Gala is sweet.

Gustatory subjectivists would argue that these two arguments have some persuasive force, and that such arguments play an important role in our gustatory lives. However, they would deny that the two arguments are sound and cogent, because to affirm that they are sound and cogent is to make the ontological commitment that gustatory properties exist or are likely to exist in the world.

In sum, just as we can construct deductively valid and inductively correct arguments out of gustatory statements, so we can construct deductively valid and inductively correct arguments out of moral statements. The fact that we construct deductively valid and inductively correct gustatory arguments does not show that gustatory properties are inhabitants of the physical universe. Likewise, the fact that we construct deductively valid and inductively correct moral arguments does not show that moral properties are inhabitants of the physical universe. In addition, just as there can be rational argumentation regarding gustatory matters within the framework of gustatory subjectivism, so there can be rational argumentation regarding moral matters within the framework of moral subjectivism. Therefore, it is wrong to say that if moral subjectivism were true, there could be no rational argumentation regarding moral matters.

## THE ARGUMENT FROM MORAL OBJECTIVISTS' METHOD

Moral objectivists cannot have it both ways. On the one hand, they claim that moral statements are true or false in exactly the way factual statements are true or false. For example, they claim that the moral statement 'Torturing a cat is immoral' is true because the world is as it says it is, just as the factual statement 'Continents move around' is true because the world is as it says it is. On the other hand, they do not attempt to establish their hypotheses about moral properties in the way scientists attempt to establish their hypotheses about descriptive properties.

Let me compare how scientists and moral objectivists go about justifying their hypotheses. Scientists observe the world or perform an experiment to gather empirical evidence, and then argue that their empirical evidence supports their hypotheses. For example, Wegner observed that the coastline of South America fitted the coastline of Africa, and then inferred that continents moved around. By contrast, moral objectivists do not perform an experiment to support their hypotheses. For example, they do not turn on a bright bulb to take a closer look at the action of torturing a cat, nor do they observe the action of torturing a cat through an infrared detector to detect the property of being immoral in the action of torturing a cat. They rather claim that we use the faculty of practical reason to acquire moral knowledge, and that we construct sound and cogent arguments to show that an action is moral or immoral. In sum, moral objectivists' method of supporting their hypotheses is profoundly different from scientists' method of supporting their hypotheses.

What can we conclude from this profound difference? Moral subjectivists conclude that moral judgements are profoundly different from factual judgments. Specifically, moral judgements are expressions of emotions, so they are neither true nor false, while factual judgments are expressions of beliefs, so they are either true or false. In addition, moral subjectivists conclude that moral properties do not inhabit the world while descriptive properties, such as the motions of continents, do inhabit the world.

These conclusions are predicated on the following reasoning. If there were no profound differences between moral and factual statements, and between moral and descriptive properties, moral objectivists would not contend that we use the faculty of practical reason to acquire moral knowledge. They would rather contend that we acquire moral knowledge in exactly the way scientists acquire descriptive knowledge. In addition, they would rather perform experiments to show that moral properties exist, just as scientists perform experiments to show that descriptive properties exist. In reality, however, moral objectivists contend that we use the faculty of practical reason to acquire moral knowledge, and they do not perform experiments to support their hypotheses. Therefore, moral objectivists' method of supporting moral objectivism ironically indicates that there are no such things as moral knowledge and moral properties.

## CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to what moral objectivists claim, moral subjectivism is not self-defeating. Moral subjectivism provides a more economical explanation of some actions than does moral objectivism. It is circular for moral objectivists to say that since we construct sound and cogent arguments out of moral statements, moral statements are true. Moral subjectivism acknowledges the role that arguments play in our moral lives. Moral objectivists' method of establishing moral objectivism ironically supports moral subjectivism. Let me finish this paper with a slogan: 'Subjectivism is better than objectivism.'

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## Moralinis subjektyvizmas prieš moralinį objektyvizmą

### *Santrauka*

Moralinis subjektyvizmas nėra savęs įveikęs, kaip teigia moraliniai objektyvistai. Remiantis Okamo skustuvo principu, teikiama pirmenybė moraliniam subjektyvizmui, o ne moraliniam objektyvizmui. Moralės objektyvistai paprastai teigia: kadangi keliamame pagrįstus ir įtikinamus argumentus, atsižvelgdami į moralės pozicijas, moraliniai teiginiai yra teisingi. Moralinis subjektyvizmas pripažįsta argumentų vaidmenį mūsų moraliniame gyvenime, priešingai nei teigia moraliniai objektyvistai. Tai, kaip moraliniai objektyvistai bando įtvirtinti moralinį objektyvizmą, ironiškai palaiko moralinį subjektyvizmą.

**Raktažodžiai:** moralinis objektyvizmas, moralės savybės, moralinis subjektyvizmas, Okamo skustuvas