

## DISCUSSION

### DOES ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM HAVE A COHERENT FORM?

It is frequently claimed and indeed as frequently denied that all moral claims are subjective. But often the precise sense of this goes unexplicated and sometimes at least it is explicated in extremely implausible ways. For there to be a plausible statement of ethical subjectivism, there must at least be a coherent statement of the thesis that all moral claims (statements, judgments) are subjective. Is there such a coherent statement?

There are four formulations of ethical subjectivism which readily come to mind. 1) A moral judgment is subjective if it cannot be made and justified independently of the attitudes of some particular human being or groups of human beings. 2) A moral judgment is subjective if it merely describes the attitudes of the utterer and/or expresses these attitudes. 3) A moral judgment is subjective if it is formed, skewed, or at least strongly influenced by an emotional bias or prejudice of the person making the moral judgment. 4) A moral judgment is subjective if, while it purports to refer to 'something outside the speaker's mind' all it really means (all the speaker has the right to say, or all he can be warranted in saying) is that the speaker approves of what is being done, advocated, prescribed, commended, or generally approved of.

In many critiques and defenses of subjectivism it is not clear which, if any, of these theses are being defended or criticized. But before any reasonable appraisal of ethical subjectivism can be made, it is crucial to ascertain just what is at issue. D. H. Monro, among contemporary philosophers, has argued as persistently and intelligently for subjectivism as anyone.<sup>1</sup> It is his belief that it is in the fourth way (listed above) that subjectivism should be stated and that in this way it is a coherent and defensible position. Indeed, in his discussion

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<sup>1</sup> See D. H. Monro, *Empiricism and Ethics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), "Are Moral Problems Genuine?", *Mind*, Vol. LXV, (April, 1956), pp. 166-183. Also notice his critical notices of Paul Edwards', *The Logic of Moral Discourse*, Kurt Baier's, *The Moral Point of View* and Bernard Mayo's, *Ethics and the Moral Life*, in the following issues of the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*: Vol. 34 (May, 1956), Vol. 37 (May 1959) and Vol. 37 (August, 1959).

of Paul Edwards' *The Logic of Moral Discourse*, Monro goes so far as to claim that this is "the only form in which subjectivism has been seriously defended."<sup>2</sup> It is the theory implicit in the retort that when one says 'X is right' or 'X ought to be done,' that all we are *entitled* to assert or are *justified* in asserting is that X is approved of or subscribed to or something of that order. What is claimed by such a form of subjectivism is that this is all such an utterance *really* means, since all that we have a *right* to say is that we have a certain attitude toward the action or situation in question. Given the attitudes we happen to have, we will make the distinctive subscriptions, approbations, and commendations that we make. But there is no 'further, distinctive reality' that moral claims are about, though moral philosophers and moralists are repeatedly deceived into thinking that there is such a distinctive 'moral reality.'

There is indeed something to Monro's claim that it is this fourth construal of 'subjectivism' or something very like it that catches what subjectivists have actually wished to maintain. But 4) is itself a very opaque claim that seems at least to presuppose the truth of subjectivism as stated in the first construal I gave to 'subjectivism.' (This will be explained below.)

For reasons that Moore, among others, has made clear 'X is good' or 'X ought to be done' does not really mean 'X is approved of,' for we can quite meaningfully say 'X is approved of, but all the same X is bad,' or 'People approve of X but they shouldn't.' If we say in reply to Moore that, while people intend to claim something more when they say 'X ought to be done' and the like, they can only *really mean* what subjectivists say, then we should note that our 'really mean' here has the force of 'all we are *justified* in saying' or 'all we have a *right* to say.' But it is important to note here that 'right to' and 'justified in' have a normative force. They are not simply neutral descriptive terms. But what entitles us to say that this is all we have a right to say or that this is all we can really mean? Presumably we have a right to say this or are justified in saying this, because 'right' and 'good' do *not* denote some intrinsic or inherent properties or realities that can exist quite independently of peoples' attitudes and feelings. But how do we know or what evidence do we have for believing that they *purport* to denote such intrinsic or inherent properties but really *fail* to do it? We have no linguistic evidence for this. Ask yourselves what kind of *existents* are there that could be the denotata of *moral*

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<sup>2</sup>D. H. Monro, "Critical Notice of Paul Edwards' *The Logic of Moral Discourse*," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 34 (May, 1956), p. 53.

*terms* and yet be 'intrinsic properties' or 'inherent properties' such that to understand them and to understand their moral importance, no reference need be made to human interests or purposes? We do not understand what we would have to believe, to believe that moral realities exist which are not at all dependent on the attitudes of human beings. We are quite unclear as to what could count as such denotata and thus our very conception of objectivism is thoroughly opaque. We cannot, *in the requisite sense* asked for here, say what it would be like to be an objectivist in ethics. But then 'being a subjectivist' cannot contrast with anything; but, without a nonvacuous contrast, subjectivism is an empty claim. Such a vacuous subjectivist claim is simply this: a moral judgment or moral claim cannot be made and held independently of the attitudes of some human beings. Moral judgments could only be objective if the moral terms used in those judgments referred to realities which did not depend for their existence on any human attitudes, feelings, or intentions. But what could count as such a reality? We seem to have no idea. We do not even understand what a nonnatural property is and for any natural property (if that is not a pleonasm) or set of natural properties X 'X is good' is synthetic. To say 'Moral judgments are subjective' is to say in a misleading way 'Moral judgments are moral judgments.'

Furthermore, what would it be like to justify a moral judgment in such a way that this justification in no way depended on any human attitudes, intentions, or preferences of the people involved? To expect such a justification, like the man who expects he can change the sex of ice cream, is to look for something that cannot *possibly* be had. But this is but another way of indicating that, in a suitable sense, 'Are moral judgments objective?' is a senseless question; and if this is so, then objectivism is a senseless position; but then so is subjectivism. If we take the sense of 'subjectivism' under discussion, i.e., sense 4), then 'Is morality objective or subjective?' does indeed seem at least to be a pseudoproblem.

In his discussion of Bernard Mayo's, *Ethics and The Moral Life*, D. H. Monro gives what appears at least to be a distinct account of what would be a viable subjectivism. I shall call it 5). It comes to this: there is no way of rationally resolving fundamental moral disputes, for fundamental moral judgments or ultimate moral principles cannot correctly be said to be true or false independently of the attitudes of at least some people.<sup>3</sup> The subjectivist is claiming, as Monro

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<sup>3</sup> D. H. Monro, "Critical Notice of Bernard Mayo's, *Ethics and the Moral Life*," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 37 (August, 1959), p. 177.

puts it, that when we come to "ultimate moral principles we find that we can only accept or reject them, much as our palate accepts or rejects rice pudding."<sup>4</sup>

There is, of course, the difficulty about spelling out exactly what constitutes an 'ultimate moral principle' or 'a fundamental moral judgment.' These concepts have a kind of specious clarity about them. But let us for the sake of this discussion assume we have clarified them.

It is, of course, tolerably evident that we cannot *derive* an ultimate moral principle from another principle for then trivially our 'ultimate principle' could not be ultimate. But this does not entail, or in any way justify, the conclusion that we could not know an ultimate principle to be true and it does not at all distinguish ultimate *moral principles* from other ultimate principles.

Claim 5), like 4), appears to be but a variant of 1). The subjectivist, on such a reading, is claiming that there can be no rational resolution to fundamental moral disputes. There is no moral insight or method of validation which will tell us which fundamental moral claims are true or justified. But with the alternative 'justified' what does this come to? If in making such a claim the subjectivist is only claiming that there is no consensus over such ultimate principles or fundamental moral judgments, this can indeed be quite readily challenged and if he is saying, whatever the sociological facts about consensus or a lack thereof, there could—logically could—be no rational basis or *rational* consensus for such an agreement, we can quite properly ask him for the grounds for such a claim. The grounds he would offer bring us back to 1). He would say there could be no rational *basis* for such an agreement because such moral judgments cannot properly be said to be true or false or that the truth or falsity of such moral judgments is not independent of the attitudes that at least some people happen to have. He would then in turn defend this claim by arguing that ultimate moral and normative claims are not statements or propositions to the effect that there are moral values that have 'a real existence' apart from any reference to human attitudes or volitions. But we have already seen that such a contention is vacuously true, for its opposite, objectivism, is unintelligible or at least incoherent. (I do not say that all forms of objectivism are unin-

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* It should be recalled that Bertrand Russell argues in this way. His most extended statement and defense of such an account, including a drawing out of the distinctive moral implications of it, occurs in his *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955). I have examined the theoretical aspects of Russell's work in ethics in my "Bertrand Russell's New Ethic," *Methodos*, (1962).

telligible but only that the form of objectivism which could be opposed to subjectivism, *so construed*, is unintelligible or at least incoherent.)

If, in trying to overcome these difficulties in subjectivism, we try to defend subjectivism in its second form, i.e., a moral judgment is subjective if it merely describes the attitudes of the utterer and/or expresses these attitudes, we indeed do get a form of subjectivism which is not incoherent, but we trade an incoherent thesis for a thesis which is plainly false. That is, if that is what we mean by 'subjectivism' it is most surely not the case that all moral claims are subjective. What makes an autobiographical statement about my feelings and/or attitudes true is that I really feel that way or really have the attitude I say I have; but it is not at all clear what, if anything, makes a moral statement true and 'Would that I didn't have to get up but clearly I should' is not equivalent to 'Would that I didn't have to get up but clearly would that I get up.' Yet if the equivalence claimed in this second form of subjectivism held, the above utterances would be equivalent. Similarly 'Oh, how I despise it but all the same I ought to do it' is not a contradiction. It is not even logically odd or a deviation from a linguistic regularity. Yet on such a conception of subjectivism it ought to be a contradiction or it ought to be something which is very close to being a contradiction. But it is neither.

If, by contrast, 3) is our use of 'subjective,' then clearly some moral judgments are subjective and some objective. Many of the moral judgments of Hitler, Agnew, Joe McCarthy, Miss Rand, and the members of the Christian Crusade can be shown to be subjective; but some of the moral judgments of cool impartial, and well-informed men can be shown in the requisite sense to be objective. It is this usage, i.e., 'subjectivism' sense 3), that is normally involved when plain men say that a moral judgment is subjective or objective. But when this usage is involved there is no philosophical problem about whether moral judgments are subjective or objective. Given such a usage, we can say what an objective moral judgment would be like and it is also evident that some moral judgments satisfy these conditions of objectivity.

So far it looks as if 'Is morality objective or subjective?' is indeed a pseudoquestion, for 'All moral claims are subjective' is either plainly false, in an appropriate sense vacuous or opaque. Where subjectivism is vacuous, 'There are no objective moral realities' has no force because given the construction put on 'moral realities,' we do not understand what could count as an instance of such a reality.

Since this is so, the assertion makes no sense and thus in a very definite way the denial must also be without sense. If, alternatively, 'There are no such moral realities' is taken to mean that it does not make sense to speak of such realities, then to ask for an objective justification of ultimate moral claims is like asking for the intelligence of raspberries or like asking for a valid inductive inference when the only thing we will allow to count as a 'valid inference' is a deductive one. If we are saying something of either sort, then in saying no ultimate moral judgments are or can be objectively justified we are saying no more than no ultimate moral judgments can be anything other than ultimate moral judgments. But then again our problem can be seen to be a pseudoproblem in a way very analogous to the way that 'Can there be a deductive justification of induction?' is a pseudoproblem. Again careful attention to what we are saying will bring out the pointlessness of our lament.

The conclusion which this discussion points to is this. In *philosophical* talk about morality there is no clear notion of what it is to be a subjectivist or an objectivist in ethics. The 'question' 'Are fundamental moral claims objective or subjective?' has no clear meaning. If we examine it carefully, we see that it has an ordinary nonphilosophical meaning and given that meaning there is no philosophical problem at all: plainly some moral judgments are objective, and some are not. But it is not clear, given the varied *philosophical* usages of these terms, that we have any genuine problem before us. Rather it has all the earmarks of a philosophical muddle: we do not know what it is that we are asking, and we do not know what we would take as an answer. There seems to be no general problem of moral objectivity.

Someone might reply that we have not pushed the issue far enough. If the philosophical subjectivists' claims are true, the following points stand out. We do not know how to confirm or disconfirm, validate or invalidate fundamental moral judgments and thus, unlike factual judgments, we do not know what would make them true or false. Thus, moral judgments are, as a class, more subjective than factual judgments. It is this invidious comparison of the whole class of moral judgments with our paradigms of objectivity, i.e., factual judgments, that the subjectivist wants to bring out. His contention may be false, but it is not vacuous, and it is not meaningless or obviously pointless. Indeed questions like this should make one pause. Such questions, like parallel questions about the objectivity of history, *may* be quite genuine, but they may be muddles as well. For does it make sense to make such comparisons between *entire*

*activities*? Given the rationale of morality, given the roles that moral discourse is tailored to perform, is there any point at all in comparing moral judgments with factual judgments in this way? One might correctly claim that some *particular* moral judgment is subjective and another objective. We might even make such remarks about certain types of moral judgments. But where no moral judgment could correctly be said to be objective and still be 'a moral judgment,' does it make sense to ask whether such judgments are objective or subjective? Would not 'Moral judgments are subjective' simply have the force of 'Moral judgments are moral judgments'? However, the haunting feeling may still remain at this point that subjectivists have a hold of something. I think that many do have this feeling and that this feeling is deserving of respect; but it is also true that defenders of subjectivism have not clearly shown what it is that they are on to, and they have not rebutted the charge that such large scale, seemingly distinct questions, are not straightforward questions at all but are muddles felt as questions. That is to say, they have *not* clearly established that the claim 'All moral judgments are subjective' makes a sensible and philosophically significant claim. So we seem to have reached this point: there are forms of subjectivism which are challenging but still thoroughly problematic. They have not been shown to make plainly false or incoherent claims but they also lack an unproblematic formulation which would meet the expectations or the fears of all those who would, on the one hand, assent to or, on the other hand, try to reject ethical subjectivism.<sup>5</sup>

KAI NIELSEN.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY.

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<sup>5</sup> As a companion piece to this essay see my "Varieties of Ethical Subjectivism," *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy*, (1972).