

The author's main conclusion is that morality is subjective. He first establishes a dichotomy: morality is either objective or subjective. Upon this basis, he considers three possible ways of showing that morality is objective before refuting each of them: (1) examining the consequences of both positions, (2) appealing to scientific authority, and (3) appealing to religious authority. From this, the author concludes that since all of these ways of proving morality is objective fail, morality cannot be objective and must therefore be subjective. Overall, while the author offers some compelling reasons why appealing to science or religion do not adequately show morality is objective, his argument relies on a flawed inductive leap from not being able to show morality is objective to morality necessarily being subjective, rendering his eventual conclusion unpersuasive.

The author first examines if consequentialist arguments can show the objectivity of morality, and concludes that this is not possible. He argues that if morality is objective, this would lead to harmful ethnocentrism that creates discriminatory practices, but if morality is subjective, then morality would end up disconnected from the real world and, by extension, useless. This particular line of reasoning does not lead to the conclusion he intends; by examining the undesirable consequences of both objective and subjective conceptions of morality, he has shown not that consequentialist arguments are untenable, but that the positions on morality themselves (as objective or subjective) are untenable. In fact, the argument appears to be internally contradictory: if it is true that consequentialist arguments cannot justify claims on the ontological status of moral facts, then his consequentialist line of reasoning would not be able to demonstrate anything about these two metaethical positions. However, a charitable reading of his argument could be that examining consequences leads to an impasse, since both objective and subjective conceptions of morality are seemingly untenable, making consequentialist arguments not helpful in our attempts to determine which conception is preferred. I would accept this line of reasoning, but it would still not justify his eventual conclusion that morality is subjective, because of the very consequentialist problems with the position he identifies. As such, this particular

reason — while it may show that morality might not be objective based on a charitable reading — does not justify his overall argument about the subjectivity of morality.

His second reason why morality cannot be shown to be objective is more compelling — he argues that scientific appeals fail because scientific consensus can change over time as new evidence emerges. This is true, since we have seen numerous paradigm shifts in science that ostensibly cast doubt on the certainty of findings — Newtonian mechanics, which had been accepted for over 3 centuries, was revealed to be flawed as Einstein's theories of relativity surfaced in the 20th century. Comparatively, ethical knowledge requires an extremely high degree of justification that is much more extensive than science — while scientific finding only need to be justified experimentally from experience and observation, ethical knowledge needs reason, experience and intuition to cohere and corroboratively justify knowledge. For instance, even though utilitarianism might cohere with societal conceptions of morality and have rational arguments in support of it, the fact that it leads to unintuitive outcomes (e.g. that we should kill one person to harvest his organs and save 5) renders it inadequately justified. Hence, science — with its much lower justificatory threshold — would not be able to justify ethical knowledge on its own. Additionally, the author correctly identifies the fundamental assumption undergirding such scientific attempts to justify morality that “moral facts are analogous to scientific facts”. However, Hume observes that these facts are fundamentally distinct: we cannot make claims about what ought to be based on claims about what is, in the same way that it would be foolish to say I ought to wear the school uniform because I do currently wear one. Hence, scientific examinations of what morality has been and where it came from cannot justify moral judgements alone.

Finally, the author's critique of appeals to religion is also compelling — he argues that these arguments presuppose the existence of god and the teachings of religions conflict with one another. Of course, this is true — Muslims are commanded not to eat pork, while it is morally acceptable to do so per other Christian teachings. Additionally, such appeals to god depend on one's ability to conclusively and indubitably show the existence of one, something which no religion is able to do. Hence, divine appeals cannot justify the existence of an objective moral framework.

At this point, the author has shown that science and religion cannot show that morality is objective, and to some degree, consequentialist arguments reveal that this position is untenable. The argument fails, however, to justify that morality is ultimately subjective for two reasons.

First, it does not follow that just because three ways of showing morality is not objective fail, that morality is really not objective. For instance, it could be that morality is objective, but we have not found the perfect, all-encompassing ethical framework that allows us to show that morality is indeed objective and universal. For instance, subjective disagreements are presently created when individuals prioritise different scales of value: in the trolley problem, since deontological and utilitarian considerations contradict, a utilitarian might subjectively prioritise maximising happiness and pull the lever while a deontologist might choose to preserve life and not do so. However, these sources of subjectivity — and fears of ethnocentrism — might be eliminated when we identify which theories apply under which domains and in which situations, a problem that philosophers like Nagel are working to solve. Hence, even though the three ways the author considers fail to demonstrate the objectivity of morality, there may very well be other ways of demonstrating the objectivity of morality (such as finding the perfect moral framework) that the author fails to consider.

Second, even if we grant that morality is really not objective, it does not follow that morality is fully subjective to the extent that we can be “our own moral boss” — it could be that morality is largely intersubjectively determined as well. As the author himself acknowledges in the first paragraph, we agree virtually universally on most moral issues, such as the immorality of killing others loved ones or burning down their homes. Hence, we might still be bound by these intersubjective moral codes, with subjectivity conferred only to the instances where there are greatly conflicting ethical positions or when different ethical scales of value disagree — for instance, we might be allowed to subjectively prioritise utilitarianism over deontological considerations only in cases like the trolley problem above when they issue contradictory imperatives. Hence, just because morality is not totally objective, it does not mean that morality is necessarily subjective to the individual — we could be bound by intersubjective moral judgements as well.

This false dichotomy and his failure to demonstrate that not being able to show morality is objective entails morality is not objective constitute the critical flaws of the author's argument. Hence, even though the author successfully rejects the possibility of justifying moral knowledge with science or religion, his eventual conclusion that morality is subjective is fairly weak.

AO1: 9/10 AO2: 13/15 AO3: 5/5 Total: 27/30

Examiner's Comments

Excellent reconstruction of the author's argument and clear understanding of what he is trying to do in this passage. Evaluation is spot on — good engagement with the main premises and the reasoning employed. There are also considerations for the bigger picture. Insightful analysis of the justificatory requirements for morality (and science) although less so for religion. All things considered, an excellent response!