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Are People Implicitly Moral Objectivists?

Lieuwe Zijlstra¹

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that there are at least two ways in which people can be moral objectivists, namely implicitly and explicitly. It is possible to explicitly deny being a moral objectivist while being implicitly committed to it. (Enoch, Shafer and Landau (eds), *The Ethical Life: Fundamental Readings in Ethics and Moral Problems*, 192–205, Oxford University Press, New York, 2014) presents three thought experiments to convince his reader that they are moral objectivists even if they explicitly think otherwise. As it happens, Enoch's tests, which he uses as intuition pumps, provide excellent measures of implicit metaethical commitments. In this paper I use each of them as material for survey experiments to test whether people are implicit moral objectivists. Overall, results provide support for the idea that people are moral objectivists.

1 Introduction

Many philosophers think that people are moral objectivists (Cuneo, 2007; Enoch 2014; Joyce, 2006; Mackie, 1977; Smith 1994). Yet, existing research suggests that in fact they may be divided on this issue. The results do not univocally support the idea that people are moral objectivists but instead many studies show that there are large differences in objectivity ascriptions both between individuals and between different moral statements (Beebe & Sackris 2016; Beebe et al. 2015; Goodwin & Darley, 2008, 2012; Nichols 2004; Wright et al., 2008; Wright et al., 2013; Zijlstra 2019). And Sarkissian et al.'s (2011) research suggests that people may support moral relativism. Furthermore, research by Pölzler and Wright (2020) suggests, while testing whether people's responses fit a multitude of realist and antirealist views, that participants' intuitions favor moral antirealism. Similarly, recent research by Pölzler, Zijlstra, and Dijkstra (unpublished manuscript). on moral progress,

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knowledge, and error, does not provide univocal support for the view that people are moral objectivists.

The mixed results of these studies have elicited very different responses. For instance, some argue that experimental results are best explained by metaethical pluralism (Wright et al., 2013; Pözlzer & Wright 2020). If this is the best explanation of moral discourse and practices, people are neither moral objectivists nor moral subjectivists in particular. Rather, people have different metaethical commitments and those metaethical commitments vary with the content of moral claims. Although people may treat some moral topics as concerning objective matters of fact, they treat other moral topics as concerning subjective matter of fact. For instance, existing research suggests that people treat extreme cases (e.g., robbery, murder, terrorism) as objectively true or false and less extreme cases (i.e., abortion, stem cell research, euthanasia) as subjectively true or false (Goodwin & Darley 2008, 2012; Pözlzer & Wright 2020, Wagner, Pözlzer & Wright forthcoming; Wright et al. 2013, 2014).

If metaethical pluralism is intended as a theory of moral language and intuitions,¹ it seems to fall under the heading of what Gill (2009) terms the Variability Thesis (see also Sinnott-Armstrong 2009). Gill contests two important claims that he identifies in contemporary metaethics, namely that ordinary moral discourse is both uniform as well as determinate. Ordinary moral discourse is assumed to be determinate in the sense that there are features of ordinary moral discourse that imply that one specific semantic thesis about moral language and discourse is true and that another must be false. Ordinary moral discourse is assumed to be uniform in the sense that all moral discourse can be explained by the same semantic thesis.

Gill (2009) questions these assumptions and poses two contrary assumptions as alternatives, namely the Indeterminacy thesis and the Variability thesis. According to the Indeterminacy thesis, there are parts of moral discourse that give us no reason to prefer one metaethical thesis over another metaethical thesis as an explanation of moral language and discourse. According to the Variability thesis, there are parts of moral discourse that are best described by one metaethical theory and there are parts of moral discourse that are best described by a different metaethical theory. On the basis of these assumptions, different views emerge about the nature of moral language and intuitions.

Sinnott-Armstrong (2009) distinguishes at least two different camps, namely Indeterminists on the one hand and Variantists on the other hand. Indeterminists accept the Indeterminacy thesis and Variantists accept the Variability thesis. The large variance in responses that we observe in existing research on folk metaethics might be explained by the Variantists' thesis. For instance, according to Gill (2009), a form of variantism according to which the semantics of moral terms varies with speaker may explain results of Goodwin and Darley (2008) (also see Sinnott-Armstrong 2009).

¹ I assume that this is what the authors have in mind when they use the term "metaethical pluralism". The term "metaethical pluralism" is frequently also employed solely to describe the variety in objectivity ascriptions that is found in existing results of research on folk metaethics.

So, what is the appropriate thesis in light of the existing research studies on folk metaethics? Prima facie it seems that empirical results provide support for theories of moral language and discourse that deviate from the idea that moral discourse is uniform and determinate (Pözlner 2017). If the empirical results are correct, people do not uniformly treat moral statements in a way that suggests that specific metaethical theories are correct. Similarly, given the large variance in objectivity ascriptions, it seems prima facie not the case that one semantic thesis about moral language is correct and that another is false. This means it is possible that a theory about moral language such as Variantism or Indeterminism is correct. Alternatively, it is possible that Loeb (2008) is correct that ordinary moral discourse is incoherent. That is, that ordinary moral discourse simultaneously contains elements that are objectivist and non-objectivist.

Before we reject the assumption that people believe moral judgments are objectively true or false, we should also evaluate whether the results of empirical research on folk metaethics reflect a type of commitments or beliefs that philosophers are interested in. In one of the first papers on folk metaethics, Nichols (2004, p. 21) argued that we need more sensitive ways to measure folk metaethical commitments and since then many different measures have been used and/or suggested (Goodwin & Darley 2008; Pözlner 2018, Zijlstra 2019). Yet, most psychological studies asked questions that were more or less of an explicit metaethical nature. The questions asked were clearly of a metaethical nature, and they were also the kinds of questions that people rarely consider when they are engaged in moral discourse. To wit, most existing studies ask participants whether or not particular moral claims can be true or false ('truth-aptness task') and/or whether it is possible that in an apparent moral disagreement at most one of the parties can be correct ('disagreement task'). The explicit nature of those questions may have caused people to provide explicit metaethical beliefs and/or to theoretically speculate about the nature of morality. Yet, philosophers do not base the assumption that people are moral objectivists on explicit metaethical beliefs/theoretical speculations but on commitments or beliefs that are more implicit.

For example, Brink writes:

My appeal to commonsense moral thinking is not a prediction about the likely results of a Gallup poll on the issue of moral realism. Rather, my concern is with the philosophical implications or presuppositions of moral thought and practice. (...) I claim that cognitivism seems to be presupposed by common normative practices of moral judgment, argument, and deliberation and that reflection on the nature of moral theorizing seems to support a realist view about these moral facts and truths. This claim may be false, but this is not shown by an appeal to common metaethical beliefs (or the lack thereof). (Brink, 1989, p. 25)

In a later passage, Brink (1989, p. 51) literally refers to "[t]he objectivism or realism that is *implicit* in commonsense morality" (my italics).

Björnsson (2012, p. 9) draws an analogous distinction between explicitly commenting on and being engaged in moral thinking and debate. He goes on to

argue that “the primary task of metaethical theories is to account for this *engaged* behavior, rather than for what is in effect lay people’s theoretical interpretations of it.” (ibid.: 9) This suggests that explicit beliefs need not be a reliable guide to people’s commitments concerning moral objectivity.

Similarly, Enoch (2005, p. 773, footnote 31) writes that:

“[W]hat is relevant is not the explicit metanormative beliefs – much less the explicit metanormative statements – of participants in normative discourse. What is relevant, rather, are the deep metanormative commitments embedded (perhaps implicitly) in normative discourse and practice themselves.”

The point can also be made in terms of Enoch’s (2014) distinction between what people explicitly think or say versus what they are implicitly committed to. Enoch argues that explicit commitments can diverge from implicit commitments. He goes as far as claiming: ‘You may think that you’re a moral relativist or subjectivist – many people today seem to. But I don’t think you are’ (Enoch, 2014, p. 193). Consequently, it might be the case that existing research does not measure people’s real allegiances.

Fortunately, Enoch has developed three intuition pumps that aim to show that people are moral objectivists implicitly even if they explicitly deny that this is the case. In this paper, I use Enoch’s tests as material for a survey experiment. In what follows, I will first discuss Enoch’s tests and present results of a survey experiment on Enoch’s tests in their original form. Subsequently, I will present an additional survey experiment on alternative versions of Enoch’s phenomenology of disagreement and counterfactual test.

2 Enoch’s Tests

My use of the term “explicit commitments” is based on the descriptions provided above (e.g. Brink, 1989; Björnsson, 2012; Enoch 2014). It seems plausible that there is a distinction between what people theoretically believe is the case once they consider things explicitly, and what they are implicitly committed to when engaged in moral discourse and thought. I will therefore follow Enoch’s (2014) conjectures about the difference between what people verbally report and what they are implicitly committed to.

The goal of Enoch’s tests is to make the reader realize that s/he is a moral objectivist, even if s/he explicitly denies being one. In other words, they serve to lay bare people’s implicit commitments. Enoch presents them as thought experiments or intuition pumps. The underlying idea is that when confronted with adequate stimuli it should take only a moment of reflection for people to realize that they implicitly accept the objectivity of morality. Or, at least, that is Enoch’s conjecture. But is that indeed the case?

2.1 Test 1: The Joke Test

Consider the following joke:

[TASTE] A child hates spinach. He then responds that he's glad he hates spinach.

To the question "Why?" he responds: "Because if I liked it, I would have eaten it; and it's yucky! (Enoch, 2014, p. 193)

What makes this joke funny, according to Enoch, is that the child fails to realize that yuckiness is a subjective property. Given that he imagines that his likes and dislikes change, he should adjust his judgment about the taste of spinach. But he does not do this. In other words, the child misconstrues yuckiness as being independent of his likes and dislikes. The child treats yuckiness as an objective property while we, as the reader, are inclined to treat it as a subjective property. That is why the story is funny.

The joke would not work, Enoch proposes, if the subject matter is something that we deem to be more objective than taste. To make his point, Enoch presents a story about factual matters that has the same structure:

[FACTUAL] Consider, for instance, someone who grew up in the twentieth-century West, and who believes that the earth revolves around the sun. Also, she reports to be happy that she wasn't born in the Middle Ages, "because had I grown up in the Middle Ages, I would have believed that the earth is in the center of the universe, and that belief is false!" (Enoch, 2014, p. 193-194)

Clearly, this version of the joke does not work. The reasoning of this person sounds perfectly sensible while the reasoning of the child does not. Enoch explains:

"[i]f the joke works, this seems to indicate that the subject matter is all about us and our responses, our likings and dislikings, our preferences and so on. If the joke doesn't work, the subject matter is much more objective than that, as in the astronomy case" (Enoch, 2014, p. 193-194)

Given that we are interested in morality, the question then arises whether moral versions of the joke more closely resemble TASTE (and hence, are deemed to be about subjective matters) or FACTUAL (and hence, are deemed to be more objective). Enoch thinks that we, philosophers and lay people alike, are implicitly committed to regarding morality as more similar to matters of fact as compared to matters of taste. To pump this intuition, Enoch provides a third version of the joke:

[MORAL] Suppose someone grew up in the US in the late twentieth century, and rejects any form of racism as morally wrong. He then reports that he's happy that that's when and where he grew up, because "had I grown up in the 18th century, I would have accepted slavery and racism. And these things are wrong!" (Enoch, 2014, p. 194)

As with the factual case, this sounds perfectly sensible and the joke is clearly not funny. Enoch believes that this is best explained by the fact that we tend to ascribe objectivity to morality.

2.2 Test 2: The Phenomenology of Disagreement Test

The second test that Enoch presents concerns is the phenomenology of disagreement, or *what it feels like from the inside* when people have a difference of opinion. Enoch claims that different types of disagreements have a different feel. When people disagree about whether human actions contribute to global warming, this feels like trying to get an objective fact right. In contrast, a disagreement about whether bitter chocolate tastes better than milk chocolate feels like stating one's own preferences. The test consists of answering the following question: Does a moral disagreement feel more like a disagreement about whether bitter chocolate tastes better than milk chocolate or does a moral disagreement feel more like a disagreement about whether human actions contribute to global warming? Enoch claims that it is the latter because he conjectures that for lay people, a moral disagreement feels like a matter of getting the objective facts right.

2.3 Test 3: The Counterfactual Test

Enoch's third test concerns counterfactuals. The key question is: "Had our beliefs and practices been very different, would it still have been true that so-and-so?" (Enoch, 2014, p. 197) Consider the following question: Had we believed that smoking is harmless and did not ban smoking, would it still have been true that smoking causes cancer? Clearly, we would answer affirmatively. Enoch suggests that this is the case because we believe that it is an objective fact that smoking causes cancer. He compares this example with our beliefs and practices concerning gender-discrimination. Had we believed that gender-discrimination is ok, would it then still have been wrong? Enoch thinks that we treat our moral beliefs as objective facts, and moral truth as independent from our beliefs and practices, and therefore the answer must be "Yes".

If people are indeed moral objectivists, the test should show that this is the case. Importantly, the tests do not concern people's explicit beliefs about morality. Instead, their answers are meant to reveal their implicit commitments about it. For instance, if you do not think that the moral version of the joke is funny, then, Enoch proposes, you must at some level regard morality as more objective than taste. The same is true if you take the phenomenology of moral disagreement to resemble factual disagreement, and if you take what is wrong to be invariant with respect to our beliefs. Indeed, although these tests indirectly may concern questions of a metaethical nature, the idea is that the response they elicit reveals what people are implicitly committed to.

However, when used as intuition pumps, these tests are of limited value. It can hardly be taken for granted that the responses of a particular individual generalize.

Because of this, there is ample reason to put this to the test in the form of a survey experiment.

3 Survey Investigation

In order to test whether ordinary people are implicitly committed to moral objectivism, I used Enoch's tests of moral objectivity as a basis for an experiment.

3.1 Methods

3.1.1 Participants

150 participants living in the United States were recruited via the online service Mechanical Turk and received \$0.75 for their time. Participants who did not complete the survey or failed to answer correctly two multiple-choice questions to assess whether they fully understood the second and third test ($N = 53$) were excluded from statistical analyses. Analyses were conducted on the remaining 97 participants (45 female; $Mage = 37$). The checks followed after the questions about how moral disagreements feel and the question whether or not actions are still wrong when beliefs and practices change. Inspection of the data shows that there are no differences in results between participants who passed or failed the checks. Nevertheless, the data were analysed exclusively on the responses of those participants who passed the checks² and understood the questions well. In the final part, participants answered three demographics questions (age, gender, nationality).

3.1.2 Materials and Procedure

The study consisted of three different parts. In the first part, participants received the three different versions of the Enoch jokes (TASTE, FACTUAL, MORAL) in a random order. In each case, they were asked to answer two questions that serve to measure their implicit commitments: (1) "Can the above story be regarded as a joke?" (Yes, No); (2) "To what extent do you think the above story is funny?" (0–100). In the second part, participants read a very short story based on Enoch's explanation about the difference between disagreements about taste and disagreements about factual matters (Enoch, 2014, p. 195–196). Participants were subsequently asked to think about a moral disagreement about abortion or a disagreement about a different moral issue they felt strongly about. They were then presented with the question whether the moral disagreement they have in mind feels more like a disagreement about whether bitter chocolate tastes better than milk chocolate or whether it feels

² More information on the attention checks can be found in Appendix 1 at the end of the paper. I have conducted this exact survey experiment twice on two different samples of participants. The results of both surveys are very similar. As the results are similar, I report the results of one of the surveys in this paper and percentages for each of the tests of the other study in Appendix 1.

more like a disagreement about whether human actions contribute to global warming (see Appendix 2).

In the third part, participants read a short story based on Enoch's explanation about how smoking would still cause cancer had our beliefs and practices changed (Enoch, 2014, p. 196–197). They were subsequently introduced with a counterfactual of the form “Had our beliefs and practices been very different, would it still have been true that so-and-so?” They were asked whether gender-discrimination (or a different moral issue they feel strongly about) would still be wrong had our relevant beliefs and practices been different (see Appendix 3).

3.2 Results

The results show that 63% of the participants regarded the spinach version of the story as a joke while respectively only 32% and 8% of the participants regarded the factual and moral versions as a joke. The results of a McNemar test for paired samples shows that the taste and factual category are significantly different ($\chi^2(97)=17.647, p<0.001$). The taste and moral category are also significantly different ($\chi^2(97)=46.817, p<0.001$). If we calculate the effect size in terms of the odds ratios, we obtain a medium effect size of 3.62 for the difference between the spinach version and the factual version, and a large effect size of 19.59 for the difference between the spinach version and the moral version. Finally, the factual and the moral category are also significantly different ($\chi^2(97)=24.242, p<0.001$), which corresponds to an effect size on the basis of odds ratios of 5.42.

In light of the within-subjects design of the present study and skewed distributions, by having zero-scores and a few outliers, a non-parametric test, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test, was conducted to test for differences in perceptions of how funny the joke is. The results indicate that the taste story (*Mdn*: 20) was perceived as funnier than the factual story (*Mdn*: 9) ($Z(94)=-3.551, p<0.001$). Results also show that the taste story was perceived as funnier than the moral version (*Mdn*: 1) ($Z(94)=-6.676, p<0.001$). The factual story was also perceived as funnier than the moral story ($Z(94)=-5.531, p<0.001$).

For the phenomenology of disagreement test, 77.5% of participants respond that moral disagreements feel like factual disagreements and 22.5% that they feel like disagreements about matters of taste. For this test, there were four participants who selected “Other”. These participants indicated that moral disagreements do not feel like disagreements about taste nor like factual disagreements. For example, one participant remarked, “It feels different. Moral issues are not a matter of taste nor an objective truth”. Another participant remarked, “I think it's a little bit of both. There are some objective truths to morality but also some subjective opinions”. Proportions were calculated for the remaining participants ($N=93$).

A proportion test was conducted with the null hypothesis that the proportion is 0.5 versus the alternative hypothesis that the proportion is higher than 0.5. For the disagreement test, results show that the null hypothesis is rejected ($Z(93)=5.41, p<0.001$), which suggests that it is unlikely that this result is a chance occurrence. This implies that participants were significantly more inclined to answer that moral

disagreements feel like factual disagreements compared to disagreements about taste.

For the counterfactual question, 70% of participants indicated that gender discrimination would still be wrong had our beliefs and practices been different and 30% indicated that it would not be wrong. A proportion test similarly showed that the null hypothesis is rejected and that is a statistically significant difference ($Z(97)=3.49$, $p<0.001$). This implies that people are more inclined to answer that gender-discrimination is still wrong had our beliefs and practices been different.

3.3 Discussion

The results of the experiment support Enoch's conjecture that faced with his tests, people are inclined to respond in ways that supports moral objectivism. This suggests that at least on some level, people seem to regard morality as objective. With regard to the first test, people perceive the taste story as a joke but not the factual and moral versions. Moreover, most people perceive the taste story as funnier than the factual or moral story. Accordingly, if we follow the interpretation of the first test as intended by Enoch, results suggest that people treat "yuckiness" as a subjective property and moral and factual matters as involving non-subjective properties. Interestingly, the difference between the factual story and the moral story is statistically significant. It is possible, however, that the significant difference in responses between the factual and moral stories is explained by the fact that people tend to provide a socially desirable response. That is, perhaps some people found that moral issues are not a laughing matter and that therefore they judged it as even less funny than the factual story. Although people do not find the factual nor the moral story funny, they therefore may respond a bit extremer to the moral story.

Results also show that for a majority of people moral disagreements feel more like factual disagreements than like disagreements about taste. Following Enoch's reasoning, the second test suggests that the feel of moral disagreements is more about getting an objective fact right than about stating one's own preferences. Similarly, the third test shows that a majority of people believe that moral wrongness is fixed over different counterfactual circumstances. That is, had their beliefs and practices been different, they would still judge gender-discrimination as morally wrong. Overall, these results provide support for Enoch's thesis that people are moral objectivists.

3.4 Conclusion

I have presented a survey study concerning the question whether people are moral objectivists. I used three tests that are designed to probe people's implicit commitments about moral objectivity. The results of the survey experiment reveal that people do respond in ways that supports Enoch's conjecture that people must on some level be moral objectivists. I therefore submit that, in spite of existing research suggesting that people may not be moral objectivism and that moral language and discourse may not be uniform or determinate, this study provides some support for the

idea that people might be moral objectivists after all. This implies that on the basis of the results presented here, we have good reason to further investigate people's implicit commitments.

4 Alternative Versions of the Phenomenology of Disagreement and Counterfactual Test

Before we conclude that Enoch's tests show that lay people are moral objectivists, we need to be certain that people's responses to Enoch's tests are a genuine reflection of their implicit metaethical commitments. Existing research on folk metaethics shows that people's responses depend on the content of the statements or scenarios used, which is termed metaethical pluralism (Wright et al., 2013; Pölzler & Wright 2020). It is possible that a similar phenomenon occurs for implicit commitments. If so, we have reason to evaluate whether Enoch's tests work just as well with slightly different content.

A related concern is the possibility that the support we received for the idea that people are moral objectivists in the survey experiment above is a consequence of the materials used instead of a reflection of participants' metaethical commitments. For instance, in the phenomenology of disagreement test, people are asked to compare how a moral disagreement about abortion feels compared to how a factual disagreement about global warming feels versus a taste disagreement about chocolate. Yet, while the stakes for the moral disagreement and the factual disagreement are relatively high, the disagreement about chocolate concerns low stakes. It is possible that the similarity in stakes for both the moral disagreement and the factual disagreement explains why participants indicate that moral disagreements feel similar to factual disagreements. If so, the results do not reflect people's implicit commitments but they are instead a consequence of the materials used.

Similarly, for the counterfactual test participants are asked to consider the example of gender-discrimination in an abstract sense. What if we present participants with a more concrete version of the test or, alternatively, with versions of the test with different moral content? Some research suggests that people respond differently to abstract and concrete cases (Nichols & Knobe 2007; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2009). To have a proper test of the idea that people are moral objectivists, I have therefore developed two additional survey experiments testing, respectively, alternative versions of the phenomenology of disagreement test and the counterfactual test.

With regard to the phenomenology of disagreement test, I have developed three additional versions and tested people's responses to each of them in a between-subjects design (see Appendix 4). In the first version, I tested how people respond to the phenomenology of disagreement test when comparing a disagreement about a low stakes matter of taste (whether dark chocolate tastes better than milk chocolate) with a low stakes factual disagreement (a disagreement about the flight time between New York and Los Angeles). In the second version, I tested how people respond when comparing a high stakes matter of taste (whether organic food tastes better than non-organic food) and a high stakes factual disagreement (the global warming example used by Enoch). In a third version, people respond to a high stakes

matter of taste (whether organic food tastes better than non-organic food) and a low stakes factual case (a disagreement about the flight time between New York and Los Angeles).

For the first version, 71.9% of participants responded that moral disagreements feel like disagreements about matters of taste and 28.1% that they feel like factual disagreements in case of the example of the taste of chocolate versus flight time. Results of a proportion test show that the null hypothesis is rejected ($Z(95)=4.29$, $p<0.001$). This suggests that people are significantly more likely to answer that moral disagreements feel like a low stakes' taste disagreement compared to a low stakes' factual disagreement.

For the second version, 54.3% of participants responded that moral disagreements feel like disagreements about matters of taste and 45.7% that they feel like factual disagreements in the case of the taste of organic food versus the question of whether human actions contribute to global warming. In this case, there are no statistically significant differences ($Z(104)=0.04$, $p=0.97$), which suggests that people are divided about the issue.

For the third version, 72.3% of participants responded that moral disagreements feel like disagreements about matters of taste and 27.7% that they feel like factual disagreements in case of the taste of organic food versus flight time, and differences are significant ($Z(100)=4.42$, $p<0.001$).

The results show that people do not respond consistently to the different versions of the phenomenology of disagreement test. There can be two reasons for this asymmetry in results. First, contrary to Enoch's conjectures, moral disagreements do not have a consistent feel for people. For lay people, some moral disagreements may feel more like taste disagreements and other moral disagreements more like factual disagreements. Second, the differences could be explained by the stakes involved in the moral disagreement and the factual disagreement. In that case, whether or not moral disagreements have a particular phenomenology for people, the stakes involved in the examples steers them in different directions.

The results of the second alternative version of the phenomenology of disagreement test show that when people are asked to consider a high stakes taste disagreement about organic versus non-organic food and a high stakes factual disagreement about whether or not human actions contribute to global warming, people are divided about the issue. In this version of the phenomenology of disagreement test one would expect that given that the stakes are high for all the disagreements involved, the "stakes" would cancel out. If people are moral objectivists, we would expect most people to indicate that moral disagreements feel like factual disagreements.

The results of the third alternative version of the phenomenology of disagreement test provide even stronger support for the idea that stakes are driving people's intuitions. Results show that a majority of people indicate that moral disagreements feel like taste disagreements when the stakes are high for the taste disagreement and the stakes are low for the factual disagreement.

Consequently, if we use different variations of the phenomenology of disagreement test, we also obtain different results. In the original version of Enoch, we are asked to compare a very trivial discussion regarding the taste of chocolate

with a moral and factual disagreement that are quite consequential. It is possible that the high stakes drive our intuitions and that we respond accordingly. In taste disagreements, Enoch claims, it feels as if we are stating our preferences and in factual disagreements it feels as if we are trying to get an objective fact right. The results of this survey suggest that for moral disagreements it can feel either way and that it depends on the stakes. If that is correct, we do not have conclusive evidence yet for the idea that people are moral objectivists.

With regard to the counterfactual test, I developed a between-subjects survey experiment on the basis of three alternative versions (see appendix 5). With regard to the original test, participants are asked quite abstractly whether gender-discrimination would still be wrong had our beliefs and practices been differently. In one of the alternative versions, gender-discrimination was described in more concrete detail. Participants read a short description of a society in which people are treated differently on the basis of their gender (see Appendix 5). Two other versions are developed on the basis of the idea that people might respond differently to cases with different moral content. To test whether this is the case, some of the participants responded to a version about public corporal punishments and other participants to a version about public dueling. The only difference with the version used in the survey experiment presented above is that the word “gender-discrimination” is replaced by respectively “corporal punishments” and “dueling”.

For each of the versions of the counterfactual test, similar proportion tests as applied before show that participants believe that a moral issue is still wrong even in the case that our beliefs and practices had been very different. For the concrete gender-discrimination case, 65% of participants believe that gender-discrimination would still be wrong had our beliefs and practices been different ($Z(79) = 4.26$, $p < 0.001$). For the corporal punishment case, 74% of participants believe that corporal punishment would still be wrong had our beliefs and practices been different ($Z(78) = 2.68$, $p < 0.05$). Finally, for the dueling case, 75% of participants believe that dueling would still be wrong had our beliefs and practices been different ($91) = Z = 4.79$, $p < 0.001$).

The results of this survey experiment support the findings of the counterfactual test in the first survey. A majority of people agree that a particular moral issue would still be wrong had our beliefs and practices been different. The results of the concrete version about gender-discrimination do not suggest that the difference between abstract and concrete plays a role for the counterfactual test. Most participants are still inclined to respond that gender-discrimination is wrong even had our beliefs and practices been different. In addition, the results of the other additional versions similarly support the conclusions we have drawn in the first survey. People do respond in a way we would expect them to respond if they are implicitly committed to moral objectivism. Hence, we do not seem to observe an effect based on moral content on the basis of the two alternative versions involving public corporal punishment and dueling. In sum, the results of the counterfactual test in the first survey and the alternative versions are similar and they provide support for the idea that people are moral objectivists.

5 Conclusion: Are People Moral Objectivists in an Implicit Sense?

The question that guided this research was whether we find supporting evidence for the idea that people are implicitly committed to moral objectivism. In existing research, we find that the evidence for the thesis of folk moral objectivism is mixed. Indeed, given that existing research shows that people are objectivists about certain moral issues and non-objectivists about other moral issues, the results have often been interpreted as evidence for metaethical pluralism. By using Enoch's tests as survey material, I have investigated whether or not people are moral objectivists in an implicit sense.

I have presented results of a survey experiment of Enoch's tests. The aim was to stay as close as possible to each of Enoch's original three tests. The results provide good support for the idea that people are moral objectivists. First, people appreciate the spinach joke significantly more than the taste and factual versions. Enoch may therefore be right that we treat moral properties as objective properties. Second, people indicate that a moral disagreement about abortion feels significantly more like a factual disagreement about global warming compared to a taste disagreement about dark versus milk chocolate. This supports Enoch's conjecture that moral disagreements feel like trying to get an objective fact right, similarly as with factual disagreements. Third, people judge that gender-discrimination would still be wrong had our beliefs and practices been different, which supports the idea that moral properties are perceived as objective properties. Taken together, this is good support for the idea that people are moral objectivists.

However, I also tested alternative versions of both tests in two separate survey experiments to investigate whether results of the first survey experiment reflect people's metaethical commitments, instead of being a reflection of the materials used. The results of a survey experiment on alternative versions of the phenomenology of disagreement test suggests that the stakes involved in the disagreements drive people's responses to the test. Or, at the very least, it shows that people do not respond consistently. Once the stakes change, people's responses change accordingly. As a consequence, we cannot interpret the results of the test as a reflection of people's metaethical commitments. At the same time, a test of alternative versions of the counterfactual test do support the idea that people believe moral facts to be independent from prevailing beliefs and practices.

In short, taking Enoch's (2014) tests as point of departure, I have tested whether or not people respond to his tests in ways that suggest that they are moral objectivists in an implicit sense. At least two of his tests, namely the spinach test and the counterfactual test, provide support for the idea that people are moral objectivists. Because we cannot interpret results from the phenomenology of disagreement test as reflecting people's metaethical commitments, we cannot interpret the results as providing evidence for the idea that people are moral objectivists. At the same time, we cannot interpret the results as evidence against it either. It is therefore possible that people are implicitly committed to moral objectivism after all.

Appendix 1: Results of the first survey experiment.

$N=94$.

1. *“To what extent do you think the above story can be regarded as a joke?”*.

Taste version: 60%

Factual version: 28%

Moral version: 12%

2. *“To what extent do you think the above story if funny (0–100)?”*.

Median score taste version: 28.

Median score factual version: 14.

Median score moral version: 6

3. *“What does a moral disagreement feel like?”*.

Feels like global warming: 72%

Feels like chocolate: 28%

4. *“Had our beliefs and practices been different gender-discrimination...”*.

Would still be wrong: 69%

Would not be wrong: 31%

Appendix 2

In this part of the study, we will consider what it feels like for you to engage in a disagreement.

Now, think of some serious moral disagreement. For example, about the moral status of abortion. Suppose that you are engaged in such a disagreement. Imagine this, as it were, from the inside. You are in this disagreement yourself. Perhaps you think that there is nothing wrong with abortion, and you are arguing with someone who thinks that abortion is morally wrong. Or, perhaps you think that abortion is morally wrong and you are arguing with someone who thinks that there is nothing wrong with it.

Please explain how it feels for you to engage in this kind of disagreement. Please note that there is no correct answer to this question: We would simply like to know how it feels for you to engage in moral disagreements. In particular, please tell us whether it feels more like disagreeing over which chocolate is better, or like disagreeing over objective facts like whether human actions contribute to global warming or not?

[1] It feels more like disagreeing over which chocolate tastes better.

[2] It feels more like disagreeing over whether human actions contribute to global warming.

Other.

Appendix 3

As a result of years of scientific research we now know that smoking causes cancer. Now, had our relevant beliefs and practices regarding smoking been different—had we been ok with it, had we not banned it, had we thought smoking was actually

quite harmless—would it still have been true that smoking causes cancer? It is probably uncontroversial that the answer is "Yes". The effects of smoking on our health do not depend on our beliefs and practices. Rather, it is an objective matter of fact.

The question that we therefore ask here is "Had our beliefs and practices been very different, would it still have been true that so-and-so?"

Let us apply this question to morality. For example, some people believe that gender-based discrimination is wrong. Maybe you also believe that it is morally wrong or maybe you do not. If you do not, imagine something else that you think is morally wrong. Would it still have been wrong had our relevant beliefs and practices been different?

[1] No, had our relevant beliefs and practices been different than it would not be wrong.

[2] Yes, had our relevant beliefs and practices been different than it would still be wrong.

Appendix 4: Study details and materials for the alternative versions of the phenomenology of disagreement test

370 participants living in the United States were recruited via the online service Mechanical Turk and received \$0.35 for their time. Participants who did not complete the survey or failed to answer correctly a multiple-choice question that assessed whether they understood the phenomenology of disagreement test appropriately ($N=50$) were excluded from statistical analyses⁵. Analyses were conducted on the remaining 320 participants (99 female; $M_{age}=35$). The check followed after the questions about how moral disagreements feel. In the final part, participants answered three demographics questions (age, gender, nationality).

After filling out a "Yes" to the informed consent form, participants were assigned to one of the three versions of the phenomenology of disagreement test. Participants read a very short story based on Enoch's explanation about the difference between disagreements about taste and disagreements about factual matters (Enoch, 2014, p. 195–196). In each version, participants were subsequently asked to think about a moral disagreement about abortion or a disagreement about a different moral issue they felt strongly about. In version 1, participants were then presented with the question of whether the moral disagreement they have in mind feels more like a disagreement about bitter chocolate versus milk chocolate or more like a disagreement about the time it takes to fly from New York to Los Angeles. In version 2, the comparison made was between a disagreement about the taste of organic food versus non-organic food and whether or not global warming is caused by human behavior. In version 3, the was between a disagreement about the taste of organic food versus non-organic food and the flight time between New York and Los Angeles.

Version 1.

People engage in all sorts of disagreements. For example, we may engage in a disagreement about whether bitter chocolate tastes better than milk chocolate. We can also disagree about how long it takes to fly from New York to Los Angeles. These two disagreements are, however, different. In the chocolate case, it feels

like stating one's own preference, and perhaps trying to influence the listener into getting his own preferences in line. In the flight case, though, it feels like trying to get at an objective truth, one that is there anyway, independently of our beliefs and preferences.

In this part of the study, we will consider what it feels like for you to engage in a.

disagreement.

Now, think of some serious moral disagreement. For example, about the moral status of.

abortion. Suppose that you are engaged in such a disagreement. Imagine this, as it were,

from the inside. You are in this disagreement yourself. Perhaps you think that there is.

nothing wrong with abortion, and you are arguing with someone who thinks that abortion.

is morally wrong. Or, perhaps you think that abortion is morally wrong and you are.

arguing with someone who thinks that there is nothing wrong with it.

Please explain how it feels for you to engage in this kind of disagreement. Please note.

that there is no correct answer to this question: We would simply like to know how it.

feels for you to engage in moral disagreements. In particular, please tell us whether it.

feels more like disagreeing over which chocolate is better, or like disagreeing over.

objective facts like the time it takes to fly from New York to Los Angeles?

[1] It feels more like disagreeing over which chocolate tastes better.

[2] It feels more like disagreeing over the time it takes to fly from New York to Los Angeles.

Version 2.

People engage in all sorts of disagreements. For example, we may engage in a disagreement about whether organic food tastes better than non-organic food. We can also disagree about whether human actions influence global warming. These two disagreements are, however, different. In the (non)organic food case, it feels like stating one's own preference, and perhaps trying to influence the listener into getting his own preferences in line. In the global warming case, though, it feels like trying to get at an objective truth, one that is there anyway, independently of our beliefs and preferences. That is, either human actions contribute to global warming, or they do not. In this part of the study, we will consider what it feels like for you to engage in a disagreement.

Now, think of some serious moral disagreement. For example, about the moral status of abortion. Suppose that you are engaged in such a disagreement. Imagine this, as it were, from the inside. You are in this disagreement yourself. Perhaps you think that there is nothing wrong with abortion, and you are arguing with someone who thinks

that abortion is morally wrong. Or, perhaps you think that abortion is morally wrong and you are arguing with someone who thinks that there is nothing wrong with it.

Please explain how it feels for you to engage in this kind of disagreement. Please note that there is no correct answer to this question: We would simply like to know how it feels for you to engage in moral disagreements. In particular, please tell us whether it feels more like disagreeing over whether or not organic food tastes better than non-organic food, or like disagreeing over objective facts like whether human actions contribute to global warming or not?

[1] It feels more like disagreeing over whether organic food tastes better than non-organic food.

[2] It feels more like disagreeing over whether human actions contribute to global warming.

Version 3.

People engage in all sorts of disagreements. For example, we may engage in a disagreement about whether organic food tastes better than non-organic food. We can also disagree about how long it takes to fly from New York to Los Angeles. These two disagreements are, however, different. In the organic food case, it feels like stating one's own preference, and perhaps trying to influence the listener into getting his own preferences in line. In the flight case, though, it feels like trying to get at an objective truth, one that is there anyway, independently of our beliefs and preferences. In this part of the study, we will consider what it feels like for you to engage in a disagreement.

Now, think of some serious moral disagreement. For example, about the moral status of abortion. Suppose that you are engaged in such a disagreement. Imagine this, as it were, from the inside. You are in this disagreement yourself. Perhaps you think that there is nothing wrong with abortion, and you are arguing with someone who thinks that abortion is morally wrong. Or, perhaps you think that abortion is morally wrong and you are arguing with someone who thinks that there is nothing wrong with it.

Please explain how it feels for you to engage in this kind of disagreement. Please note that there is no correct answer to this question: We would simply like to know how it feels for you to engage in moral disagreements. In particular, please tell us whether it feels more like disagreeing over whether or not organic food tastes better than non-organic food, or like disagreeing over objective facts like over the time it takes to fly from New York to Los Angeles.

[1] It feels more like disagreeing over whether organic food tastes better than non-organic food.

[2] It feels more like disagreeing over the time it takes to fly from New York to Los Angeles.

Appendix 5: Study details and materials for the concrete counterfactual test

300 participants living in the United States were recruited via the online service Mechanical Turk and received \$0.35 for their time. Participants who did not complete the survey or failed to answer correctly a multiple-choice question that

assessed whether they understood the test appropriately ($N = 48$) were excluded from statistical analyses. Analyses were conducted on the remaining 252 participants (76 female; $Mage = 34$). The check followed after the question whether or not something is still morally wrong had our beliefs and practices been different. In the final part, participants answered three demographics questions (age, gender, nationality).

Participants read a short story based on Enoch's explanation about the counterfactual of "Had our beliefs and practices been very different, would it still have been true that so-and-so?" applied to the example of how smoking causes cancer even if we would believe otherwise and had we not banned it (Enoch, 2014, p. 196–197). They were then presented with one of the three alternative versions of the counterfactual test, namely either to a concrete version of the gender-discrimination example (version 1, see Appendix 5), to a version about public corporal punishment (version 2), or to a version about dueling (version 3). They were subsequently again introduced with a counterfactual of the form "Had our beliefs and practices been very different, would it still have been true that so-and-so?" and asked whether the particular moral issue (or a different moral issue they feel strongly about) would still be wrong had our relevant beliefs and practices been different.

As a result of years of scientific research we now know that smoking causes cancer. Now, had our relevant beliefs and practices regarding smoking been different—had we been ok with it, had we not banned it, had we thought smoking was actually quite harmless—would it still have been true that smoking causes cancer? It is probably uncontroversial that the answer is "Yes". The effects of smoking on our health do not depend on our beliefs and practices. Rather, it is an objective matter of fact.

The question that we therefore ask here is "Had our beliefs and practices been very different, would it still have been true that so-and-so?".

Let us apply this question to morality. For example, some people believe that gender-based discrimination is wrong. Maybe you also believe that it is morally wrong or maybe you do not. If you do not, imagine something else that you think is morally wrong. There has been a time in which people in societies made strong distinctions on the basis of gender, in which women were expected to take responsibility for children and perform household chores while men where out to work, and in which there were different clothing restrictions for men and women. Now, had our relevant practices and beliefs regarding differences in gender been different—had we been ok with making distinctions on the basis of gender—had we been ok with a society in which women and men were expected to fulfil different social roles—would it still have been morally wrong?

[1] No, had our relevant beliefs and practices been different than it would not be wrong.

[2] Yes, had our relevant beliefs and practices been different than it would still be wrong.

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