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The Empirical Study of Folk Metaethics

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In this paper, I review recent attempts by experimental philosophers and psychologists to study folk metaethics empirically and discuss some of the difficulties that researchers face when trying to construct the right kind of research materials and interpreting the results that they obtain. At first glance, the findings obtained so far do not look good for the thesis that people are everywhere moral realists about every moral issue. However, because of difficulties in interpreting these results, I argue that better research is needed to move the debate forward.

Philosophers in the analytic tradition have in recent decades largely assumed that ordinary people take moral claims to be objectively true or false and to apply to all people regardless of culture. J. L. Mackie, for example, famously argued:

The ordinary user of moral language means to say something about whatever it is that he characterizes morally, for example a possible action, as it is in itself . . . and not about, or even simply expressive of, his, or anyone else's, attitude or relation to it . . . one that is absolute, not contingent upon any desire or preference or policy or choice.¹

However, despite the prevalence of this view, there has not been much empirical work studying the actual contours of folk metaethical thinking. Elliot Turiel's influential work on the moral/conventional distinction addressed the important metaethical question of how people distinguish moral issues from non-moral ones.² Jennifer Cole Wright, Piper Grandjean, and Cullen McWhite have continued this line of research in descriptive metaethics and found there is significant disagreement among the folk

1 J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, London, Penguin 1977, p. 33. See also D. O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1989, M. Smith, *The Moral Problem*, Oxford, Blackwell 1994, and S. Darwall, *Philosophical Ethics*, Boulder, CO, Westview Press 1998.

2 E. Turiel, *The Development of Social Knowledge: Morality and Convention*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1983.

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about whether certain issues such as abortion or anonymously donating money to charity are moral issues at all.³ More recently, however, the central metaethical question researchers have been investigating concerns the degree to which folk metaethics is realist or objectivist. The work of Shaun Nichols and Geoffrey Goodwin and John Darley has prompted a number of researchers to turn their attention to this issue.⁴

I will argue in Section I that the tools used in many studies to study folk metaethics suffer from a number of conceptual difficulties. In Section II, I review research on folk moral objectivism that avoids the first set of difficulties but faces new difficulties in the interpretation of their results. I conclude (Section III) with some suggestions about how the empirical study of folk metaethics can be improved.

I.

Goodwin and Darley attempted to investigate the extent to which ordinary participants were “ethical objectivists (i.e., individuals who take their ethical beliefs to express true facts about the world)” or “ethical subjectivists (i.e., individuals who take their ethical beliefs to be mind-dependent, and to express nothing more than facts about human psychology).”⁵ They found that “individuals tend to regard ethical statements as clearly more objective than social conventions and tastes, and almost as objective as scientific facts.” They also found considerable variation in metaethical intuitions across individuals and across different ethical issues. Goodwin and Darley also report (i) that participants treated statements condemning ethical wrongdoing as more objective than statements enjoining good or morally exemplary actions, (ii) that perceived consensus regarding an ethical statement positively influenced ratings of metaethical objectivity, and (iii) that moral objectivism was associated with greater discomfort with and more pejorative attributions toward those with whom individuals disagreed.⁶

One difficulty with Goodwin and Darley’s research materials is they often fail to distinguish between normative ethical judgments and metaethical judgments, and they often conflate semantic or metaphysical issues with epistemological issues in problematic ways. For example, in their first experiment Goodwin and Darley asked

3 J. C. Wright, P. T. Grandjean, and C. B. McWhite, *The Meta-Ethical Grounding of our Moral Beliefs: Evidence for Meta-Ethical Pluralism*, ‘Philosophical Psychology’ forthcoming.

4 S. Nichols, *After Objectivity: An Empirical Study of Moral Judgment*, ‘Philosophical Psychology’ 2004 17, G. P. Goodwin, and J. M. Darley, *The Psychology of Meta-Ethics: Exploring Objectivism*, ‘Cognition’ 2008 106.

5 G. P. Goodwin, and J. M. Darley, *The Psychology of Meta-Ethics: Exploring Objectivism*, op. cit., pp. 1357–1358.

6 G. P. Goodwin, and J. M. Darley, *Why are Some Moral Beliefs Perceived to be More Objective than Others?*, ‘Journal of Experimental Social Psychology’ 2012 48.

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participants to select one of the following options as the best description for each of several ethical statements:⁷

- (1.1) True statement.
- (1.2) False statement.
- (1.3) An opinion or attitude.

Goodwin and Darley interpreted the first two answer choices as objectivist answers, and the third one as non-objectivist. However, this task is problematic as a test for objectivism for several reasons. One is that the answer choices above conflate normative ethical and metaethical judgments. Participants in Goodwin and Darley's study were initially asked for their opinions about cheating, discrimination, and other ethical issues—that is, they were asked about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that the actions described were morally good or bad. In the metaethical task, participants were supposed to be directed to reflect upon their moral opinions at a higher level (perhaps with some degree of critical distance) and to consider the objectivity of those opinions. But asking if participants think that an ethical statement is true or false (as in 1.1 or 1.2) is not obviously asking them a metaethical question. The issue of whether moral judgments have truth values is indeed a metaethical one. However, the question above does not seem well-suited to direct participants to focus on this issue. It appears to be simply asking them another first-order normative ethical question.

Furthermore, Goodwin and Darley presumably intended 'opinion or attitude' to be understood as something that is neither true nor false—otherwise, the answer choices would not be exclusive, and there would be no contrast between the first two and the third. While some expressions (e.g., "Boo!" or "Hooray!") can succeed as communicative utterances without being the sort of things that are true or false, the most common or default interpretation of the English word 'opinion' does not preclude the possession of a truth value. Many people currently have opinions about who will campaign to be the next President of the United States, and there is nothing about the fact that these opinions are opinions that prevents them from being true or false. Note, too, that we often consult 'expert opinion' or 'informed opinion' about some matters, and we do so because we think these opinions are more likely to be true than naïve or uninformed opinions. Moreover, even if it were granted that some opinions can be true or false, it would remain an open question as to whether a subjectivist or objectivist interpretation should be offered of what determines their truth values. These difficulties are

⁷ G. P. Goodwin, and J. M. Darley, *The Psychology of Meta-Ethics: Exploring Objectivism*, op. cit.

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compounded by the fact that Goodwin and Darley appear to invoke the truth-valued sense of ‘opinion’ when they instruct participants “to indicate your opinion about the status of each statement—whether it is true, false, or an opinion.”⁸

The default interpretation of ‘opinion’ also seems to be neutral with respect to the epistemological question of the rational or evidential merits of opinions. The mere fact that an attitude is an opinion does not tell us whether it is well-grounded or based upon uninformed prejudice or superstition. That being said, there is a common, non-neutral use of ‘opinion’ that is generated when someone’s point of view is said to be ‘*merely* an opinion,’ implying that the judgment in question is not based upon good reasons or evidence. And there is a colloquial sense of ‘true’ and ‘false’ (to which philosophers strongly object) that can serve as a foil to this sense of ‘opinion’—viz., one that takes ‘true’ and ‘false’ to be equivalent to ‘well-confirmed’ or ‘disconfirmed.’ On this epistemic interpretation of ‘true,’ ‘false,’ and ‘opinion,’ the answer choices represented in (1.1) through (1.3) are asking participants to say something about the evidential merits of the ethical judgments in question. However, this is not what Goodwin and Darley hope to be investigating. Rather, they want to know whether ordinary individuals think that ethical judgments—regardless of how well or poorly confirmed they may be—have mind-independent truth values.

Thus, because (1.1) and (1.2) fail to present objectivist answers at all and because (1.3) fails to clearly represent a non-objectivist one, it seems that Goodwin and Darley’s first measure of moral objectivism is inadequate. Goodwin and Darley also employ a second measure of moral objectivism in their first experiment, and it seems to be problematic as well. Participants were asked how they would regard a situation in which someone else disagrees with them about the truth values of certain ethical statements. They were then instructed to select one of the following options for each target statement:

- (2.1) The other person is surely mistaken.
- (2.2) It is possible that neither you nor the other person is mistaken.
- (2.3) It could be that you are mistaken, and the other person is correct.
- (2.4) Other.

Goodwin and Darley interpreted the first answer choice as “fully objective” and the second and third choices as “intermediately objective.” However, this second measure of objectivism also conflates distinct levels of assessment and fails to keep metaphysical and epistemological and related issues distinct. As before, participants were asked

8 G. P. Goodwin, and J. M. Darley, *The Psychology of Meta-Ethics: Exploring Objectivism*, op. cit., p. 1343.

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to indicate their opinions about various ethical statements before completing a meta-ethical task that was supposed to direct them to make higher order judgments. Answer choice (2.1), however, does not unambiguously lead participants to reflect at the meta-ethical level. Suppose you say that you believe that p is true, and we tell you that someone else believes that p is false. If we then ask you whether the other person is mistaken, this may simply be testing your ability to reason from “ p is true” to “‘ p is false’ is false”—all of which can remain at the first-order level. Goodwin and Darley were obviously hoping that anyone selecting (2.1) would be trying to express their commitment to objectivism, but the answer choice does not make this the only or even the most natural available interpretation.

An additional problem with (2.1) concerns the fact that it uses the term ‘surely.’ In the first-order or normative ethical task that Goodwin and Darley gave to participants, the answer choices included two components—one concerning valence and another concerning confidence. Participants were supposed to say whether they agreed or disagreed with certain ethical statements and at the same time to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed. However, in the metaethical task participants were supposed to make a judgment that had nothing to do with the strength of their first-order opinions. Yet the term ‘surely’ is most naturally understood as expressing a strong degree of confidence and as modifying participants’ first-order judgments. Mary thinks that Joe is surely mistaken, if Mary is quite confident that he is. If Mary is a moral objectivist, Mary will be confident that there is a correct answer to the question of whether the target statement is true or false. But “The other person is surely mistaken [in their first-order opinion]” does not capture this higher-order commitment very well.

Option (2.3) similarly includes an expression (viz., “it could be”) that is most naturally interpreted as concerning the degree of confidence that participants have in their first-order opinions. Many philosophers contend that statements like the one in (2.3) are best interpreted as expressions of epistemic possibility—i.e., as expressing something like “For all I know, p is true.”⁹ From this perspective, (2.3) is best interpreted as indicating that an individual holds an opinion but does not think she possesses enough evidence to be supremely confident that it is correct. Again, however, issues concerning confidence, evidence, or certainty are distinct from the metaphysical issues that lie at the heart of the kind of objectivism Goodwin and Darley intend to be investigating.

9 E.g., K. DeRose, *Epistemic Possibilities*, ‘Philosophical Review’ 1991 100. A. Egan, and B. Weatherson, eds. *Epistemic Modality*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2011.

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Goodwin and Darley would have been better served by following more directly their own account of objectivism:

[A]lthough there are a variety of ways that philosophers have distinguished objectivism and subjectivism, one simple and respectable formulation is as follows: if an individual takes a particular ethical claim to be true, and regards situations of ethical disagreement as necessarily implying that at least one party is mistaken, then they are an objectivist (with respect to that statement), whereas if they instead allow that neither party need be mistaken, then they are a subjectivist.¹⁰

In other words, if they had simply asked whether it is possible for both disagreeing parties to be correct or whether at least one of them must be mistaken, they would have had a better probe for the kind of objectivism that was their target. In the studies described below, a variety of researchers direct their participants to respond in precisely this fashion.¹¹

Other measures of metaethical objectivity that have been used in the published literature suffer from difficulties as well. For example, Nichols attempted to measure undergraduates' commitment to moral objectivism by asking them which of the following options best characterized a situation in which two people disagreed about the moral permissibility of hitting someone just because you feel like it:¹²

10 G. P. Goodwin, and J. M. Darley, *The Psychology of Meta-Ethics: Exploring Objectivism*, op. cit., pp. 1341–1342.

11 Perhaps in response to worries such as those raised above, in their second experiment Goodwin and Darley (2008, p. 1350) replaced the “true, false, or opinion” question discussed above with “Can there be a correct answer as to whether the statement in question is true?” Participants were given the answer choices “Yes” and “No.” However, Goodwin and Darley (2008) continued to include the four options about who is mistaken (i.e., “The other person is surely mistaken,” “It is possible that neither you nor the other person is mistaken,” etc.) in their second experiment. And in their third experiment they asked participants what they would conclude about someone who hypothetically disagreed with them, directing them to use an answer scale that ranged from “neither of us need be mistaken” to “the other person is clearly mistaken.” Again, however, “the other person is clearly mistaken” cannot be a pure measure of objectivism insofar as it incorporates an element of subjective confidence.

In more recent work, Goodwin and Darley (2012) use a new measure of moral objectivism that suffers from the same kinds of problems that afflict their previous measures. After telling participants that there was at least one other person in the study who disagreed with them about each of several ethical statements, participants were asked to indicate “the extent to which they thought the disagreeing other person was mistaken, as opposed to neither party being mistaken” on a six-point scale that ranged from “Neither of us need be mistaken” to “Other person is clearly mistaken.” Again, however, first- and second-order judgments are not kept clearly distinct. Thinking that the other person is mistaken may simply mean that one has a first-order opinion about the matter. It may not by itself imply anything about one's metaethical position. In addition, Goodwin and Darley once again include the term ‘clearly’ in what is supposed to be a second-order metaethical judgment, even though the term seems most naturally interpreted in this context as an expression of confidence in one's first-order moral opinion.

12 S. Nichols, *After Objectivity: An Empirical Study of Moral Judgment*, op. cit., p. 7.

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- (3.1) It is okay to hit people just because you feel like it, so John is right and Fred is wrong.
- (3.2) It is not okay to hit people just because you feel like it, so Fred is right and John is wrong.
- (3.3) There is no fact of the matter about unqualified claims like “It’s okay to hit people just because you feel like it.” Different cultures believe different things, and it is not absolutely true or false that it’s okay to hit people just because you feel like it.

However, these answer choices fail to serve as an adequate measure of objectivism. Options (3.1) and (3.2) simply ask participants to report their first-order opinions about the morality of hitting someone for no good reason. In other words, these answer choices do not clearly ask participants to make metaethical judgments at all. The third choice does concern metaethical issues, but it fails to serve as a good foil to the first two. Nichols seems to be assuming that someone cannot be a non-objectivist and at the same time think that Fred is right and John is wrong (or *vice versa*) because participants are forced to choose between giving a non-objectivist answer and saying that one of the parties is mistaken. But moral non-objectivists do not cease to have moral opinions when they reject objectivism. They simply do not think those opinions are objectively correct or incorrect.

In the same article, Nichols used the following set of answer choices as another measure of moral objectivism:¹³

- (4.1) It is an objective fact, independent of what different people think, that it was not wrong for Frank to hit Ben and for Lisa to shove Nancy. So John is right and Ted is wrong.
- (4.2) It is an objective fact, independent of what different people think, that it was wrong for Frank to hit Ben or for Lisa to shove Nancy. So Ted is right and John is wrong.
- (4.3) There is no objective fact, independent of what different people think, about whether it was wrong for Frank to hit Bill or Lisa to shove Nancy. These actions were “wrong for Ted” and maybe “wrong for me,” but they aren’t *objectively wrong* independent of what people think about them.

In addition to the fact that these answer choices jointly contain 118 words, they are also problematic because they fail to distinguish first- and second-order moral

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

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judgments. Options (4.1) and (4.2)—but not (4.3)—ask participants to make a first-order judgment about whether John’s or Ted’s opinion is correct and also to make a second-order judgment about the objectivity of the claims involved. First- and second-order judgments, however, are best kept distinct. And because (4.3)—like (4.3) above—only concerns second-order (i.e., metaethical) matters, it again precludes participants from registering both a non-objectivist metaethical judgment and a first-order judgment about hitting.

Because of the difficulties with extant measures of moral objectivism reviewed in this section, other researchers have developed and employed a cleaner and less problematic measure.¹⁴ They asked participants, “If someone disagrees with you about whether [a moral statement is true], is it possible for both of you to be correct or must at least one of you be mistaken?” However, as we will also see, this probe faces some difficult questions of its own.

Before continuing, I would like to offer a few clarifying remarks about the nature of the criticisms that have been presented in this section. Two anonymous reviewers from this journal and another journal thought it problematic that my criticisms are lodged from the armchair without any empirical support. For example, I have not presented any data showing participants in Goodwin and Darley’s experiments (or any others) understood “an opinion or attitude” in a truth-valued sense rather than in the non-truth-valued sense that Goodwin and Darley intended. However, to fault my criticisms for failing to be supported by data is to misunderstand them. I am criticizing the construct validity of the research materials described above. Construct validity concerns the degree to which a set of research materials succeeds in testing or measuring what a researcher thinks it tests or measures. The questions and objections I raised above focused on whether the notions of moral objectivism and its opposites have been successfully operationalized in the research materials that were employed. Questions about construct validity concern how or whether we can know what a set of data actually means, given certain features of the questions that were used to obtain them. To ask whether a set of questions does a good job of capturing essential features of metaethical judgments is to ask a theoretical question rather than a straightforwardly empirical one. Because of the theoretical nature of this enterprise, I do not think it is problematic that I have presented no data in this section. Not every question about an empirical study is itself an empirical matter.

14 H. Sarkissian, J. Parks, D. Tien, J. C. Wright, and J. Knobe, *Folk Moral Relativism*, ‘Mind & Language’ 2011 26, J. R. Beebe, and D. Sackris, *Moral Objectivism Across the Lifespan*, ‘Philosophical Psychology’ forthcoming, J. R. Beebe, R. Qiaoan, T. Wysocki, and M. A. Endara, *Moral Objectivism in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ‘Journal of Cognition and Culture’ 2015 15.

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My collaborators and I asked participants in the United States, China, Poland, and Ecuador to respond to the following moral judgments:¹⁵

- (5.1) Anonymously donating a significant portion of one's income to charity is morally good.
- (5.2) Assisting in the death of a friend who has a disease for which there is no known cure and who is in terrible pain and wants to die is morally permissible.
- (5.3) Scientific research on human embryonic stem cells is morally wrong.
- (5.4) Before the third month of pregnancy, abortion for any reason is morally permissible.
- (5.5) Cutting the American flag into pieces and using it to clean one's bathroom is morally wrong.
- (5.6) Lying on behalf of a friend who is accused of murder is morally permissible.
- (5.7) Cheating on an exam that you have to pass in order to graduate is morally permissible.
- (5.8) Robbing a bank in order to pay for an expensive vacation is morally bad
- (5.9) Hitting someone just because you feel like it is wrong.
- (5.10) Treating someone poorly on the basis of their race is morally wrong.

Participants were asked to respond the following question with respect to each moral judgment above:

If someone disagrees with you about whether [the moral judgment is true], is it possible for both of you to be correct or must one of you be mistaken?

___ It is possible for both of you to be correct.

___ At least one of you must be mistaken

The first answer was taken to be a denial of objectivity, and the second was interpreted as an attribution of objectivity. Unlike previous probes for folk metaethical objectivism, these questions do not seem to conflate semantic or metaphysical issues with epistemic ones or normative ethical judgments with metaethical ones.

As in Goodwin and Darley's study, considerable variation was observed in individuals' willingness to endorse moral objectivism and in the proportion of objectivist

15 J. R. Beebe, and D. Sackris, *Moral Objectivism Across the Lifespan*, op. cit., J. R. Beebe et al., *Moral Objectivism in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, op. cit.

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responses that different moral judgments elicited (cf. Figure 1). In each of the four countries, younger individuals (e.g., those in their teens and twenties) rejected moral objectivism to a greater extent than older adults (cf. Figure 2).

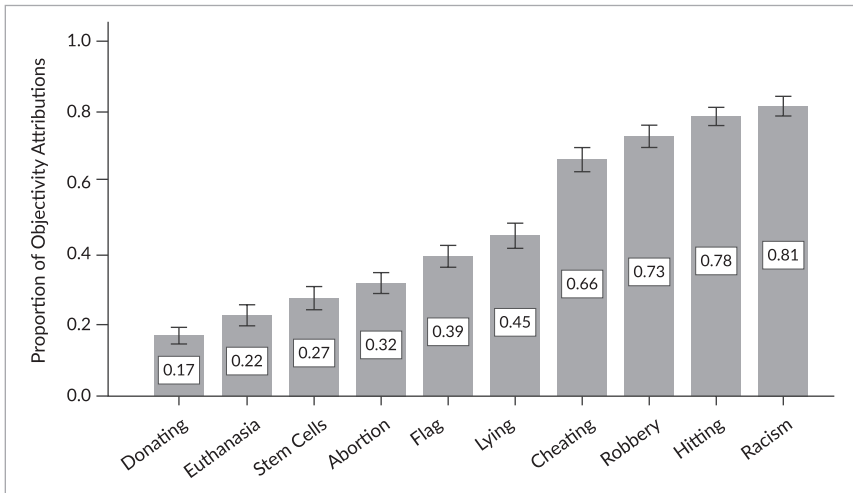


Figure 1. Proportions of participant objectivity attributions to moral judgments in Beebe and Sackris (forthcoming). Error bars in all figures represent 95% confidence intervals.

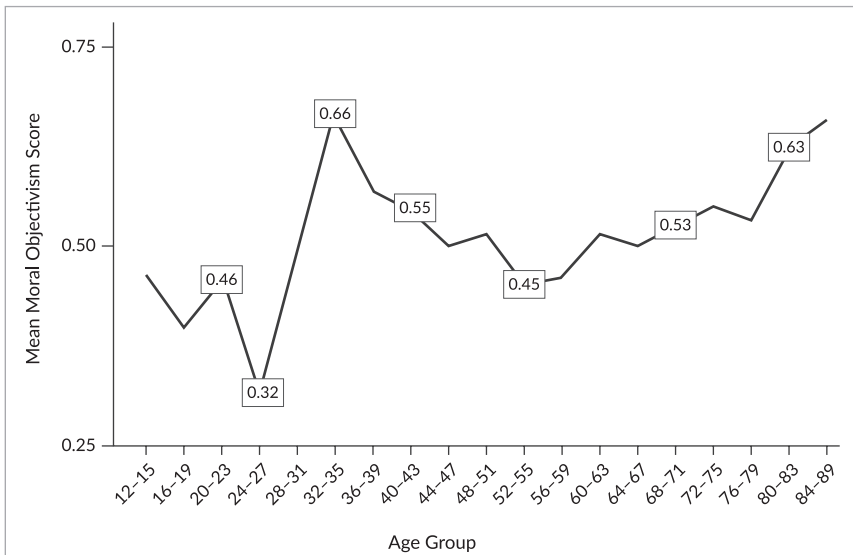


Figure 2. Proportions of participant objectivity attributions to ethical statements across different age groups in Beebe and Sackris (forthcoming).

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At first glance, these data appear to be bad news for the dominant view in analytic philosophy that ordinary individuals are moral objectivists across the board. Consider Mackie's claims that were quoted above or Smith's claims that "we [i.e., everyone everywhere?] seem to think moral questions have correct answers; that the correct answers are made correct by objective moral facts" and that "it is a platitude that our moral judgements at least purport to be objective."¹⁶ It seems that the received view never would have predicted as much variation in objectivity attributions as was observed across issues and individuals, nor would it have predicted the very small proportions of objectivist responses given to judgments about charitable donations, euthanasia, the use of stem cells, and abortion.

However, the situation becomes more complicated than what a first glance at the data may suggest. One worry arises when we consider the data Beebe and Sackris obtained when they asked participants to respond to the following statements about the physical world:

- (6.1) Frequent exercise usually helps people to lose weight.
- (6.2) Global warming is due primarily to human activity (for example, the burning of fossil fuels).
- (6.3) Julius Caesar did not drink wine on his 21st birthday.
- (6.4) There is an even number of stars in the universe.
- (6.5) Humans evolved from more primitive primate species.
- (6.6) Mars is the smallest planet in the solar system.
- (6.7) The earth is only 6,000 years old.
- (6.8) New York City is further north than Los Angeles.

Participants were asked the same question as above, viz., "If someone disagrees with you about whether [the statement is true], is it possible for both of you to be correct or must one of you be mistaken?" Participant responses are summarized in Figure 3.

As in the case of moral judgments, more controversial statements received fewer objectivist responses. However, is it really plausible to think that those who are aware of the current debate about global warming do not think there is an objective fact of the matter about whether or not recent climate changes are due primarily to human activity? They may be unsure about what the correct answer is. But the objectivity question was merely supposed to probe whether participants thought there was a correct answer—not whether they were sure they knew what it is. Furthermore, even the

¹⁶ M. Smith, *The Moral Problem*, op. cit., pp. 6, 84.

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most ardent supporters of creationism must surely maintain that there is a fact of the matter about whether or not humans evolved from more primitive primate species. They simply disagree with the scientific community about what those facts are. Participant responses to physical statements are surprising enough that a closer look at what might be underlying them seems in order.

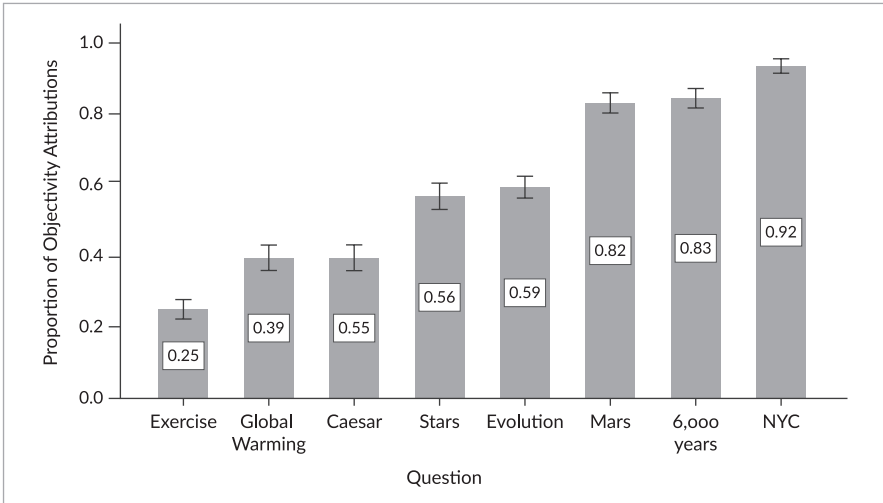


Figure 3. Proportions of participant objectivity attributions to physical statements in Beebe and Sackris (forthcoming).

One possibility is (i) that participants who give the non-objectivist response to either moral judgments or physical statements are simply not thinking through what this kind of response means but (ii) that if they were to think through the issue more carefully, they would give an objectivist response.¹⁷ Several scholars have expressed the worry that many of the results reported by experimental philosophers are based merely upon the ‘surface intuitions’ rather than the ‘reflective intuitions’ of their participants and thus that their results fail to represent participants’ core or true commitments or conceptions.¹⁸ The key objectivity question used in the studies above does nothing to ensure that participants have a proper understanding of what is involved in answering “It is possible for both of you to be correct.”

17 Thanks to Katarzyna Paprzycka (University of Warsaw) and Adrian Kuźniar (University of Warsaw) for pressing this point with me.

18 Cf. A. Kauppinen, *The Rise and Fall of Experimental Philosophy*, ‘Philosophical Explorations’ 2007 10, T. Nadelhoffer, and E. Nahmias, *The Past and Future of Experimental Philosophy*, ‘Philosophical Explorations’ 2007 10.

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Another explanation of why participants might have chosen non-objectivist answers in the studies above without actually rejecting objectivism is that they may believe that some actions are always right or always wrong but that many other actions (narrowly described) are only right or wrong in relation to features of the relevant situation. To use an example suggested to me by Adrian Kuźniar, suppose that in one culture there has never been a tradition of polygamy and that it is widely viewed as immoral by members of that culture. But suppose there is another culture with a long tradition of polygamy, where women significantly outnumber men and where polygamy seems to be the most reasonable response to the situation. Observers might think that polygamy is wrong for people in the first group but right for people in the second and yet not be moral relativists of any kind. It is just that the question of what the objectively correct moral norm is for a situation takes account of the details of that situation. Thus, participants in the above studies might have chosen the objectivist answer for actions that are always right or wrong, but they might have chosen the allegedly non-objectivist answer when presented with a situationally variable action or practice like polygamy.

Relatedly, the experimental probes may have provided participants with too little information about the situations they were supposed to be considering for them to know whether they should consider the relevant actions to be objectively right or wrong. That is, participants who might have been inclined to call an action objectively right or wrong, if the relevant situational background of the action had been described in sufficient detail, might not be so inclined when details are few.¹⁹

Importantly, the moral judgment that received the lowest proportion of objectivity responses concerned donating money to charity. This judgment involves an imperfect moral duty—i.e., a moral obligation that one has that can be fulfilled in a number of ways. One can agree that one has such a duty and yet disagree with someone else about which person(s) or organization(s) should be the recipient(s) of one's donation and about how much money one should give. One could even argue that one has no obligation to give money to someone who will simply spend that money on illegal drugs or some other wasteful or illicit activity. Yet the possibility of none of these disagreements need imply that one rejects the objectivity of moral duties or the judgments that express them.²⁰ In other words, the fact that a moral judgment about an imperfect duty received far fewer objectivity responses than judgments

19 Thanks to Katarzyna Paprzycka (University of Warsaw) and Marta Zaręba (University of Warsaw) for raising this point to me.

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about perfect duties may well reflect participants' (perhaps implicit) appreciation of the perfect/imperfect distinction rather than differences in participants' commitment to the objectivity of the claims in question.

The physical statement that received the fewest objectivity responses appears to be much like the moral judgment about donating money to charity. It seems obvious that exercise often does contribute to weight loss. However, participants are likely aware that exercise is not the only factor related to weight gain and loss and that it does not always lead to weight loss. If one exercises a significant amount but takes in an enormous number of calories, then one will not lose weight. And one can, of course, lose weight without exercising at all by eating healthier. Just as an imperfect moral duty can be fulfilled in a number of ways, the goal of weight loss can be achieved in a number of ways. The variability of means in both situations and the multiplicity of factors involved may very well have led participants to attribute objectivity less often to cases of disagreement about them.

One possible explanation of the variation in objectivity responses to physical statements is that it reflected participants' thoughts about the strength of evidence possessed for the statements in question.²¹ We have stronger and more doubt-proof reasons concerning the relative position of New York City and Los Angeles than we do for claims about human evolution, climate change, or what Julius Caesar did on one of his birthdays. Similarly, in the case of racial discrimination and inflicting unwanted harm on another, it seems that the reasons in favor of the wrongness of these actions are stronger and more doubt-proof than the reasons one might offer in favor of the permissibility of abortion, euthanasia, and stem cell research.

In regard to moral judgments, Hagop Sarkissian and his collaborators wondered whether participants were answering their objectivity question—the same one used by my collaborators and I—as if it were a question about the strength of reasons.²² Therefore, in one of their studies, they included a question that probed participants' perceptions of the strength of reasons various agents had for their beliefs. They asked “These individuals have different beliefs about this case. We would like to know whether you think only one of them has good reason to believe what he or she does, or whether they both have good reasons.” Sarkissian et al. found that participants did not answer the question about the goodness of reasons in the same way that they answered the objectivity question and concluded that participants were not treating them as equivalent. However, even if participants were not treating the questions in exactly

21 Thanks to Adrian Ziółkowski (University of Warsaw) for suggesting this.

22 H. Sarkissian et al., *Folk Moral Relativism*, op. cit.

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the same manner, it is still entirely possible that the perceived strength of reasons affected participants' objectivity responses to some degree.

A final concern about the question "If someone disagrees with you about whether [the moral judgment is true], is it possible for both of you to be correct or must one of you be mistaken?" is that it does not present participants with a noncognitivist option. It implicitly assumes that moral judgments are the sort of things that have truth values and that the only question is whether the truth of one person's opinion will keep the other person's opinion from being true. However, it is possible that folk metaethics is not cognitivist at all. Indeed, some empirical data suggests that this may be a live option. In a nationwide phone survey in the United States, Beebe and Sackris (unpublished data) asked participants to consider situations where individuals disagreed about the truth of the following moral judgments:

- (7.1) It is morally wrong to eat meat.
- (7.2) It is morally wrong to play violent video games.
- (7.3) Americans have a moral duty to give money to charity.
- (7.4) Smoking marijuana is morally acceptable.
- (7.5) It is OK to tell a lie for a friend who has been accused of murder.
- (7.6) It is morally wrong for white people to discriminate against black people.
- (7.7) Homosexuality is morally wrong.

Participants were asked which of the following options they thought best represented each situation of disagreement:

- (8.1) One of their beliefs is true, and the other is false.
- (8.2) Both beliefs are true.
- (8.3) Both beliefs are false.
- (8.4) Neither belief is true or false.

Options (8.1) and (8.2) are equivalent to the answer choices used in previous studies. Answer choice (8.4), however, represented a new, noncognitivist alternative. (8.3) was included for the sake of completeness. Participant responses to seven cases of moral disagreement are summarized in Figure 4, ordered in terms of increasing percentages of objectivity attributions. Answer choices 1, 2, 3, and 4 in the chart correspond to (8.1), (8.2), (8.3), and (8.4).

As can be seen in Figure 4, the most common non-objectivist answer that participants chose was the noncognitivist one (the fourth answer choice). This suggests that

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the questions used by Sarkissian et al., Beebe and Sackris, and Beebe et al. was inadequate insofar as it failed to provide a way for participants to clearly voice a noncognitivist opinion.

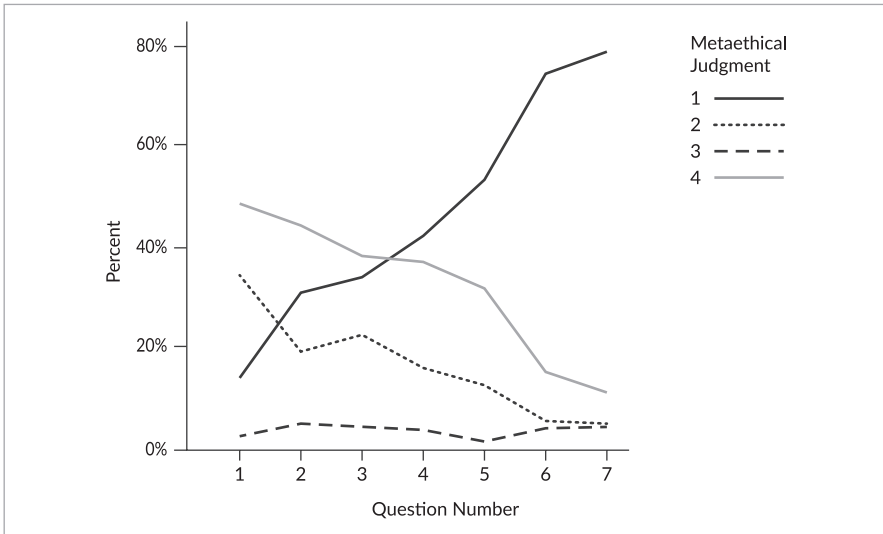


Figure 4. Proportions of participant objectivity attributions to moral judgments in a nationwide phone survey in the United States (Beebe and Sackris unpublished data).

III.

What can be done to overcome or address the difficulties with existing research into folk metaethics outlined above? One key change that researchers need to make is to move away from expecting a single metaethical question to do all of the heavy lifting in their studies. It is not that a better single question needs to be formulated. Rather, each participant should be asked an array of questions about a given moral judgment or case of moral disagreement. Metaethical questions should be formulated so that it is clear they are distinct from normative ethical questions. But simply having separate questions that ask about different things will alleviate some of the worries about participants answering a different question than the one that was intended.

For example, participants should be asked to indicate their own opinion about the matter and how strongly they hold their opinion. They should be asked what kinds of reasons they think can be given in support of their opinion and how strong those reasons are. They should also be directed to think about what kinds of reasons people

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who disagree with them about the issue might be able to give and how strong those reasons might be. It would be good to ask if they think those who disagree with them can be rational in doing so and whether they think there is any hope of disagreeing parties ever reaching a consensus on the matter. Some metaethical questions should make clear the distinction between knowing what the answer is and believing there is an answer, even if no one knows what it is. For example: “Even if no one today is completely sure what the answer is concerning this issue, do you think there is a single, correct answer to the question?”

Some metaethical questions should explicitly address the issue of situational appreciation or variability. A participant who says that a given action is morally wrong might be asked a follow-up question like “Are there any circumstances in which performing action x might be morally permissible?” Indeed all participants should probably be asked a question like this. Those who answer “Yes” might then be directed to answer further questions about the kinds of circumstances they have in mind. These should probe whether participants think that the relevant actions can be morally permissible because of objective features of agents’ circumstances or because morality is a completely subjective affair and there are no moral constraints on what people are permitted to do. They should be asked whether they think the existence of exceptional cases does anything to undermine the robustness or correctness of general moral principles.

The possibility of noncognitivist folk intuitions should be probed in a manner that more clearly addresses the issue than simply including “Neither belief is true or false” as an option in a multiple-choice question. For example, if a participant agrees with a particular moral judgment, they might be asked “Is it a fact that x is morally right or wrong?” And although Goodwin and Darley and Beebe and Sackris both compared participants’ responses to moral judgments to their responses to physical statements, it would be good to ask participants directly how similar they think the two categories of statement are.

Questions that probe the possibility of faultless disagreement would also be instructive. For example, participants might be asked “If two people knew all of the relevant facts and information about a case, would it be possible for them to still (rationally) disagree with each other about the case?” Again, follow-up questions should be asked that try to determine whether participants who answer “Yes” are doing so because they endorse a strongly subjectivist view of morality or simply because they appreciate the importance of the particularity of different action situations.

Adrian Kuźniar has suggested to me that the investigation of folk views about the objectivity of morality should be broadened to encompass more than just the issue of moral realism, which all of the above studies focus upon. Moral judgments may

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be objective in a variety of senses that are not captured by looking solely at whether at least one of two disagreeing parties must have an incorrect opinion about a moral judgment. Kuźniar pointed out that Nichols followed Turiel in looking at other kinds of objective features moral judgments seem to enjoy, such as being independent of particular authority structures and concerning violations that are more serious, more punishable, and more universal than other violations. Future empirical studies of folk metaethics should pay more attention to these features than has been done in recent years.

Finally, researchers should find ways to ensure that participants' responses adequately reflect their genuine metaethical commitments and are things they would continue to endorse upon further reflection. It can be difficult to accomplish this using multiple-choice questions in a laboratory setting. However, at the very least, a barrage of follow-up questions should be asked of someone who endorses either an objectivist or non-objectivist opinion to make sure they really understand what this entails. Structured interview techniques might be employed to this end, but researchers should take steps to ensure that participants are not being led too much by the kinds of questions interviewers ask. I have been told that a team of researchers in the Netherlands is almost finished constructing a metaethical inventory that is something like a personality scale. Valuable tools such as this are needed to gain a better picture of folk moral realism and its contraries.

To sum up, the empirical investigation of folk metaethical commitments seems to be an interesting and important development in recent experimental philosophy and experimental moral psychology. However, because of the number of open and unanswered questions that have been raised about these studies, it seems much too early to tell whether and to what degree the folk endorse or reject moral objectivism and what form their objectivism or non-objectivism might take.

Abstrakt

Badania empiryczne nad metaetyką potoczną

W artykule dokonuję przeglądu najnowszych, podejmowanych przez filozofów eksperymentalnych i psychologów prób empirycznego badania metaetyki potocznej i omawiam trudności, które badacze napotykają, starając się skonstruować odpowiedni rodzaj materiałów badawczych i interpretując otrzymane wyniki. Na pierwszy rzut oka uzyskane dotychczas rezultaty nie przemawiają na korzyść tezy, że ludzie wszędzie i w każdej kwestii moralnej są realistami moralnymi. Jednak z uwagi na trudności w interpretacji tych wyników, argumentuję, iż potrzebujemy lepszych badań, by posunąć tę dyskusję do przodu.