

# Does Belief in Ethical Subjectivism Pose a Challenge to Classical Liberalism?\*

By Niclas Berggren\*\*

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**Abstract.** Classical liberalism stresses the desirability of free markets, limited government and the rule of law. As such, it builds on some moral judgments. According to ethical objectivism, such judgments (in themselves always personal and subjective) can be true or false since objective moral facts exist against which the judgments can be assessed. Ethical subjectivism denies the existence of objective moral facts. This paper asks: Does it matter whether people believe that objective moral facts exist – in general and for a defense of classical liberalism? It is argued that the answer is in the negative. The implication for classical liberal strategy is that attempts to argue that a certain metaethical foundation is needed should be abandoned.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

While classical liberals agree on many things, e.g. that free markets, limited government and the rule of law are necessary characteristics of any good society, they disagree about whether objective moral facts – i.e. extra-individual, mind-independent, true propositions as to what is right and wrong – exist and can be used to support their ideology. Some – here termed *ethical objectivists* – think such facts do exist, whereas others – here termed *ethical subjectivists* –

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take the opposite position.<sup>1</sup> But does it really matter whether the one thing rather than the other is believed? Epstein (2003: 66) certainly thinks so, using the term *moral relativism* to denote the view that objective moral facts do not exist:

There are, I think, three major intellectual trends that tend to undercut the viability of economic markets and the social and political institutions on which they depend. The first of these dangers is *moral relativism*, which disputes the capacity to make any kind of objective moral judgments about the relative soundness of alternative legal rules, not only in close cases, but in any case where someone refuses to acquiesce in the claims of his rivals. ... Each line of attack represents a grave and misguided effort to undermine both the rule of law and the principle of individual liberty with which it is usually linked. (Italics in original.)

Other scholars likewise argue for one particular metaethical view on the often implicit presumption that *it*, unlike other views, is important for an adequate defense of classical liberalism: see e.g. Lomasky (1979), Harman (1980), Mack (1981), Rothbard (1982), Machan (1989) and Rasmussen and Den Uyl (1991, 1998).<sup>2</sup> Many other classical liberal thinkers do not, to my knowledge, deal with the issue at all.<sup>3</sup> That is as it should be, in my view. The

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\*\* The Ratio Institute, P.O. Box 5095, SE-102 42 Stockholm, Sweden. Phone: +46-8-58705404. Fax: +46-8-58705405. E-mail: [niclas.berggren@ratio.se](mailto:niclas.berggren@ratio.se)

<sup>1</sup> These are views in the realm of metaethics (or second-order ethics), i.e. the study *of* ethics rather than studies *in* ethics. For an introduction, see Couture and Nielsen (1995a).

<sup>2</sup> From the more general debate, one could mention that MacIntyre (1981) criticizes (one form of) liberalism for entailing a relativistic concept of morality originating with the idea of individual preference satisfaction; and Johnson (1992) seems to largely blame the rise of totalitarianism on belief in ethical subjectivism. Cf. Scanlon (1998: 330-333). Furthermore, there is a large literature addressing the related but logically distinct issue of whether moral facts exist: see e.g. Mackie (1977), Brink (1989), Sayre-McCord (1989), Couture and Nielsen (1995b), Dworkin (1996), Harman and Thomson (1996) and Hare (2000).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Hayek (1960: 35-36; 1967: 38).

thesis I shall argue in favor of is, namely, that it does not matter whether people believe that objective moral facts exist, neither in general nor – and especially not – for a defense of classical liberalism.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively put, unlike others I think that belief in ethical subjectivism does not pose a challenge to classical liberalism. Below, I shall specify in more detail what differing consequences different beliefs in this area could – but ultimately, I think, will not – entail. To the extent that this thesis holds, it implies that it is unwise to require of an argument for classical liberalism that it has a particular (or even that it has some) type of metaethical foundation.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, definitions of the central concepts used are offered, along with a discussion. Then, the main analysis is presented in section 3, with a detailed examination of claims to the effect that it matters what metaethical beliefs people have. Lastly, concluding remarks are offered.

## 2. PRELIMINARIES

### Definitions

The most central concepts used are defined as follows:

DEFINITION 2.1. A *moral judgment* is an expression of a subjective (i.e. intra-individual, mind-dependent) proposition as to what is right and wrong.

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<sup>4</sup> For general arguments along somewhat similar lines, see Hare (1972) and Tännsjö (1974). For an opposite point of view, see Sturgeon (1986). Dworkin (1996) denies the relevance of metaethical analysis – he regards metaethical statement as statements in first-order ethics – but thinks it important nevertheless to advocate a version of ethical objectivism (without the “normal” metaethical foundations).

DEFINITION 2.2. A *moral fact* is a true proposition as to what is right and wrong. An *objective* moral fact is an extra-individual, mind-independent, true proposition as to what is right and wrong. A *subjective* moral fact is an intra-individual, mind dependent, true proposition as to what is right and wrong.

DEFINITION 2.3. A *moral view* is a moral judgment in conjunction with a set of non-moral factual assessments.

DEFINITION 2.4. *Ethical objectivism* (EO) is the view that moral judgments can be objectively true or false since objective moral facts exist.

DEFINITION 2.5. *Ethical subjectivism* (ES) is the view that moral judgments cannot be objectively true or false since objective moral facts do not exist, i.e.  $\sim$ EO.

DEFINITION 2.6. *Ethical skepticism* (ESk) is the view that objective moral facts cannot be known with any great degree of certainty, at least not by people in general.

A few things need to be clarified before proceeding to the method of analysis.

About definitions 2.1 and 2.2: The terms *subjective* and *objective* denote existence internal to or external to individual minds, respectively.<sup>5</sup> The proposition expressed by a moral judgment is a reflection of a feeling-state or a desire. A moral judgment is *true* when it is identical to a moral fact – be it objective or subjective. In the latter case, truth refers to a proposition as to what is right and wrong reflecting the individual’s feeling-state or desire correctly. Shafer-Landau (1998) clarifies that there are two mutually exclusive interpretations of ES: *normative subjectivism*, which entails holding that moral judgments can be true or false in the *non-objective* sense of accurately reporting the speaker’s feelings, and *metaethical*

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<sup>5</sup> Nozick (2001, p. 286) lists three marks of objectiveness: “[An objective truth] is accessible from different angles; it is or can be interpersonally agreed to; and it holds independently of the beliefs and experiences of the observer or thinker.” The third mark is stressed here.

*subjectivism*, which entails holding that moral judgments cannot be true or false in any sense.

As noted, the former interpretation is the one opted for here.

About definition 2.3: In conjunction with a set of factual assessments a moral judgment forms a moral view, as illustrated in Figure 1.

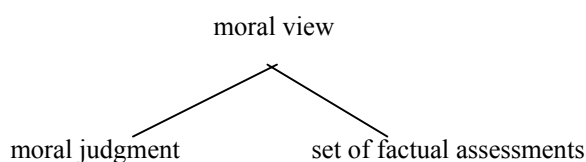


Figure 1. The two components of a moral view

About definition 2.4: On EO, a moral view can be false either if the moral judgment is incorrect, i.e. not in agreement with the objective moral facts, *or* if the set of factual assessments are incorrect, i.e. not in agreement with the non-moral facts. Also, there are other ways to define EO that do not invoke objective moral facts as defined here; see e.g. Scanlon (1998). To the extent that people actually *think* that collective manifestations of individual, subjective moral judgments under some circumstances entail objectivity, then this type of “EO,” which is strictly speaking a type of ES, could be treated as a type of real EO for analytical purposes.

About definition 2.5: On ES, a moral view can be false either if the moral judgment is incorrect, i.e. not in agreement with the subjective moral facts, *or* if the set of factual assessments are incorrect, i.e. not in agreement with the non-moral facts.

About definition 2.6: In the analysis, I shall make use of at least a mild form of ES<sub>k</sub>, entailing that at least *some* non-trivial cases of moral dispute cannot be settled because convincing moral knowledge is missing.<sup>6</sup> On ES, this is because there are no objective moral

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<sup>6</sup> A similar point is made by Barry (1995).

facts to be found; on EO, this is because moral agents are unable to properly perceive the objective moral facts (although they exist). The bases for this epistemological assumption is twofold: i) If this (or any stronger) form of ESk did not hold, it seems to me that it would be possible to know and demonstrate that certain, and not other, moral judgments were the correct ones – and this seems not to be the case (as argued by Ayer, 1967; cf. Posner, 2003, p. 8); ii) If this assumption did not hold, it seems difficult to explain moral disagreement. It is quite clear that such disagreement exists and is nowhere near a solution. Take areas such as the death penalty, abortion, the treatment of animals, homosexuality, sex before marriage, war, euthanasia, cloning, narcotics sales, intoxication, taxation – and it will be obvious that severe and lasting moral disagreement exists, not only on facts but also when it comes to moral judgments. This conclusion is reinforced if we consider the existence of many incompatible ethical theories (such as consequentialist and deontological ones) which stipulate differing evaluative criteria for what is morally desirable. Note that to explain moral disagreement, I do not claim that ES is true (which is sometimes done) but that if EO is true, so is some form of ESk.<sup>7</sup>

Someone may retort that moral agreement does exist on many issues, and of course this is so (as in the case of whether it is morally right and wrong to set fire to a cat). But on ES, this can be explained in terms of intersubjectivity, i.e. that people's feeling-states have converged, for biological, social/cultural or other reasons, in some quite basic cases – *but not on many others*. On EO, there is then an asymmetry present: certain moral truths can be apprehended *whereas others cannot*. An explanation is needed and, again, at least some mild form of ESk seems plausible. As will be outlined below, an alternative (or, really, complementary) explanation could be that people are *de facto* not able or willing to be governed by rational considerations in moral matters and that this may explain moral

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Mackie (1977, pp. 36-38).

disagreement.<sup>8</sup> It does not really matter for my argumentation what the reason is for people not observing objective moral facts. But below, my main comparison, in the end, will be between a belief in ES and a belief in EO in conjunction with (at least a mild form of) ESk.

### Method of Analysis

The method of analysis is a simple form of the utility-function approach of economic theory. The approach is primarily used to facilitate a systematic and compact analysis.

Assume the existence of a person called Claude Lester (henceforth referred to as CL) who is an ideal classical liberal. From the point of view of any classical liberal, CL is a perfectly representative and perfectly informed evaluator of various states of affairs.

CL's utility function can be expressed in the following manner:

$$U_{CL} = f(C, I, E)$$

where  $C$  = the *content* of people's moral views,  $I$  = the *intensity* of people's moral views, and  $E$  = the ability to *evaluate* moral views. These variables have been chosen as they are perceived to entail the most important potential consequences of people believing EO or ES to be true.

CL's goal is to obtain as high utility as possible with regard to the three variables; and it is assumed that these are the only variables that he cares about.<sup>9</sup> But what, more precisely, do they mean?

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Wright (1992) and Huemer (1996).

First,  $C$  refers to the content of first-order moral views. Some (perhaps most) such views are not relevant for CL, since he only cares about those that in some manner or form relate to his own set of moral views. But counting those,  $U_{CL}$  is higher the more people are in agreement with this particular set of views.

Second,  $I$  refers to the intensity of the moral views people hold – and is thus a way of describing the character, rather than the content, of their first-order moral views.  $I$  is a continuous variable with a threshold value under which the intensity of a moral view is not strong enough to provide enough moral motivation to cause an individual to act in accordance with the view, and above which the intensity is strong enough for a morally induced act to take place.  $U_{CL}$  is higher the more intense moral views relevant for and in line with CL's set of moral views are, but lower the more intense moral views relevant for and out of line with this set of views are.

Third,  $E$  refers to the ability to evaluate moral views, and  $U_{CL}$  is higher the greater this ability is.

Lastly,  $U_{CL}^{EO}$  is the utility of CL when people believe that EO is true and  $U_{CL}^{ES}$  as the utility of CL when people believe that ES is true. The hypothesis of this paper, and indeed a criterion for its main thesis, can then be expressed as  $U_{CL}^{EO}(C, I, E) = U_{CL}^{ES}(C, I, E)$ .<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> CL is hence modelled as a *partial* type of person, since he of course cares about many other things as well. As these other things are not relevant for the present analysis, they are not included; but it is assumed that they do not conflict with the goal specified here.

<sup>10</sup> A stricter criterion for the thesis to hold would be  $U_{CL}^{EO}(C) = U_{CL}^{ES}(C)$  in conjunction with  $U_{CL}^{EO}(I) = U_{CL}^{ES}(I)$ , and  $U_{CL}^{EO}(E) = U_{CL}^{ES}(E)$ . The difference between this and the criterion specified above is that the latter allows for differential effects of EO and ES on one or more of the three variables *so long as* the effects cancel each other out in utility space.



Hence, it should now be clear what is meant by the term *matter* in the rubric of this paper – i.e. for whom and in what way metaethical views may matter. It remains to be seen if they do.

### 3. CLAIMS

This section contains three claims to the effect that it does matter for  $U_{CL}$  whether people believe that EO or ES is true.

#### Claim Concerning *C*

**CLAIM 3.1.** "Without a belief in EO anything is permitted."<sup>11</sup>

I take this to be the most common claim to the effect that it matters whether people hold EO or ES to be true. The idea is that EO ensures that beliefs and behavior that run counter to a desired first-order moral view can be minimized in scope. Without an ability to say that "x is objectively right" or "x is objectively wrong" we cannot influence people to think and act sufficiently morally.

But a first thing to note is that ES  $\neq$  ethical nihilism (EN). That is, saying that objective moral facts do not exist and that moral judgments express propositions that are reflections of feeling-states of individuals is not the same as saying that moral judgments should not matter for anyone's attitudes or behavior. Belief in ES certainly allows for moral judgments, and these may be identical in first-order moral content to the judgments expressed by someone adhering to EO – and, if EO is true, they may also be identical to the objective moral facts. This means that an ethical subjectivist can utter a statement of disapprobation of any act or phenomenon he deems to be immoral; that he can try to convince others, including

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<sup>11</sup> A slight variation of a claim put forth by Ivan Karamazov.

those prone on acting in ways he deems immoral, to embrace his views; and that he can actively try to forestall, prevent, stop and have punished acts that he deems immoral (but presumably, in the last case, only to the extent that these acts are also illegal; if they are not, he could try to make them so, even though it is by no means certain that CL would like many a thing deemed immoral illegal). As Hägerström (1939, p. 128) puts it:

They commit the error of believing that emotional expressions and the ambition of influencing others through these are unjustified if it is not possible to claim the correspondence of one's feelings with certain notions such as true judgments about reality. With the same authority it could then be said that it is not right to breathe or move. Breathing or moving are not judgments that could be said to be true or false either. Life entails much more than judgments. (Own translation.)

Hence, an ethical subjectivist cannot in general be regarded as wanting to permit anything; in fact, he can readily have the exact same first-order moral views as an ethical objectivist. Schumpeter (1976, p. 243) echoes this insight: “To realize the *relative* validity of one's own convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian.” (Italics added.)

But, someone may counter, what if the ethical subjectivist's ability to influence *others'* moral views is smaller than that of the ethical objectivist, *even if* they hold identical moral views? If this holds, then it would matter for  $C$  and  $U_{CL}$  whether EO or ES is believed true, since CL cares about what first-order moral views people in general have. For it to hold, however, the mere addition of the word “objectively” to the phrase “ $x$  is wrong” must influence people's moral thinking in some substantial way – and does it? Assume first that the listeners to this phrase believe ES to be true. In that case, adding the word makes no difference whatever to them.

Assume instead that the listeners believe EO to be true. If it is not true, then there is no way of demonstrating that a particular moral view is objectively right, even though it may be so called, and that means that the word is probably of no importance. In fact, in a setting with many claims about what constitutes an objective ethics, a general disbelief in anyone's ability to discern the right ethics may very well spread, the effect of which will probably will be very similar to what obtains when people believe that ES is true.

If EO is true and if people believe that it is, it is required, for the claim to hold, that

- i) they must make be able to observe the objective moral facts just like the propagandist, and
- ii) they must be willing to adopt the observable objective moral facts as their own moral judgments.

This needs some further elaboration.

On the first point: If objective moral facts exist they can still be unobservable (at least to people in general), and if so, much the same thing can be expected as in the case of people believing ES to be true and as in the case of people believing EO to be true when it is false. In a setting with competing claims, how could the term *objective per se* offer convincing moral guidance?

In this context, it should be pointed out that there is a distinct risk involved when using objectivity as an argument, if the unique moral truth cannot be identified in a rational manner understandable to people in general (either because ES is true or because EO is true in conjunction with objective moral facts not being observable). If (which, as argued here, is probably not the case) the usage of this term makes people more prone to change their

moral views, there is no guarantee, from the point of view of the moral propagandist, that his listeners will change their views in his direction –  $U_{cl}$  could in fact then *decrease* if people's  $C$  changes as a result of, say, a communist arguing that his views are implied on EO (this idea is explored further below, as something that also affects  $I$ ).

On the second point: Even if objective moral facts exist and even if they are observable, people may not be willing to adopt them as their moral judgments. Both an ethical subjectivist and an ethical objectivist can hold that all moral judgments are based on feeling-states. It may be that these feeling-states induce people to hold the objective moral facts as moral judgments – but it may just as well be that the feeling-states induce them to hold moral judgments at odds with the objective moral facts. That is, moral motivation may not primarily, or at all, be derived from reason (i.e. what rational considerations dictate) but from people's feeling-states. Acknowledging the existence of facts is another matter than being governed by facts. As Russell (1950) noted:

All human activity is prompted by desire. There is a wholly fallacious theory, advanced by some earnest moralists, to the effect that it is possible to resist desire in the interest of duty and moral principle. I say this is fallacious, not because no man ever acts from a sense of duty, but because duty has no hold on him unless he desires to be dutiful. If you wish to know what men will do, you must know not only or principally their material circumstances, but rather their whole system, of their desires with their relative strengths.

Whatever the metaethical foundation of ethics, desires or feeling-states bring about moral judgments, motivation and action (although cognitive abilities, the use of logic for

consistency purposes and beliefs about the world naturally also play a role and enables rational analysis of a certain kind also in moral matters).<sup>12</sup>

The argument is summarized in Figure 2. It shows a number of alternative situations that may hold for a listener to some EO-based moral rhetoric, the purpose of which is to make him adopt the moral view presented by the speaker.

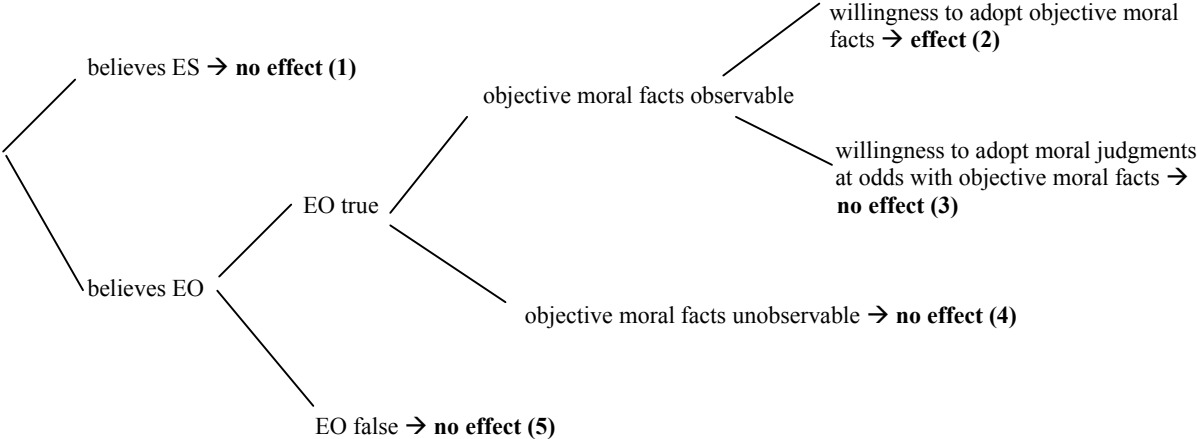


Figure 2. The partial effect on a listener’s moral views of adding only the term *objective* to a moral argument

Note that the figure only looks at the *partial* effect of adding an objectivity component to a moral argument, which means that there may still be a *total* effect of the moral argument even where the figure lists “no effect.” Also note that even if a person is willing to accept *some* moral argument and regard it as objective, the argument here, not least at nodes (4) and (5), is that the acceptance of *any* moral argument is not always enhanced solely by the inclusion of the term “objective.” Now, as is clear in Figure 2, quite a few conditions have to be met in

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<sup>12</sup> Binmore (1994, 1998) strongly criticizes the approach of moral philosophers who think that moral judgments are formed as the result of mere reasoning. The emerging literature on evolutionary psychology offers similar ideas, that moral views are formed through evolutionary processes that have little or nothing to do with rational evaluation: see e.g. Barkow, Cosmides and Toby (1992), Wright (1994), Pinker (1997), Ruse and Wilson (1997) and Dennett (2003, ch. 7). Cf. Ayer (1967), Hume (1984, book II, part iii, section 3), Mackie (1980, chapters III, IV) and Björnsson (1998, 2002).

order for there to be an effect. The probable situation in reality is that all these do not hold and that there is no, or at least a small, effect. Thus, whether one adheres to EO or ES does not seem to matter for *C* in the sense that one can hold the same first-order moral views and one can influence others in a similar manner irrespective of which metaethical beliefs people hold. As noted by Russell (1935, pp. 254-255):

Whatever our definition of the 'Good,' *and whether we believe it to be subjective or objective*, those who do not desire the happiness of mankind will not endeavor to further it, while those who do desire it will do what they can to bring it about. (Italics added; cf. Rorty, 1999: 83-84, and Blackburn, 2001.)

### **Claim Concerning *I***

**CLAIM 3.2.** "On a belief in EO, moral views are taken more seriously."

Williams (1973, p. 219) states the following:

It cannot be denied that an intrinsic feature of moral thought are the distinctions between taking a serious view and a less serious view; having strong convictions and less strong convictions, and so forth. It would be a mark of insanity to regard all moral issues as on the same level.

That is to say, a certain, given moral content *C* may be embraced more or less strongly. In fact, *I* can be regarded as a continuous variable, and at some point, this intensity is sufficiently strong to turn into a moral motivation for action. This is an analysis of the *character* of moral views rather than of their content.

The claim here is that even if someone who believes in ES and someone who believes in EO have the exact same first-order moral views, the latter will embrace them more

strongly and be more motivated to act upon them. This, however, seems dubious – and also like a risky way of thinking for CL.<sup>13</sup>

First: As has been argued above in the context of the content of moral views, adding the concept of objectivity scarcely makes a certain view more attractive to others. This is because moral judgments are not *per se* determined through reflections in metaethics but through the feeling-states of individuals. It appears even more reasonable to think the intensity of moral views the result of feeling-states.

Second: Assume now that people may have different first-order moral views, that the argument that belief in EO better ensures intense adherence to some first-order ethics in fact holds, that ES or EO is true and that if EO is true, some non-negligible epistemological imperfection is present (i.e. ESk obtains in some way). Here, a risk is involved. The risk is that *some other* first-order ethics than the one favored by oneself is adopted. This is illustrated in Figure 3.

	People believe that ethical subjectivism is true	People believe that ethical objectivism is true
Good first-order ethics	$U_{CL}^1$	$U_{CL}^2$
Bad first-order ethics	$U_{CL}^3$	$U_{CL}^4$

Figure 3. Combinations of first-order moral views and metaethical beliefs in the general population

The following utility relationship then holds:  $U_{CL}^2 > U_{CL}^1 > U_{CL}^3 > U_{CL}^4$ . That is, the best outcome is when people agree with CL and do so more intensely; and the worst outcome is when they disagree with CL and do so more intensely. Now, either people believe in ES or

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Joyce (2001, ch. 8).

they believe in EO. In each of these two mutually exclusive cases, there is a probability for them sympathizing with CL and a residual probability for them sympathizing with  $\sim$ CL. Hence, the risk arises because there is no way of knowing which of the two options yields the highest expected  $U_{CL}$ . Is  $p(\text{good first-order ethics}) * U_{CL}^1 + p(\text{bad first-order ethics}) * U_{CL}^3$  larger than, smaller than or equal to  $p(\text{good first-order ethics}) * U_{CL}^2 + p(\text{bad first-order ethics}) * U_{CL}^4$ ? This way of reasoning is, as a rule, overlooked: people who perform this type of analysis simply presume that if EO is believed, then their particular form of first-order moral views will automatically be accepted. That is naïve, at best.

### **Claim Concerning *E***

**CLAIM 3.3.** “On a belief in ES, moral views cannot be questioned objectively.”

If objective moral facts do not exist and moral judgments really are nothing but reflections of feeling-states, how can a moral view ever be legitimately questioned? How can a moral conflict be resolved? *De gustibus non est disputandum?* As Shafer-Landau (1998) puts it:

If our ethical attachments are ultimately entirely up to us, with no supporting reasons needed, and no rationally compelling ones available, then our moral views are arbitrary.

I think this view is largely mistaken, for four reasons.

First, assessments of facts can be analyzed. Any moral view consists of a moral judgment and a set of factual assessments, and even if the compatibility of the former with



objective facts cannot be assessed, the latter can be.<sup>14</sup> Hence, if two people have different moral views, this is either the result of their having different moral judgments or of their having made different factual assessments as to what means should be applied to achieve the goal(s) determined by the moral judgment(s).<sup>15</sup> Take, as an example, a person whose moral view is that Asians should not be allowed to vote, whose moral judgment is that people who are unintelligent should not be allowed to vote and whose set of factual assessments are based on the writings of the *National Enquirer*. Upon encountering a person who (for the sake of argument) agrees with his moral judgment but disagrees with his moral view, he is presented with facts in the form of scientific studies that show that Asians are, indeed, more intelligent than the average person – and as a result, he revises his moral view.

Second, standards of logical consistency can be applied to identify and resolve inconsistencies in a person's set of moral views.

Third, there is another way, hitherto rather overlooked in metaethical discussions, in which I think an evaluation of moral judgments is possible on a belief in ES.<sup>16</sup> To demonstrate this, I will make use of Hare's (1981, ch. 2) idea of there being two levels of moral thinking, the intuitive and the critical levels, but in a slightly different way than he does. The intuitive level refers to the way we think morally in familiar and everyday situations without deeper reflection. The critical level refers to the way we (could) think morally about non-familiar situations or about situations of internal moral conflict. Now, the argument I would like to put forth says that the propositions being expressed in moral

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Blackburn (1971, p. 122).

<sup>15</sup> Russell (1992, p. 349) asserts: "Perhaps there is not, strictly speaking, any such thing as 'scientific' ethics. It is not the province of science to decide on the ends of life. Science can show that an ethic is unscientific, in the sense that it does not minister to any desired end."

<sup>16</sup> Cf. LaFollette (1991).

judgments, being reflections of individuals' feeling-states,<sup>17</sup> are generally the result of thinking at the intuitive level – but they can be questioned at the critical level by asking: *How did they come about?* That is, feeling-states are not taken for granted but are scrutinized using rational analysis, bringing factual knowledge about the emergence of feeling-states to bear upon the relevance of the moral judgments themselves.

One can imagine at least four (often mutually reinforcing) sources of feeling-states, viz. biological evolution, social evolution/culture, methods of upbringing and illness. The point is that *each of these sources can result in feeling-states that can be questioned on rational and factual grounds*. Biological evolution may have given rise to feeling-states that facilitated survival in some setting but which are not relevant in another. This could concern attitudes towards phenomena such as people different to oneself,<sup>18</sup> certain economic and political issues,<sup>19</sup> certain animals perceived to be dangerous and certain actions.<sup>20</sup> To take an example in this area, if a person experiences a feeling-state to the effect that he should acquire as many material possessions as possible, this may be realized to be a remnant of an era when gathering food etc. was a direct matter of survival; in modern days, it might yield higher utility on net to spend more time with family and friends. Hence, the feeling-state that directs a person to amass things *in absurdum* can be questioned on a critical level. Or, to take another example used by Hayek (1978), if a person experiences a feeling-state to the effect that egalitarian policies, incorporating massive redistribution among citizens, should be pursued, it may be that its basis is to be located to an evolutionary stage when people lived in small,

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<sup>17</sup> These propositions could be at odds with the subjective moral facts (i.e. the feeling-states or desires), but that type of conflict is assumed away at present.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hayek (1978).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Rubin (2002).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Thornhill and Palmer (2000).

communal bands. Today's modern, complex society may be quite unsuited for the same rules as the ones originating in a completely different setting.

Social evolution/culture can influence moral judgments through memes quite quickly, either with an originally biological basis or with roots in some cultural propagandist, whose feeling-states may have been suitable to a certain setting quite different from the present one. These judgments can likewise be questioned, e.g. after having become internalized by many persons. To take an example, the Nazi moral judgments, with lower worth put on some categories of people, were probably internalized by many Germans, inducing them to support persecutions of various kinds. Realizing that these judgments stemmed from a small group of ideologues, and that perhaps popular sentiment was receptive to these judgments due to biological –and not generally rational – factors, inducing them with a propensity to regard strangers with skepticism, could enable a person to question feeling-states of hatred.

Methods of upbringing, to the extent that they propagate moral judgments, simply reflect the feeling-states of parents, family, teachers and other guardians. What reason is there to think these persons' feeling-states especially appealing? They may simply reflect the particular circumstances of *their* upbringing (and so on, going back in time). To take an example, assume that a person knows that his parents never once left their hometown and that they harbored virulent feelings of hatred towards anyone not stemming from their particular part of the world. Upon having moved to a big city, the person experiences feelings of intense dislike upon encountering persons with a different color of the skin. But realizing that these feeling-states were induced by his parents attitudes, in turn shaped by the particular way they lived their lives (reinforced by evolutionary psychology to some degree), he is able, upon critical reflection, to question his own feelings and judgments and downplay the ones he finds are without rational basis.

Illness is a fourth source of certain feeling-states, in particular various forms of mental problems. If the individual affected can be made to realize that he in fact suffers from some objective condition which influence his emotional set-up, he can also, on purely factual grounds, be made to see that all feeling-states and related moral judgments that he experiences are not to be relied on without further reflection.

Now, on this view, it is still not possible to say, on a belief in ES, that a person's moral judgments are *objectively false* – but it is possible to say that they are *inapplicable* (as the underlying feeling-states are irrelevant for the setting in which the person now lives his life) and should actively be resisted and preferably abandoned as a basis for moral views and action. However, if a person, upon reflecting critically in this manner (on his own or as a result of listening to or reading others) does not want to alter the internal priorities of his emotional set-up or eradicate some recurring feeling-state (a want that in itself, of course, would be the result of a feeling-state), then there is nothing more that can be done.<sup>21</sup>

How do these three possibilities of evaluation of moral views on a belief in ES compare to a situation where people believe in EO? The presumption in the claim addressed here is that in the latter situation, a rational evaluation of moral judgments is possible (as these can be compared to objective moral facts that can be shown to be true or false). But if EO is in fact false, or if EO is true but objective moral facts are not observable with any degree of certainty, then a situation very similar to that when people believe ES to be true obtains – i.e. because there are not objective moral facts, or because these cannot be identified, no more rational argumentation is possible than when people believe ES to be true. If people believe EO to be true, if it is true and if objective moral facts are observable, then

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<sup>21</sup> Perhaps it is the case, if our moral judgments reflect feeling-states brought about by biological evolution, that we *cannot* change them through critical moral thinking. But if this is so, it is so irrespective of metaethical beliefs.

rational argumentation in the purer sense is possible, but again, the assumption of observability seems optimistic at best – as does, perhaps, the assumption that there is a willingness for moral agents to adopt objective moral facts as their own moral judgments. From the viewpoint of CL, then, it seems as if it does not really matter whether people believe ES or EO to be true. Rational evaluation can go on *to some extent* no matter what.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Many argue in favor of EO or ES as if it really matters what people believe in this realm of affairs. Here, I have tried to find out whether this supposition is, in fact, true. By looking at three distinct claims, concerning how the three variables of the utility function of CL are affected, the following has been found:

- i) On *C*: The *content* of moral views need not and probably does not differ between believers in EO and believers in ES; and it is improbable that one's ability to influence the moral views of others depends on whether they believe EO or ES to be true.
- ii) On *I*: The *intensity* of moral views need not and probably does not differ between believers in EO and believers in ES; and even if it does, such that believers in EO hold their moral views more strongly, there is a risk that they hold "bad" moral views, which may render belief in ES just as preferable on net.

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<sup>22</sup> Thereby, Sturgeon's (1986) argument (really about *P*), that a believer in EO can be expected to be more humble than a believer in ES, as the former allows for errors in his moral judgments (i.e. he regards them as fallible), seems to fall.

- iii) On *E*: The ability to *evaluate* moral views is probably as great on a belief in ES as on a belief in EO.

Hence, as there is no reason to expect there to be different effects of a belief in EO compared to a belief in ES on the individual variables of CL's utility function, there is naturally no reason to expect the overall utility level to differ depending on people's metaethical beliefs in this area. However, should one come to a different conclusion and think that a belief in EO affects one or more of the three components in a different manner than a belief in ES, *it may still be that the different effects cancel each other out* such that  $U_{CL}^{EO}(C, I, E) = U_{CL}^{ES}(C, I, E)$  after all. In all, ES does not, in spite of many claims to the contrary, pose a particularly great challenge to or undermine cherished moral views.

The implication of this is clear: advocates of a certain set of first-order moral views, such as classical liberalism, should cease trying to construct and present arguments as to the metaethical basis of these views and concentrate on instilling interest in and support for the views directly. How this could be done – if at all – is, however, another story.

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