

# IS ETHICS OBJECTIVE?

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Intro Philosophy

## 1. Objectivity versus subjectivity

*Objective*: is true independently of us

*Subjective*: is not objective

Etiquette seems subjective; facts about science and history seem objective.  
Which is ethics?

## 2. Arguments against moral objectivity

### 2.1 Argument from democracy

1. If ethics is objective, then some moral opinions are true and others are false
2. Everyone has a right to their moral opinions
3. If everyone has a right to their moral opinions, then it's not the case that some moral opinions are true and others are false
4. Therefore, ethics isn't objective

### 2.2 Argument from tolerance

1. It's wrong to impose one's moral beliefs on others
2. This can be explained if ethics is nonobjective
3. This can't be explained if ethics is objective
4. If something can be explained by, but only by, ethics being nonobjective, then ethics is nonobjective
5. Therefore, ethics is nonobjective

### 2.3 Argument from atheism

1. Ethics is objective only if God exists
2. God doesn't exist
3. Therefore, ethics isn't objective

### 2.4 Argument from disagreement

1. There is persistent disagreement about ethics
2. There cannot be persistent disagreement about an objective subject
3. Therefore, ethics is not objective

Revised argument:

- 1\*. There is *intrinsically ethical* persistent disagreement about *all ethical issues*
- 2\*. There cannot be intrinsic persistent disagreement about all issues in an objective subject
- 3\*. Therefore, ethics is not objective

### 2.5 Argument from economy

1. If two theories can explain the same data, then the more economical theory is more likely to be true
2. The theory that morality is nonobjective explains the same data as the theory that morality is objective
3. The theory that morality is nonobjective is more economical than the theory that morality is objective
4. Therefore, it's more likely that morality is nonobjective than objective

(Parallel arguments are sometimes used to argue for materialist theories of the mind and atheism.)

**Ethical naturalism** Moral facts reduce to scientific facts

## 2.6 Argument from oddness

1. Objective values would be *odd*
2. *Odd* things probably don't exist
3. Therefore, there are probably no objective values

## 2.7 Argument from knowledge

1. If morality is objective then either ethical naturalism or ethical nonnaturalism is true
2. Ethical naturalism isn't true
3. If ethical nonnaturalism is true then we don't have any moral knowledge
4. Therefore, if morality is objective then we have no moral knowledge

## 3. Normative versus metaethical subjectivism

**Normative subjectivism** The sentence “*X* is morally right” is true if and only if the person uttering the sentence approves of *X*; “*X* is morally wrong” is true if and only if its utterer disapproves of *X*

**Metaethical subjectivism (emotivism)** “*X* is morally right” and “*X* is morally wrong” are neither true nor false. They are used to express approval and disapproval (like: “Yay for *X*!” and “Boo for *X*!”)

Us: “Torturing people is wrong”

Them: “Torturing people is right”

- Objectivists say: one of us is right, one is wrong
- Normative subjectivists say: each of us is right
- Emotivists say: neither of us is right (we're just expressing our feelings)

## 4. Arguments against subjectivism

### 4.1 Argument from moral equivalence

Hitler: "What I am doing is morally right"

Mother Theresa: "What you are doing is morally wrong"

1. If normative subjectivism is true, Hitler and Mother Theresa both speak the truth
  2. If Hitler and Mother Theresa both speak the truth, then there is no significant moral asymmetry between them
  3. There is a significant moral asymmetry between them
  4. Therefore, normative subjectivism is not true
- I\*. If emotivism is true then neither Hitler nor Mother Theresa speak the truth, and each is expressing his or her emotions

### 4.2 Argument from disagreement

A: "It was wrong to invade Iraq"

B: "It was not wrong to invade Iraq"

1. If normative subjectivism is true, then *A* and *B*'s statements are both true
2. If *A* and *B*'s statements are both true, then *A* and *B* don't mean the same thing by the word 'wrong'
3. If *A* and *B* don't mean the same thing by the word 'wrong', then they aren't really disagreeing.
4. *A* and *B* are really disagreeing
5. Therefore, normative subjectivism isn't true

## 5. Argument from moral motivation

1. Every moral judgment motivates all by itself
2. Factual judgments cannot motivate all by themselves
3. Therefore, moral judgments are not factual