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THE PROBLEMS WITH MORAL SUBJECTIVISM

Seow Hon Tan

Moral dialogue for moral subjectivists is gravely limited. As soon as moral subjectivists hold another person to any moral standard independent of the person's belief, they must give up their moral subjectivism. Some moral subjectivists might turn out to be moral realists who accord primacy to autonomy. This, however, is a senseless position that renders all persons equally worthless, unless such moral realists concede that norms that limit autonomy exist. But if so, they are not different from any other moral realists after all.

According to moral realists, moral facts and properties exist which are independent of a subject's thinking, belief or feeling. Of an act such as Lucy slugging her brother Linus as and when she feels crabby, it can be said that the act is wrong. A statement that Lucy's act is wrong is not merely a statement about Linus's belief or Lucy's feeling of guilt. It involves a claim about the properties of Lucy's action – a claim that can be true or false. If two persons disagree about whether Lucy is wrong to slug Linus whenever she feels like it, one of them is wrong.

In contrast, moral subjectivists, who are opponents of moral realism, are of the view that moral judgements depend on the perception of the subject.

Moral subjectivists, such as David Hume, may be non-cognitivists who take the view that claims about right and wrong resemble expressions of emotions, which cannot be true or false. Strictly, not all moral subjectivists are non-cognitivists, as moral subjectivists may think moral opinions can be true or false to particular individuals and may not regard them as mere sentiments.

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Moral sceptics are another group of opponents of moral realism. There are different forms of moral scepticism. Moral sceptics may be sceptical about the existence of an objective standard of morality; or they may be sceptical that such an objective standard can be known. Moral sceptics of the first sort – a more severe form of scepticism – are necessarily moral subjectivists.

Another stance on morality is moral relativism. Moral relativists may be relativistic in different manners: the emotive meta-ethical relativism of Bertrand Russell, for example, is essentially non-cognitivism, while cultural relativists think that each culture has its own standard of right and wrong. Cultural relativism is a form of moral subjectivism.

I shall demonstrate that moral dialogue for moral subjectivists is gravely limited. As soon as moral subjectivists attempt to hold another person to their moral standards independent of the person's belief, thinking or feeling, they must give up their moral subjectivism. Moral subjectivists are likely to hold another person to their moral standards paradoxically when they insist on certain corollaries arising out of the nature of morality being subjective. I shall explore the problems of moral subjectivism, first, by examining the position of cultural relativism, as a subset of moral subjectivism, and then by considering moral subjectivism in general. Next, I shall consider why moral subjectivism seems appealing at first blush, and suggest that the reasons for its appeal are inconclusive. I shall conclude with the problem confronting moral subjectivists who turn out to be moral realists.

Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativists are moral subjectivists who think that morality is culturally subjective. Unpacking the exact claim of cultural relativism throws up some difficulties.

First, it is not clear how a culture is to be defined. Is culture constituted by race, religion or nationality?

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Commonly, claims of cultural relativism are made by nation-states that resist what they perceive to be the imperialism of other nations that maintain that human rights are universal and require these nations subscribing to cultural relativism to respect such rights for their own citizens. In a non-racially or non-religiously homogeneous country that subscribes to cultural relativism, are its 'culturally' relativistic norms the norms of the majority or dominant group? If so, those making the claim ironically neglect to honour the culture of minority groups.

Second, even if we could agree on a definition of 'culture' in cultural relativism, it is questionable what cultural relativism entails for others beyond the group. Are others bound to respect the culturally relativistic norms of one group when they belong to a different group governed in their view by a different set of cultural norms? At first blush, it would seem that the obvious answer is they are not bound in this manner. But a claim of cultural relativism in fact often ends up requiring others to respect a group's right to be governed by the group's norms *to the exclusion* of other groups' norms, in that sense binding others. If a cultural relativist, P, does not think that P's group norms bind another person, Q, from a different culture, except that P insists that Q's culturally relativistic group norms also cannot bind P, P's stance is ironically only superficially culturally relativistic. P's stance in substance holds Q to a meta-cultural standard that attempts to bind Q to respect P's entitlement to be governed by P's group norms rather than Q's group norms, even if Q's culture does not endorse such an entitlement. Cultural relativism suggests norms are relative to culture, but P is found to endorse a norm that P cannot insist is merely subjective, as P seeks to bind Q whether or not Q endorses P's group norms. The norm's content appears to be tantamount to a right to self-determination by each culture. P must therefore explain why such a right exists. If it exists, for example, because each cultural group is constituted by persons who have equal moral worth and may thus together choose the norms that

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govern their group, the insistence that Q must respect P's group norms insofar as it governs P, even if Q does not agree, suggests that P subscribes to a norm that is neither culturally relativistic nor constituted by agreement. P is found to subscribe to an absolute norm that, stripped to its core, honours the equal moral worth of persons. Therefore, P is a moral realist. P's view as to the absolutist nature of the particular norm of cultural self-determination can also be challenged; that is, P can be questioned about why cultural self-determination has primacy over other possible values.

If P, on the other hand, remains true to subjectivism, P must not be found to hold Q to any of P's group norms. If Q subscribes to another set of group norms in Q's version of cultural relativism, and if some of Q's norms concern P's conduct, P cannot persuade Q otherwise while staying true to cultural relativism. Moral dialogue breaks down.

Suppose, instead, that R, from a different culture, happens to be a moral realist who subscribes to the existence of universal human rights. If P insists that R must respect P's right to be governed by P's group norms, P has similarly given up on P's moral subjectivism.

A Further Illustration of Possible Moral Dialogues

A hypothetical scenario illustrates the preceding points.

Suppose that there are two neighbouring countries, both of which subscribe to cultural relativism. In Country A, persons of Race X form the majority and persons of Race Y form the minority. In Country B, it is the opposite: persons of Race Y form the majority and persons of Race X form the minority.

One day, the government of Country A ('Government A') decides to eliminate all Race Y citizens, justifying its genocide by reference to its culturally relativistic norm, according to which persons of Race X have equal moral worth but persons of Race Y are regarded as sub-human and have no entitlement to human rights. At this juncture, the

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government of Country B ('Government B'), with a dominant majority of Race Y citizens, seeks to intervene to save Race Y citizens of Country A. What can Government A and Government B say to each other if they attempt to engage in a moral dialogue, instead of using brute force to resolve their differences?

Suppose we leave international law out of the picture for our discussion. After all, Government A cannot pick and choose international law norms to suit its purposes. It would like to tell Government B to mind its own business but cannot reasonably rely on international law principles relating to national sovereignty and assert an entitlement to do whatever it pleases within its own territories if it is planning to violate a *jus cogens* norm against genocide. Even though the violation of the *jus cogens* norm might not entitle Government B, a sovereign nation, to unilaterally decide to intervene, Government A is unlikely to want to put itself in this situation when an international institution acts against it based upon international law norms against genocide, or subject itself to the sanctions of international criminal law later. Leaving international law aside, how might the moral dialogue go?

Government A might assert that it subscribes to cultural relativism and explains that according to its group norms, persons of Race Y within its territory are sub-human and can be eliminated without any violation of human rights. What can Government B say in reply? Government A's cultural relativism is a form of subjectivism, according to which moral norms are relative to culture. However, if moral norms are truly relative to culture, Government B is not bound by the subjective view of Government A and can therefore step in to do what is right according to its own subjective view, which it can argue that Government A must accept since Government A endorses subjectivism and believes that culture is the source of moral norms. In this line of argumentation, Government B is holding Government A to its moral subjectivism, essentially saying that Government A must accept that Government B is therefore not bound by Government A's merely subjective

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norms. Moral dialogue in fact breaks down as moral subjectivism leaves us with no means to resolve the conflict between contradictory norms.

If Government A stays true to its subjectivism, can it offer no comeback? Government A might counter that it has not deviated from subjectivism if it argues that Government B is permitted to define rights for matters pertaining to people within the territory of Country B, but not beyond that. Government A might say that it has not stopped Government B from determining that persons of Race Y within Country B are not sub-human but entitled to human rights. There are, however, at least two problems with this line of argumentation. The first problem is that it would be unrealistic to delineate rights in this manner in an interconnected world as acts involving people outside one's country may have effects within one's country, although this is not implicated in this hypothetical scenario. The question which culturally relative rights prevail, if they are conflicting on an issue that impinges on the two countries, or their peoples, must be resolved. Such resolution would be impossible if both Government A and Government B stay true to moral subjectivism, as a meta-cultural standard which both reject is necessary for the resolution. The second and more critical problem is that true subjectivism cannot conceptually restrict its adherents to a particular content of norms or their reach, such as that a government can only define rights for people within its territory. To insist on such a restriction is to concede that there is a non-subjective standard. As such, true subjectivism, taken to its logical conclusion, means its adherents do not have a comeback against their opponents in moral dialogue.

Moral Subjectivism on an Individual Level

The problem of moral dialogue breaking down between cultural relativists would recur in some form or other with all moral subjectivists.

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Suppose M does an act which R, a moral realist, thinks is objectively wrong – that is, *really* wrong. R tells M off. M is a non-cognitivist who thinks that claims of right and wrong are merely sentiments, and cannot be true or false. M cannot conclude that R has done something *really* wrong to tell M off because all acts, including the act of R telling M off, are not *really* wrong.

Suppose another moral subjectivist N thinks that moral judgements can be true or false according to individual perception, but not objectively or *really* so. Suppose that R thinks that N has done something wrong and insists on telling N so. N disagrees and thinks that according to N's subjective moral standards, N has not done anything wrong. N might opine that moral subjectivism entails that R cannot tell N off, for two alternative reasons. The first reason is that N's subjective moral norms stipulate that R cannot tell N off. If that is the reason, N should still not hold R to those merely subjective norms. By N's own views, those norms are true for N but not necessarily for others. An alternative (and different) reason as to why N would think that moral subjectivism entails that R cannot tell N off is that N thinks that R's moral judgement is merely R's subjective opinion, given that there is no moral law to which individuals are subject. In the second case, N must ironically resort to a non-subjective norm that binds R. After all, if there is no objective moral law to which individuals are subject, R can do as R pleases. What would the content of such a non-subjective norm be? Such a norm perhaps accords primacy to the autonomy of individuals to determine what is right. But any such norm is unworkable when unpacked. If individuals may do as they please, everyone becomes equally worthless as others can do anything to them; if, however, there are to be some constraints on one's autonomy, these constraints usually add up to an elaborate moral law calling for respect for another's physical integrity (if one cannot physically harm the other), property (if one cannot damage the other's property), and so on. As long as the moral subjectivist admits of the primacy

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of autonomy whilst denying that all are equally worthless, the moral subjectivist turns out to be just another moral realist.

Appeal of Moral Subjectivism

Several reasons account for the appeal of moral subjectivism, namely, the existence of disagreement on moral issues; the fear of intolerance and hindrance of dialogue if one subscribes to moral realism; and the view that objective morality cannot be proven to exist. These reasons are in fact inconclusive as 'arguments' for moral subjectivism. I shall deal with each in turn.

The existence of disagreement on moral issues debunks the existence of an objective morality only if objective morality is constituted by an inter-subjective consensus or agreement. According to moral realists, it is not: moral facts and properties exist that are independent of the subject. A disagreement about moral facts and properties is similar to a disagreement about the number of planets in the galaxy: it does not change the objective fact. Are there other explanations that account for the existence of disagreement? An alternative explanation is that one or more of the interlocutors are wrong. Moral realists can in fact offer several hypotheses for why we would disagree about moral facts and properties if they exist. First, even if moral facts and properties are accessible by ordinary persons through rational intuition, by reasoning from first principles, or through other means accessible to all, social conditioning or the mores of the times can pervert reason or the means of moral knowledge. Second, most, if not all, of us can attest to how we sometimes end up doing what we know to be wrong and insist we have done no wrong: we might sometimes give in to our passions or instincts, over the dictates of what appears to be our conscience or reason. Third, apart from the occasions when we give in to a moment of weakness, there are other occasions when we

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choose to do what we know to be wrong out of self-interest. For example, we break promises when it is inconvenient for us to keep them. Even if we can initially tell right from wrong, by a deliberate habit of continual wrongdoing and self-justification, we would find that over time, our guilt is lessened and we no longer flinch when doing an act over which we had agonized the first time we had done it. Given our experiences, we should know enough not to attach too much significance to the presence of disagreement.

Another reason for the appeal of moral subjectivism over moral realism is the fear that those who are of the view that an objective morality exists might be intolerant, not engage in moral dialogue, and imperiously impose their views on others. In the preceding parts, I have sought to demonstrate, however, that moral dialogue is in fact gravely limited amongst and with moral subjectivists. Some moral subjectivists might be circumspect about acting on merely subjective views, given that they acknowledge that these views are only true to them, but other moral subjectivists might not. Genuine endorsement of moral realism, in contrast, entails a commitment to deliberation. Moral realists rationally ought to be more circumspect about the possibility of being wrong if morality is not merely dependent on their beliefs. Moral judgements should therefore be held more provisionally if moral facts and properties exist independently of a subject's thinking, making deliberation and hearing the other out more important. Unfortunately, the bad sheep – those who are bigoted and refuse to deliberate – give a bad name to moral realism. But moral realists are not the only ones who can be bigoted and intolerant – subjectivists might be too.

As for those moral subjectivists who choose to be circumspect about acting on their merely subjective moral opinions, there is a third reason for the appeal of moral subjectivism. It might lie in the belief that, as it is impossible to prove that objective morality exists, it would be safer not to act on moral judgements. Arguably, moral subjectivism, more so than moral realism, allows one to refrain

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from acting on one's moral opinion, since that opinion is only true to one's self. Some of the Hellenistic Sceptics took the view that suspension of judgement would ensure freedom from disturbance or *ataraxia*. The problem with morality, however, is that the refusal to act on a particular moral judgement might in some cases be equivalent to acting as if the opposite moral judgement were true. For example, if one withholds judgement on whether an act is wrong because it is impossible to prove that an objective morality exists, one might as well act as if it is not wrong and do it. Notably, some Sceptics, such as Pyrrho, doubt the accuracy of both sense perceptions and judgements (including moral judgements) but permit a statement to be made to the effect that something 'appears to be so'. Thus, it might be said that such persons could still act on their beliefs, whilst refraining from thinking that such beliefs accurately reflected objective moral facts and properties. That is precisely what some moral subjectivists end up doing. But surely it might not lead to *ataraxia* after all: revising one's tentative subjective belief that one has already acted upon on an earlier date might be disturbing.

Furthermore, it could be argued that it is somewhat strange to act on one's moral opinion that an act is wrong, for example, while insisting that the act is not *really* wrong as a matter of objective truth – an oddity that philosophers such as Dworkin[1] have noted. I borrow Burnyeat's example of a proposition such as, 'the stick in the water is bent', and his distinction between an impression and an assent to explain an aspect of the oddity.[2] In the case of the proposition relating to the stick, one's impression and one's assent can be different. One's impression is based on one's sense perception, in this case, of sight. But one can conclude that the stick in the water is not *really* bent because one is aware of the law of physics relating to the refraction of light. While Burnyeat dealt with philosophical propositions generally rather than moral judgements in particular, the difficulty of distinction between impression and assent can arguably apply to moral judgements. For moral subjectivists who do not think that moral opinions are

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mere sentiments but remain subjectivists, impressions of moral norms are formed through philosophical argument; for moral realists, moral facts and properties are also discerned through philosophical argument. Arguably, it is therefore odd (though not impossible) for the moral subjectivist to form a moral judgement through philosophical argument, but disbelieve that they have discerned moral facts and properties that are *really* so.

A Squabble amongst Moral Realists

I have argued that when push comes to shove, some moral subjectivists turn out to be moral realists. The moral subjectivists who do not turn out to be moral realists are gravely limited in what they can argue for in a moral dialogue. Those who turn out to be moral realists are really contending with others over the content of moral norms. They seem, at first blush, to be moral subjectivists only because they are of the view that individuals can decide what is right or wrong for themselves, and others cannot morally judge them because there is no moral law to which individuals are subject. But such a proposition is self-defeating: if there is no moral law to which individuals are subject, it is a free-for-all; the moral judgement of others cannot itself be morally critiqued. If, on the other hand, apparent moral subjectivists really extol the primacy of autonomy, they turn out to be moral realists committed to the primacy of autonomy. Moral realism committed to the primacy of autonomy is, on deeper analysis, untenable. While such primacy must have been derived from the equal moral worth of all individuals, it in fact renders all of them equally worthless unless there are limits to everyone's autonomy. Those limits, if conceded, however, constitute an elaborate set of moral norms and render their adherents indistinguishable from avowed moral realists. Any further debate over the content of norms is a squabble within the family of moral realists.

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Notes

[1] Ronald Dworkin, 'Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 25 (1996), 87–139, at p. 87.

[2] Myles Burnyeat, 'Can the Sceptic Live his Scepticism?', in Schofield, Burnyeat, Barnes eds., *Doubt and Dogmatism: Studies in Hellenistic Epistemology* (Clarendon Press, 1980), 20, at pp. 52–3.

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