

~ Folk Meta-Ethical Commitments ~

Jennifer Cole Wright & Hagop Sarkissian

In *Philosophy: Traditional and Experimental Readings*, F. Allhoff, R. Mallon, & S. Nichols (Eds).

Oxford University Press (pub date Aug, 2012).

Introductory paragraph: The various articles in this section have represented attempts by philosophers to explain the nature and status of morality as a human practice. In undertaking this project, philosophers have typically assumed that people's ordinary folk understanding of morality involves a belief in objective moral truths. This latter question about how ordinary individuals themselves think of the moral domain is one that has been explored in recent years by researchers in the social sciences. In this article, we review this research and suggest how it bears on the philosophical project of metaethics.

I. Introduction

In this section of the book, we've been looking at various attempts that people have made to come to an accurate understanding of the nature and status of morality. This involves asking questions like: are moral rules universal or culturally bound? Do moral judgments come from rational or emotional faculties? Can moral claims be true or false? Regardless of their particular theories, the philosophers examined in this section have taken one position or another on the phenomenon of morality—that is, the way we normally use moral discourse, evaluate moral problems, and think of the moral domain as compared to other domains.

Perhaps the most obvious example of a philosopher taking a definite stance on normal moral practice is J.L. Mackie, who makes broad claims about it as part of his 'error theory' of morality. Mackie famously claims that ordinary moral discourse purports to refer to objective moral properties that exist apart from any particular human opinion or perspective, and that are not dependent upon any person's or group's particular desires, preferences, or values (Mackie 1977, 33). Mackie takes this to be a part of our everyday moral lives. However, Mackie argues that there is no good reason to believe that such properties—along with their purported power to provide universal reasons for action to all—actually exist, as they would be unlike any

other properties in the world. Mackie thus supports an error theory about ordinary moral practice—meaning that our ordinary moral judgments (judgments that make objective moral claims) are false.

There are at least two different ways that Mackie’s theory could be wrong. First, it could turn out that there really *are* such things as moral properties. If such properties existed (even if not in precisely the way that Mackie characterizes them) then the folk would obviously *not* be in error in presupposing them as part of their ordinary moral discourse. Indeed, many philosophers who have found Mackie’s arguments unconvincing have been motivated to describe precisely how such real moral properties might exist.

Another way that Mackie could be wrong is if the folk don’t actually assume (or tacitly embrace) any objective moral properties in their ordinary discourse. In other words, if the folk reject moral objectivism, then it seems (once again) that they couldn’t be committing any real ‘error’ about the nature of morality. In this final reading, we will pursue this latter question of whether or not the folk really *are* (as Mackie and others have assumed) moral objectivists.

II. Objectivism and Relativism

What does it mean for someone to be a moral objectivist? Roughly speaking, objectivism holds that the moral domain, like the scientific domain, is grounded in universal and fundamental *facts* that exist (largely) independently of people’s beliefs, preferences, attitudes, norms, or conventions. For example, actions such as consciously discriminating against someone because of their gender or race would be morally wrong not because people simply prefer not to discriminate, because they have strong negative emotional responses against discriminating, or even because as a society they have come to agree that discriminating is wrong. Rather there are certain features of discrimination itself (e.g., cruelty and unfairness) that “ground” its wrongness—and would do so even if people generally felt ambivalent or deemed such behavior to be perfectly acceptable.¹ This means that in most cases where there is disagreement about whether a particular action (e.g., racial/gender discrimination) is morally

¹ The story of how “wrongness” gets instantiated, whether there are moral facts or only non-moral facts, and so on varies between philosophers and here we remain entirely neutral between views.

unacceptable, if two individuals hold opposite opinions, then at least one of them must be mistaken (Railton 1986; Shafer-Landau 2003; Smith 1994).

There are many meta-ethical theories that reject objectivism in some way. Here, we will contrast objectivism with one of its primary rival theories: relativism.² Relativism holds that the moral domain—much like other normative domains (e.g., social/conventional)—is ultimately grounded in the beliefs, preferences, attitudes, habits, norms, and/or conventions of people (whether individuals or groups). This means that moral claims can only be assessed relative to a particular moral framework, or a particular set of moral values; in cases of moral disagreement, different moral claims could both be right if asserted from different moral frameworks (Dreier 1990; Harman 1975; Pinillos 2010; Prinz 2007; Wong 1984; 2006).

As we mentioned a moment ago, regardless of which meta-ethical position philosophers defend, they typically assume that people are naturally moral objectivists. Michael Smith, for example, wrote that most people

seem to think moral questions have correct answers; that the correct answers are made correct by objective moral facts; that moral facts are wholly determined by circumstances and that, by engaging in moral conversation and argument, we can discover what these objective moral facts determined by the circumstances are. (Smith 1994, 6)

And Mackie (1977, 35) similarly argued that “objectivity...is ingrained in our language and thought”, that “most people in making moral judgments implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive” (which led to his claim that people’s moral claims are generally false). In short, the claim that ordinary people are moral objectivists enjoys a surprising degree of support amongst moral philosophers, even those with disparate theoretical commitments (e.g. Blackburn 1984; Brink 1989; Mackie 1977; Shafer-Landau 2003; Smith 1994). But are all these philosophers correct – *are* people moral objectivists? The answer to this seems important, as many philosophers take it to be part of their job description to explain

² The word ‘relativism’ is used in different ways in different disciplines. We are using it here to describe any view according to which moral claims can only be assessed relative to a particular culture or system of values (e.g. Harman 1975; Wong 1996; 2006).

how ordinary folk objectivism fits into a broader theory about the nature and status of morality. Luckily, whether folk are moral objectivists is an empirical question—one that can be pursued using scientific methods. So, what does the research tell us?

III. People as Objectivists? – Supporting Evidence

There is an extensive body of empirical research that supports (if sometimes only indirectly) this philosophical assumption. People of all ages—whether children, adolescents, or adults—all have significantly stronger negative reactions towards people with dissimilar beliefs, values, and practices when they involve moral issues than when they involve other types of issues (Wainryb, Shaw, & Maianu, 1998; Wainryb, Shaw, Laupa, & Smith, 2001; Skitka & Mullen, 2002; Wainryb, Shaw, Langley, Cottam, & Lewis, 2004; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; Wright, Cullum, & Schwab, 2008). For example, Wainryb, Shaw, Langley, Cottam, & Lewis (2004; see also Wainryb & Ford, 1998) found that 5, 7, and 9-year-olds were more intolerant towards dissimilar moral beliefs (e.g., whether or not hitting another child is okay) than other types of beliefs, such as taste/preference (e.g., whether or not chocolate ice cream is yucky), beliefs about the world (e.g., whether or not rain is wet), and more ambiguous beliefs (e.g., whether or not a dog is not playing with a toy because he is tired). Similarly, children, adolescents, and adults were more tolerant of beliefs that differed from their own when they were based on non-moral “informational” assumptions than when they were based on moral differences. Specifically, children and adults reported it to be more acceptable for someone to believe that boys should be given more privileges than girls when this belief was allegedly based on the “informational” assumption that boys are generally smarter and more responsible than girls than on the moral assumption that boys should be treated nicer than girls (Wainryb, Shaw, & Maianu, 1998; see also Wainryb, 1993; Wainryb, Shaw, Laupa, & Smith, 2001).

When asked to rate how supportive they were of four different types of diversity (*demographic, politico-moral, socio-sexual, and personal activities*), adults were by far the least supportive of politico-moral diversity, especially when it was encountered in an intimate

context (Haidt, Rosenberg, & Hom, 2003; see also Rosenberg, 2001). Similarly, the strength of a person's moral conviction (i.e. how morally important the issue was believed to be) predicted a variety of interpersonal outcomes including intolerance for different opinions and unwillingness to interact with dissimilar others, as well as the tendency to view them in an unfavorable light (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; Skitka & Houston, 2001; Skitka & Mullen, 2002). And adults were also found to be the least willing to interact with, help, sit next to, and share resources with someone with dissimilar beliefs when that person differed from them with respect to his/her moral beliefs (Wright, Cullum, & Schwab, 2008).

In general, people of all ages treat moral wrongs as more serious, less permissible, less response-dependent, more severely punishable, and more universally generalizable than social/conventional wrongs (Turiel, 1983, 1998; also Nucci, 1981; Smetana, 1981, 1983; Davidson, Turiel, & Black, 1983; Smetana & Braeges, 1990; Nichols & Folds-Bennett, 2003; Nichols, 2004; Goodwin & Darley, 2008). And, perhaps most tellingly, they tend to view moral transgressions as wrong even in the absence of rules and/or in the presence of social sanctions (Smetana, 1981, 1983; Turiel, 1983; Stoddart & Turiel, 1985).

IV. People as Objectivists? – Conflicting Evidence

Taken together, these studies strongly support the assumption that people are moral objectivists. After all, attributing to folk a belief in moral objectivity would seem the most straightforward way to explain the results. Yet more recent research has sought to explore people's meta-ethical commitments more directly, and the results paint a more complicated picture. For example, when asked specific questions about morality's grounding, Nichols (2004) found that even though many people gave objectivist responses (i.e., stating that if two people disagreed about a moral claim, one of them had to be wrong), a significant portion (Study 1: 42.5%; Study 3: 25.6%) of them did not, stating instead that there was no objective fact of the matter and that, even in the presence of disagreement, all parties could be right.

Goodwin and Darley (2008, 2010) found that while people, on average, tended to give more objective groundings to moral transgressions than they did to other transgressions (such as conventional or broadly aesthetic), they were nonetheless internally inconsistent with this

objectivity. That is, when presented with a selection of moral transgressions, they gave objective groundings to only *some* of them (e.g., opening gunfire in a crowd, conscious discrimination, robbery, and cheating on an exam) while giving clearly relative groundings to other issues—issues that would seem, in at least some cases, to be highly charged and divisive (e.g., donating money to charity, abortion, assisted suicide, and stem cell research).

Beebe and Sakris (2010) found a similarly interesting variation in people's meta-ethical commitments—only this time driven by age. In their study, the young adults (17-29 years) that they interviewed were significantly more likely to provide a relative grounding for a given set of moral issues than either a younger age group (14-16 years) or an older age group (30-77), the oldest age group giving the strongest objective grounding of the three.

It is standard procedure in studies such as these for the experimenters *themselves* to classify the transgressions or disagreements they present as being “moral” in nature, while others merely conventional (aesthetic, etc.). This leaves room to doubt whether the people who participated in the studies actually agreed with the experimenters and viewed the issues as “moral” as well. Recent studies on moral conviction and tolerance (Wright, et al., 2008; Wright, 2010; Cullum & Wright, 2010) found that people of all ages disagree (both within and between age groups) about what qualifies as a moral issue. So, it could be that the reason why people gave relativist groundings for some of the moral transgressions they were presented with by Goodwin and Darley (2008, 2010) and Beebe and Sakris's (2010) was that they did not actually consider them to be *moral* transgressions. In other words, people might actually be objectivists about morality, but simply disagree about whether particular transgressions or disagreements are moral in nature.

To test this, Wright, Grandjean, and McWhite (in press) gave people the opportunity to identify which transgressions they viewed as moral and then measured their meta-ethical commitments for those issues specifically. Though the sorts of issues people identified as moral differed somewhat from Goodwin and Darley's (2008) original list (e.g., people did not view donating money to charity as a moral issue), nonetheless people displayed the same sort of variation when grounding their self-identified moral issues. While people reported some of the moral issues they identified (e.g., discrimination and robbery) as being objectively grounded, at

the same time they refused to ground others (e.g., abortion and assisted suicide) in the same way. Such results suggest that people's meta-ethical commitments do indeed vary: not only are some people more objectivist about morality than others, but people are also more objectivist about *some* parts of morality than others.

Sarkissian, Park, Tien, Wright, & Knobe (in press) provide additional support against the view that people are consistently moral objectivists. In a series of studies, they asked people to consider other people's judgments about two different behaviors – first, a father killing his child because he finds him unattractive and, second, a man who tests the sharpness of a newly purchased knife by randomly stabbing a passerby on the street. People were told that one of their fellow classmates had judged these behaviors to be morally wrong, while another thought it was not morally wrong. When asked whether both these individuals could be correct in their judgments, people responded in predictably objectivist ways. That is, they denied that both individuals could be correct. But when one of the disagreeing individuals was depicted as being from a different cultural group—either a Mamilon (an Amazonian tribesman whose tribe had remained isolated from modern society), or a Pentar (an extraterrestrial being whose primary goal in life was to create pentagrams)—people began to give more relativist responses. That is, they were much less likely to say that someone had to be mistaken when one of the moral judgments came from a Mamilon, and even less so when it came from a Pentar. And this was true even when the study was altered in a variety of ways—for example, by telling people that the father killing his child was an American, and the stabber a fellow student. So, even when the person engaging in the behavior was from the same culture, people still accepted that someone from a different culture could view the behavior differently than they did and not be wrong.

V. Meta-Ethical Pluralism?

While there is clear empirical evidence for moral objectivism in the “folk”, there is also clear evidence for relativism. What the evidence suggests is that whether people express a relative or an objective meta-ethical commitment depends on many factors—e.g., their age, the specific issue they are considering, and the where a potential source of disagreement is coming from.

Does this mean that Mackie's error theory is at least partially correct—that at least *some* of the time people are making moral claims that refer to objective moral properties? Perhaps. But before we conclude that this is the case, it might be worth looking more closely at the circumstances under which people gave objectivist responses. For example, Sarkissian, et al. (under review) found that people's responses looked objectivist when the sources of disagreement were both located within the same culture. But arguably, even a die-hard relativist (of the cultural variety) would acknowledge the fact that when two people from within a culture disagree about the moral status of an action, both of them can't be correct. After all, being members of the same culture, both people occupy the same moral framework or "vantage point" from which the moral status of the action is determined. Arguably, then, people's meta-ethical commitments could have been more consistently relativist than it first appeared.

In a similar vein, Goodwin and Darley (2010) hypothesized that one reason for people's apparent internal variation in their meta-ethical commitments (providing objectivist groundings for some issues and relativist groundings for others) could be that they were simply conflating *objectivity* with *perceived consensus*. That is, perhaps people were more likely to give a relative grounding for those issues whose rightness/wrongness they perceived as being contentious and up for debate. In support of this hypothesis, they found a very strong across-items correlation between objectivity and perceived consensus ($r = .84$).³ And, if we consider the issues for which people have provided strong relativist groundings (i.e., abortion, assisted suicide, and stem cell research), these *do* appear to be issues that—unlike conscious racial discrimination or robbing a bank—people are currently debating about, often quite publicly.

If this is correct, then it may be that even when people are making objectivist claims, they are not (as Mackie believed) making reference to objective moral properties that exist independently from people's beliefs, values, and practices. Rather, they are making reference to the fact that certain issues (though not others) are generally viewed and treated similarly by people, even across cultural lines. In other words, they may be making reference to certain beliefs and values that they believe (perhaps mistakenly) unite people together—beliefs and

³ Wright, et al. (in press) also found a correlation between objectivity and perceived consensus, though not as strong ($r = .36, p < .001$).

values that many human beings share. This is still a relativist position, only one that considers it possible (at least in some instances) to have a moral vantage point that encompasses all of humanity.

A question remains: why have so many philosophers assumed that the folk are moral objectivists? Here, we end with some speculative thoughts. It's likely the case that ordinary folk are seldom asked to think of individuals or cultures very different from themselves when deliberating about moral issues. Instead, they usually think about moral issues within their own communities, and discuss them with other individuals not very different than themselves. If this is the normal context for moral deliberation, it might make sense to think that moral issues generally admit of only one correct answer—that we will not find multiple correct answers to a single moral question.

VI. Implications for Meta-Ethics

Philosophers are undoubtedly correct in their commitment to make sense of ordinary moral practice. Morality is a distinctively human institution, and one cannot go about trying to understand it without taking actual moral practice into account. But it may turn out that there is simply no answer to the general question: are the folk objectivists about morality? It could be that folk are objectivists about some issues rather than others, or that some folk are objectivists and others are not. So perhaps philosophers should approach their task in a different way: rather than trying to make sense of folk objectivism, they could try to make sense of a practice where people's views are pluralistic, complex, and not entirely self-consistent. The research we've surveyed in this section would be very useful in making headway in this new task.

References

- Beebe, J., & Sakris, D. (2010). Moral objectivism across the lifespan. Talk given at the *MERG Conference*, New York City, NY, May, 2010.
- Blackburn, Simon (1984). *Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Brink, David. O. (1989). *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Cullum, J., & Wright, J.C. (2010). *The structural differences between moral vs. non-moral beliefs*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Davidson, P., Turiel, E., & Black, A. (1983). The effect of stimulus familiarity on the use of criteria and justifications in children's social reasoning. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 1:1, 49-65.
- Dreier, James (1990). "Internalism and speaker relativism." *Ethics*, 101(1): 6-26.
- Goodwin, G., & Darley, J. (2008). The psychology of meta-ethics: Exploring objectivism. *Cognition*, 106, 1339-1366.
- Goodwin, G. P., and Darley, J. M. 2010: The perceived objectivity of ethical beliefs: psychological findings and implications for public policy. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 1, 1-28.
- Haidt, J., Rosenberg, E., & Hom, H . (2003). Differentiating diversities: Moral diversity is not like other kinds. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 33, 1-36.
- Harman, Gilbert (1975). "Moral relativism defended." *The Philosophical Review*, 84(1): 3-22. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 31:3, 266-285.
- Nichols, S. (2004). After objectivity: An empirical study of moral judgment, *Philosophical Psychology*, 17:1, 5-28.
- Nichols, S., & Folds-Bennett, T. (2003) Are children moral objectivists? Children's judgments about moral and response-dependent properties. *Cognition*, 90, B23-B32.
- Nucci, L. (1981). Conceptions of personal issues: A domain distinct from moral or societal concepts. *Child Development*, 52, 114 – 121.
- Mackie, J.L. (1977). *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. New York, Penguin.

- Pinillos, N. Ángel (2010). Knowledge and moral relativism. Unpublished manuscript. Arizona State University
- Prinz, Jesse (2007). *The Emotional Construction of Morals*. New York, Oxford University Press, USA.
- Railton, Peter (1986). "Moral realism." *The Philosophical Review*, 95(2): 163-207.
- Rosenberg, E. (2001). *Attitudes towards diversity*. Unpublished distinguished majors thesis, University of Virginia, VA.
- Sarkissian, H., Park, J., Tien, D., Wright, J.C., & Knobe, J. (in press). Folk moral relativism. *Mind & Language*.
- Shafer-Landau, Russ (2003). *Moral Realism: A Defence*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Skitka, L. J., Bauman, C. W., & Sargis, E. G. (2005). Moral conviction: Another contributor to attitude strength or something more? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88, 895-917.
- Skitka, L. J., & Houston, D. A. (2001). When due process is of no consequence: Moral mandates and presumed defendant guilt or innocence. *Social Justice Research*, 14, 305-326.
- Skitka, L. J., & Mullen, E. (2002). The dark side of moral conviction. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 7, 35-41.
- Smetana, J. G. (1981). Preschool children's conceptions of moral and social rules. *Child Development*, 52, 1333-1336.
- Smetana, J. G. (1983). Social-cognitive development: Domain distinctions and coordinations, *Developmental Review*, 3, 131-147.
- Smetana, J. G., & Braeges, J. (1990). The development of toddlers' moral and conventional judgments. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 36:3, 329-346.
- Smith, Michael (1994). *The Moral Problem*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- Stoddart, T., & Turiel, E. (1985). Children's concepts of cross-gender activities. *Child Development*, 56:5, 1241-1253.
- Turiel, E. (1983). *The development of social knowledge: Morality and conventions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Turiel, E. (1998). The development of morality. In N. Eisenberg (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 3, Social, emotional, and personality development* (5th ed., pp. 701-778). New York: Wiley.
- Wainryb, C. (1993). The application of moral judgments to other cultures: Relativism and universality. *Child Development, 64*, 924-933.
- Wainryb, C., & Ford, S. (1998). Young children's evaluations of acts based on beliefs different from their own. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 44*, 484-503.
- Wainryb, C., Shaw, L., Langley, M., Cottam, K., & Lewis, R. (2004). Children's thinking about diversity of belief in the early school years: Judgments of relativism, tolerance, and disagreeing persons. *Child Development, 75:3*, 687-703.
- Wainryb, C., Shaw, L., Laupa, M., & Smith, K. (2001). Children's, adolescents', and young adults' thinking about different types of disagreements. *Developmental Psychology, 37*, 373-386.
- Wainryb, C., Shaw, L., & Maianu, C. (1998). Tolerance and intolerance: Children's and adolescents' judgments of dissenting beliefs, speech, persons, and conduct. *Child Development, 69:6*, 1541-
- Wong, David B. (1984). *Moral Relativity*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Wong, David B. (1996). "Pluralistic relativism." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, 20*: 378-99.
- Wong, David B. (2006). *Natural Moralities: A Defence of Pluralistic Relativism*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Wright, J.C. (2010). Moral conviction in children and adolescents: Exploring the cognitive and affective dimensions of intolerance in our youth. *Manuscript under review*.
- Wright, J.C., Cullum, J., & Schwab, N. (2008). The cognitive and affective dimensions of moral conviction: Implications for tolerance and interpersonal behaviors. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 34:11*, 1461-1476.
- Wright, J. C., Grandjean, P. T., & McWhite, C. (in press). The meta-ethical grounding of our moral beliefs: Evidence for meta-ethical pluralism. *Philosophical Psychology*.