



Philosophy

Task

Read the extracts below and then write a 2000-word essay answering the question:

Are moral values objective or subjective?

Objective = true independently of what anyone thinks or wants (e.g. physics)

Subjective = not objective (e.g. etiquette).

Guidance

The idea is for you to give an argument for a particular answer to the question – objective or subjective. You are not being asked simply to summarize the extracts. The extracts contain arguments that you may find helpful. For instance, if you argue that moral values are objective, it might be worth explaining why the argument in the first extract goes wrong. If you argue that moral values are subjective, it may be worth explaining why the argument in the second extract goes wrong. But we want to know what you think. Because that is what philosophy at Cambridge is about : thinking for yourself.

Extract 1

Mackie: argument from relativity (from his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*)

The argument from relativity has as its premiss the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community...

But it is not the mere occurrence of disagreements that tells against the objectivity of values.

Disagreement on questions in history or biology or cosmology does not show that there are no objective issues in these fields for investigators to disagree about. But such scientific disagreement results from speculative inferences or explanatory hypotheses based on inadequate evidence, and it is hardly plausible to interpret moral disagreement in the same way.

Disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect people's adherence to and participation in different ways of life. The causal connection seems to be mainly that way round: it is that people approve of monogamy because they participate in a monogamous way of life rather than that they participate in a monogamous way of life because they approve of monogamy. Of course, the standards may be an idealization of the way of life from which they arise: the monogamy in which people participate may be less complete, less rigid, than that of which it leads them to approve.

This is not to say that moral judgements are purely conventional. Of course there have been and are moral heretics and moral reformers, people who have turned against the established rules and practices of their own communities for moral reasons, and often for moral reasons that we would endorse. But this can usually be understood as the extension, in ways which, though new and unconventional, seemed to them to be required for consistency, of rules to which they already adhered as arising out of an existing way of life. In short, the argument from relativity has some force simply because the actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the

hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values.

Extract 2

Enoch: the spinach test (from his 'Why I am an objectivist about moral value')

Consider the following joke (which I borrow from Christine Korsgaard): A child hates spinach. He then reports that he's glad he hates spinach. To the question "Why?" he responds: "Because if I liked it, I would have eaten it; and it's yucky!". In a minute we're going to have to annoyingly ask why the joke is funny. For now, though, I want to highlight the fact that similar jokes are not always similarly funny.

Consider, for instance, someone who grew up in the twentieth-century West, and who believes that the earth revolves around the sun. Also, she reports to be happy she wasn't born in the Middle Ages, "because had I grown up in the Middle Ages, I would have believed that the earth is in the center of the universe, and that belief is false!". To my ears, the joke doesn't work in this latter version (try it on your friends!). The response in the earth-revolves-around-the-sun case sounds perfectly sensible, precisely in a way in which the analogous response does not sound sensible in the spinach case.

We need one last case. Suppose someone grew up in the US in the late twentieth century, and rejects any manifestation of racism as morally wrong. He then reports that he's happy that that's when and where he grew up, "because had I grown up in the 18th century, I would have accepted slavery and racism. And these things are wrong!" How funny is this third, last version of the joke? To my ears, it's about as (un)funny as the second one, and nowhere nearly as amusing as the first. The response to the question in this last case (why he is happy that he grew up in the 20th century) seems to me to make perfect sense, and I suspect it makes sense to you too. And this is why there's nothing funny about it.

OK, then, why is the spinach version funny and the others are not? Usually, our attitude towards our own likings and dislikings (when it comes to food, for instance) is that it's all about us. If you don't like spinach, the reason you shouldn't have it is precisely that you don't like it. So if we're imagining a hypothetical scenario in which you do like it, then you no longer have any reason not to eat it. This is what the child in the first example gets wrong: He's holding fixed his dislike for spinach, even in thinking about the hypothetical case in which he likes spinach. But because these issues are all about him and what he likes and dislikes, this makes no sense.

But physics is different: What we want, believe or do – none of this affects the earth's orbit. The fact that the earth revolves around the sun is just not about us at all. So it makes sense to hold this truth fixed even when thinking about hypothetical cases in which you don't believe it. And so it makes sense to be happy that you aren't in the Middle Ages, since you'd then be in a situation in which your beliefs about the earth's orbit would be false (even if you couldn't know that it is). And because this makes sense, the joke isn't funny.

And so we have the spinach test: About any relevant subject matter, formulate an analogue of the spinach joke. If the joke works, this seems to indicate that the subject matter is all about us and our responses, our likings and dislikings, our preferences, and so on. If the joke doesn't work, the subject matter is much more objective than that, as in the astronomy case. And when we apply the spinach test to a moral issue (like the moral status of racism), it seems to fall squarely on the objective side.