

**Phil 104, April 24, 2007**  
**Dworkin: Can we deny that there are any moral truths?**

What effect should accepting subjectivism—that there are no moral truths that apply to all of us—have on our thought and practice? Should we be nihilists, for example, and believe that everything is permitted?

A common answer is: “No. To believe that anything is permitted is to believe something *within* morality. Claims about whether beliefs of this kind are ever true is a claim *about* morality.”

Dworkin asks whether we can distinguish between claims *within* morality and claims *about* morality.

*I-propositions*=first-order value judgments: e.g., “Abortion is wrong”

*E-propositions*=second-order claims about the status of first-order value judgments: e.g., “What I said about abortion was not just venting my feelings. My opinions are true. They would be true even if no one believed them.”

*Internal skepticism:*

- Assumes the truth of some value judgments. Example: Skepticism about conventional sexual morality, based on the Harm Principle.
- Implies some value judgments, e.g., sex before marriage is permissible.

*External skepticism:*

Directed not at first-order value judgments, but instead at second-order claims about the status of first-order value judgments.

- “*Austere*”: Does not assume any value judgments.
- “*Neutral*”: Does not imply any value judgments.

Most subjectivists claim to be *external* skeptics.

*Is subjectivism neutral?*

If every E-proposition means the same thing as some I-proposition, then subjectivism is not neutral.

*Can the E-propositions be interpreted as meaning the same thing as the I-proposition?*

Yes. They can be interpreted simply as “emphatic or metaphorical” restatements. I am stressing that my belief that abortion is wrong is not simply a taste, which is simply part of what it means to say that I believe that it is *wrong*.

*Can the E-propositions be interpreted as meaning something else?*

(1) Secondary Properties?

- The E-proposition is that moral properties are “primary,” rather than “secondary” properties. They are not simply dispositions to provoke reactions in people, like the disgustingness of rotten eggs.
- Is this independent of any I-proposition?
- No. Someone who denies the E-proposition holds that, say, genocide is wrong only if it outrages people. So she believes that if people were not outraged by genocide, then it would not be wrong.
- This is a (very implausible) I-proposition. It says that if we find that exterminating some group of human beings does not outrage people, then it is perfectly permissible to exterminate them. Accepting this I-proposition would affect our choices.

(2) Correspondence with Reality?

- The E-proposition is that moral facts *cause* moral beliefs.

- This is equivalent to the “moral-field” thesis.
- First, no one thinks this; it can’t possibly be the right interpretation of the E-proposition.
- Second, even if it were the right interpretation of the E-proposition, it would imply a (very implausible) I-proposition: that what makes genocide wrong is that instances of genocide are surrounded by a moral field (as opposed to the fact that they involve killing people).

(3) Expressivist Readings?

- I-propositions differ from E-propositions, because I-propositions merely express feelings, whereas E-propositions assert something about how things are (e.g., that I-propositions merely express feelings).
- Why? Gibbard: The alternative is “Platonism,” the idea “that truths about what is rational or just or good are ‘among the facts of the world.’”
- But is *this* E-proposition any different from the I-proposition that certain things are rational, or just, or good?
- Gibbard needs a distinct, “neutral” interpretation of the E-proposition in order to motivate his revisionist, expressivist interpretation of the I-proposition.

*Is subjectivism “austere”?*

Can one argue for subjectivism without assuming some claims about value?

(1) Mackie’s argument from relativity (or diversity):

- Whether diversity in beliefs about a certain subject matter supports the claim that beliefs about that subject matter cannot be true depends on the subject matter in question.
- If beliefs about a subject matter are supposed to arise from *perceptions* of that subject matter, then diversity undermines those beliefs.
- But beliefs about values are not supposed to arise from perceptions of values.
- So there is no reason why diversity, as such, in beliefs about values should undermine them.

(2) Mackie’s argument from queerness:

An “objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it.” What does this mean?

- (i) Anyone who comes in contact with an objective good will be motivated to pursue it? This seems to assume something like the moral-field thesis.
- (ii) Anyone who believes that something is objectively good must believe, on pain of contradiction, that he ought to pursue it? If this is true, it is true simply in virtue of what “objectively good” means.
- (iii) Anyone who believes that something is wrong must actually be motivated, to some degree, to avoid it, no matter what other desires he has? If this is true, it is a true in virtue of how we attribute beliefs to people.

Dworkin seems to be arguing that these arguments are *no good*, not that they *must assume* some claims about value. Is that what he set out to show?

(3) Epistemological concerns:

- (i) It makes no sense to suppose that things have moral properties unless we have some plausible explanation of how we could have knowledge of them.
- (ii) There is no plausible explanation (since, e.g., the moral field thesis is absurd).
- (iii) Therefore, things do not have moral properties.
  - Dworkin’s reply: Are we more confident of (ii) than we are that (iii) is false? If we are more confident that (iii) is false, we ought to reject (ii).
  - More fundamentally, subjectivism is not austere: that a subjectivist must make some claims about value, namely (iii), to support his position.