Moral Realism

David Enoch’s “Why I am an Objectivist about Ethics (And Why You Are, Too)”

Nathan Kellen

University of Connecticut

February 3rd, 2015
Table of Contents

Objectivity and Moral Realism

Three Jokes and a Test

The Phenomenology Test

Counterfactual Test

Outcomes
Objectivity

In this article David Enoch attempts to defend the **objectivity** of ethics.
In this article David Enoch attempts to defend the objectivity of ethics. The term “objectivity”, as it’s used in ethics, typically has two meanings.
Objectivity

In this article David Enoch attempts to defend the **objectivity** of ethics.

The term “objectivity”, as it’s used in ethics, typically has two meanings.

According to the first meaning, something is objective iff it doesn’t vary. Think about this as non-pluralist.
Objectivity

In this article David Enoch attempts to defend the **objectivity** of ethics.

The term “objectivity”, as it’s used in ethics, typically has two meanings.

According to the first meaning, something is objective iff it doesn’t vary. Think about this as non-pluralist.

On the second meaning, something is objective iff it is based in facts independent of us. This is what Gensler referred to at the end of his article last time.
Objectivity

In this article David Enoch attempts to defend the *objectivity* of ethics.

The term “objectivity”, as it’s used in ethics, typically has two meanings.

According to the first meaning, something is objective iff it doesn’t vary. Think about this as non-pluralist.

On the second meaning, something is objective iff it is based in facts independent of us. This is what Gensler referred to at the end of his article last time.
Moral Realism

Enoch defends a metaethical theory called moral realism. Moral realism is the thesis that there are true moral statements, independently of our thoughts, feelings, etc. about them.
Enoch defends a metaethical theory called **moral realism**. Moral realism is the thesis that there are true moral statements, independently of our thoughts, feelings, etc. about them.

That is, moral realists believe that morality is objective in the second sense.
Moral Realism

Enoch defends a metaethical theory called **moral realism**. Moral realism is the thesis that there are true moral statements, independently of our thoughts, feelings, etc. about them.

That is, moral realists believe that morality is objective in the second sense.

However, most moral realists also believe that morality is objective in the first sense as well (e.g. Enoch), and thus some people run the two together.
Moral Realism

Enoch defends a metaethical theory called **moral realism**. Moral realism is the thesis that there are true moral statements, independently of our thoughts, feelings, etc. about them.

That is, moral realists believe that morality is objective in the second sense.

However, most moral realists also believe that morality is objective in the first sense as well (e.g. Enoch), and thus some people run the two together.

When Enoch discusses objectivity, he means a combination of the two senses above. So on the view he defends in this article, morality is neither relative nor dependent on us.
Spinach Joke

Consider a child who hates spinach. She says “I’m glad I hate spinach”.
Spinach Joke

Consider a child who hates spinach. She says “I’m glad I hate spinach”.

The mother asks “Why?”
Spinach Joke

Consider a child who hates spinach. She says “I’m glad I hate spinach”.

The mother asks “Why?”

And the child responds “Because if I liked spinach I would eat it, but it’s gross”.
Science Joke

Consider someone in the 20th century who believes that the Earth revolves around the sun.
Science Joke

Consider someone in the 20th century who believes that the Earth revolves around the sun.

They remark: “I’m glad that I wasn’t born in the Middle Ages!”, to which their friend asks “Why?”
Science Joke

Consider someone in the 20th century who believes that the Earth revolves around the sun.

They remark: “I’m glad that I wasn’t born in the Middle Ages!”, to which their friend asks “Why?”

And the first person responds: “Because if I had grown up in the Middle Ages I would have thought the sun revolves around the earth, and that’s false!”
Finally, consider someone from modern America. They remark “I’m glad I grew up in the 20th century!”, and their friend asks why.
Finally, consider someone from modern America. They remark “I’m glad I grew up in the 20th century!”, and their friend asks why.

Of course they respond: “Because if I had grown up in the 1700s I would’ve thought that slavery isn’t wrong, and that’s false!”
What’s the Point?

Assume for a moment that any of these three jokes were at least slightly funny (I know they aren’t). We should ask why they’re funny - what makes us chuckle about the way they’re set up?
What’s the Point?

Assume for a moment that any of these three jokes were at least slightly funny (I know they aren’t). We should ask why they’re funny - what makes us chuckle about the way they’re set up?

Enoch claims that there’s something importantly different about the latter two jokes (Science/Ethics) versus the Spinach Joke, and that explains why the latter two are even less funny than the Spinach Joke.
What’s the Point?

Assume for a moment that any of these three jokes were at least slightly funny (I know they aren’t). We should ask why they’re funny - what makes us chuckle about the way they’re set up?

Enoch claims that there’s something importantly different about the latter two jokes (Science/Ethics) versus the Spinach Joke, and that explains why the latter two are even less funny than the Spinach Joke.

Further, Enoch claims that the Ethics and Science Jokes are relevantly similar, and not just in being less funny than the Spinach Joke. He’ll take this to imply that Science and Ethics are alike in important ways.
Why Is the Spinach Joke Funny?

Enoch thinks that the Spinach Joke is funny because it doesn’t really make sense.
Why Is the Spinach Joke Funny?

Enoch thinks that the Spinach Joke is funny because it doesn’t really make sense.

That is, the Spinach Joke is self-defeating in a sense - it’s funny because the reason that the child gives undermines itself.
Why Is the Spinach Joke Funny?

Enoch thinks that the Spinach Joke is funny because it doesn’t really make sense.

That is, the Spinach Joke is self-defeating in a sense - it’s funny because the reason that the child gives undermines itself.

This is because we typically think that the things that we like are the reasons for our behaving in certain ways towards them, like eating them. And if we didn’t like them, we just wouldn’t have those reasons.
Why Is the Spinach Joke Funny?

Enoch thinks that the Spinach Joke is funny because it doesn’t really make sense.

That is, the Spinach Joke is self-defeating in a sense - it’s funny because the reason that the child gives undermines itself.

This is because we typically think that the things that we like are the reasons for our behaving in certain ways towards them, like eating them. And if we didn’t like them, we just wouldn’t have those reasons.

So when the child imagines herself as not liking spinach, they’re wrong in holding that spinach is gross in that scenario, because according to the version of them in that scenario, it’s just not.
The Spinach Test

Enoch asks us to consider the Spinach Test:
The Spinach Test

Enoch asks us to consider the **Spinach Test**:

> In any subject matter formulate a relevant analogue to the Spinach Joke.
The Spinach Test

Enoch asks us to consider the **Spinach Test:**

*In any subject matter formulate a relevant analogue to the Spinach Joke.*

If the joke works then this seems to indicate that the subject “depends on us”.
The Spinach Test

Enoch asks us to consider the **Spinach Test**:

*In any subject matter formulate a relevant analogue to the Spinach Joke.*

If the joke works then this seems to indicate that the subject “depends on us”.

Likewise, if the joke doesn’t work then it seems to indicate that the subject doesn’t have much to do with our responses.
The Spinach Test

So according to this test the Spinach Joke (or taste in general) depends on us—what tastes good or bad is a matter of personal opinion. It can change if our opinions change, and could vary from person to person.
The Spinach Test

So according to this test the Spinach Joke (or taste in general) depends on us—what tastes good or bad is a matter of personal opinion. It can change if our opinions change, and could vary from person to person.

On the other hand, scientific talk doesn’t seem to depend on us. Whether we know about the sun and earth and their revolutions doesn’t change what actually is true.
The Spinach Test

So according to this test the Spinach Joke (or taste in general) depends on us—what tastes good or bad is a matter of personal opinion. It can change if our opinions change, and could vary from person to person.

On the other hand, scientific talk doesn’t seem to depend on us. Whether we know about the sun and earth and their revolutions doesn’t change what actually is true.

Enoch’s claim is that ethics is the same way - whether slavery is wrong doesn’t really depend on our thoughts, and doesn’t vary across persons.
Enoch notes as an exercise that we should try to think about a Spinach Test for music. What do you think?
Enoch considers another test - let’s call it the **phenomenology test**. But let’s first explain phenomenology.
Phenomenology

Enoch considers another test - let’s call it the **phenomenology test**. But let’s first explain phenomenology.

Phenomenology is essentially the study of how things feel, or how we experience them.
Phenomenology

Enoch considers another test - let’s call it the phenomenology test. But let’s first explain phenomenology.

Phenomenology is essentially the study of how things feel, or how we experience them.

So the phenomenology of pain is a study of how pain feels. For example, we might ask whether my pain feels like your pain.
Enoch considers another test - let’s call it the **phenomenology test**. But let’s first explain phenomenology.

Phenomenology is essentially the study of how things feel, or how we experience them.

So the phenomenology of pain is a study of how pain *feels*. For example, we might ask whether my pain feels like your pain.
The Phenomenology Test

The **phenomenology test** asks us to consider the phenomenology of ethical disagreement.
The Phenomenology Test

The **phenomenology test** asks us to consider the phenomenology of ethical disagreement.

So think about situations where you have gotten into ethical disagreements with others, especially the vigorous debates. What do those debates *feel like*?
The Phenomenology Test

The phenomenology test asks us to consider the phenomenology of ethical disagreement.

So think about situations where you have gotten into ethical disagreements with others, especially the vigorous debates. What do those debates feel like?

It’s important to imagine yourself as the one in the debate - don’t just look at debates from the outside.
Self Phenomenology Test

This can also be done by oneself. Imagine a scenario where you are really torn about what you should do morally.
Self Phenomenology Test

This can also be done by oneself. Imagine a scenario where you are really torn about what you should do morally.

Perhaps you’re considering doing something that others would consider immoral. Perhaps you’re considering criticising someone for doing something immoral. When you’re debating with yourself, what does that feel like?
The Phenomenology Test

Now compare these results to the following two kinds of debate:
The Phenomenology Test

Now compare these results to the following two kinds of debate:

- Debates over whether red pandas or giant pandas are cuter
The Phenomenology Test

Now compare these results to the following two kinds of debate:

▶ Debates over whether red pandas or giant pandas are cuter
▶ Debates over whether humans caused global climate change
The Phenomenology Test

Now compare these results to the following two kinds of debate:

▶ Debates over whether red pandas or giant pandas are cuter
▶ Debates over whether humans caused global climate change

Which of those is most similar to the phenomenology of ethical disagreement?
Counterfactuals

Sometimes we make statements about what isn’t the case, but could have been.
Counterfactuals

Sometimes we make statements about what isn’t the case, but could have been.

For example, we can consider situations in which we woke up earlier, or slept in through class, etc.
Counterfactuals

Sometimes we make statements about what isn’t the case, but could have been.

For example, we can consider situations in which we woke up earlier, or slept in through class, etc.

These types of statements are called counterfactuals. They’re extremely useful in evaluating causation (the study of causes). Enoch wants to use counterfactuals to determine whether ethics is objective or not.
The Counterfactual Test

The **counterfactual test** asks us to consider statements like:

If our society hadn't cared about the Holocaust, would it have been morally okay?
The Counterfactual Test

The **counterfactual test** asks us to consider statements like:

*If our society hadn’t of cared about the Holocaust, would it have been morally okay?*
The **counterfactual test** asks us to consider statements like:

*If our society hadn’t of cared about the Holocaust, would it have been morally okay?*

That is, we want to consider statements where we change the details about us, society, etc., and ask whether ethics changes as well.
The Counterfactual Test

Now compare these results to statements like the following:
The Counterfactual Test

Now compare these results to statements like the following:

- If everyone in society wore top hats, would they be considered out of fashion?
The Counterfactual Test

Now compare these results to statements like the following:

- If everyone in society wore top hats, would they be considered out of fashion?
- If everyone in society didn’t think that cigarettes caused cancer, would they?
The Counterfactual Test

Now compare these results to statements like the following:

▶ If everyone in society wore top hats, would they be considered out of fashion?
▶ If everyone in society didn’t think that cigarettes caused cancer, would they?

Again, compare these to the ethics cases. Which do the ethics cases feel like?
The Outcomes

So what does this show?
The Outcomes

So what does this show?

Enoch takes the three tests considered to imply that ethics seems to be *objective*, in both of the senses we started with.
The Outcomes

So what does this show?

Enoch takes the three tests considered to imply that ethics seems to be *objective*, in both of the senses we started with.

That is, ethics seems not to depend on our opinions, and doesn’t vary across cultures or between different people.
Aspirations vs. Outcomes

That isn’t to say that ethics is in fact objective. The tests aren’t meant to prove that ethics is objective, but rather show that most of us think that it is.
Aspirations vs. Outcomes

That isn’t to say that ethics is in fact objective. The tests aren’t meant to prove that ethics is objective, but rather show that most of us think that it is.

But Enoch’s whole shtick relies on the premise that thinking something is so doesn’t imply that it is in fact so, so he can’t say that!
Aspirations vs. Outcomes

That isn’t to say that ethics is in fact objective. The tests aren’t meant to prove that ethics is objective, but rather show that most of us think that it is.

But Enoch’s whole shtick relies on the premise that thinking something is so doesn’t imply that it is in fact so, so he can’t say that!

Enoch believes that ethical discourse (talk) aspires, acts like, etc. like objective discourse.
Aspirations vs. Outcomes

That isn’t to say that ethics is in fact objective. The tests aren’t meant to prove that ethics is objective, but rather show that most of us think that it is.

But Enoch’s whole shtick relies on the premise that thinking something is so doesn’t imply that it is in fact so, so he can’t say that!

Enoch believes that ethical discourse (talk) aspires, acts like, etc. like objective discourse.

That’s compatible with it ending up that morality isn’t objective, i.e. that moral realism is false. Enoch is attempting to give an argument from intuition for his position, and he recognises it won’t fully convince most people by itself.
Default Positions

Another way of looking at Enoch’s argument is that he is trying to establish moral realism as the default position.
Default Positions

Another way of looking at Enoch’s argument is that he is trying to establish moral realism as the **default position**.

That is, he’s trying to show us that our initial assumption about morality shouldn’t be that it depends or varies with culture or opinion, but instead that it operates like mathematics or science.
Another way of looking at Enoch's argument is that he is trying to establish moral realism as the default position.

That is, he's trying to show us that our initial assumption about morality shouldn't be that it depends or varies with culture or opinion, but instead that it operates like mathematics or science.

Again, this is fully compatible with even Enoch acknowledging that moral realism is false. It just provides a strong starting point (an argument from intuition) for moral realism's truth.
Next Time

Next time we finish off our metaethics segment by discussing whether morality depends on god(s). Brink will argue that everyone, theists and atheists alike, should agree that morality is independent of god(s).