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# Objectivity and Idolatry<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Rousseau thought humans have a problem: our inescapable need to cooperate with others threatens our natural freedom (Rousseau 1997, p. 147). The only stable solution is submission to the will of the people whose decisions we partly determine. This solution imposes an objective moral demand – one that binds us independently of our desires and beliefs. Plato, Hobbes, Kant, Gauthier and Korsgaard all had structurally similar thoughts. There is a problem that all humans share, and since there is a unique solution to this problem in the form of moral rules, this (moral) solution binds us objectively. The idea was simple enough but the execution complex, and these philosophers all spent large parts of their philosophical careers honing the details of an account that would justify moral objectivity. Other philosophers took a more direct route. They claimed that the prevalence of beliefs in moral objectivity itself is sufficient evidence for that objectivity, either because objective moral rules offer the best explanation of these beliefs or just because they ‘couldn’t possibly imagine’ moral rules not being objective. But whether by fiat or by hard work, establishing the objectivity of morality undoubtedly tops the list of philosophical obsessions.

This curious, unrelenting crusade to vindicate moral objectivity is the topic of my paper. In the first part I explore a recent attempt by Sharon Street to show that objective moral rules are a unique solution to the universal problem of loss. In the second part I put aside particular attempts to offer a vindication and turn my attention to the rationality of searching for such a vindication. I argue that the only justification of our efforts to find a vindication lie in our beliefs in moral objectivity; that these beliefs can be as well, if not better, explained by wishful thinking and other cognitive biases; that as a research community we have failed to take precautions against such biases, despite obvious warning signs; and that as a result we have been making disproportional and therefore irrational efforts to vindicate moral objectivity.

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## Part One

### **Street on Moral Objectivity**

According to Street, the common thread in all constructivist attempts to vindicate moral objectivity is a three stage procedure. First, one identifies a normative point of view constitutive of members of a group; second, one locates a significant problem common to those who share this point of view and finally, one shows that objective moral rules are the best solution to that problem. If one can show that the point of view is that of all humans and if one can further show that the problem is the most significant problem humans face, then one is well on her way to prove that moral rules have authority over all of us, regardless of our personal beliefs or inclinations. The vindication of moral objectivity is not an easy task and Street does not propose to carry it out in one fell swoop. In her paper “Constructivism in Ethics and the Problem of Attachment and Loss” (Street 2016, this volume) Street's central aim is to show that we all share a problem and that this problem is the most important one we face. She does however describe her favored solution: the practice of mindfulness meditation which, on her view, necessarily involves submission to objective moral standards.

The general strategy Street follows has two noteworthy characteristics. It differs from non-constructivist attempts to vindicate moral objectivity in that the evaluative point of view it rests on is constitutive rather than contingent. Glaucon considered the possibility that people want to take advantage of others but do not wish to be taken advantage of, and suggested that moral rules offer the best *modus vivendi* (Plato 1992, 358 d- 359 b).<sup>2</sup> One might, however, worry that some of us are less risk averse, and thus are willing to fight our way to dominance unfettered by the rules of morality. If this is so then the evaluative point of view identified by Glaucon is contingent and cannot ground moral rules that apply to all of us independently of our desires and beliefs<sup>3</sup>. In contrast, constructivists appeal to an evaluative point of view which is constitutive of those under discussion, and thus to a point of view they cannot be without. Street's vindication of moral objectivity also differs from that of restricted constructivism. Restricted constructivists such as Rawls take some of our reasons as given (say, reasons to live in a liberal society) and try to justify other reasons (say, reasons given by rules of justice) on the basis of these already established reasons. Un-restricted constructivists, on the other hand, wish to ground all reasons in people's evaluative points of view without appealing to any prior reasons. In these two respects Street's

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<sup>2</sup> Glaucon attributes the view to Thrasymachus.

<sup>3</sup> Glaucon himself noted that on this view moral rules apply to us only when there is a risk of getting caught (Plato 1992, 359c-360c). Such restriction in scope does not however, in itself, threaten the objectivity of moral rules since in their restricted scope they could apply to every person independently of their desires and beliefs.

attempt to justify objective moral rules follows in the footsteps of Korsgaard's. It differs from Korsgaard's attempt in its focus on the problem of loss. I will return to the exact characterization of this problem later, for now suffice it to say that this is the problem we all face because the people, things, or projects that are important to us are not secure from the ravages of time and chance.

### **Advantages of un-restricted constructivism**

The rules of justice, according to Rawls, are the optimal solution for those who hold in common certain liberal values (Rawls 1993, p. 100-1; 2001, p. 5) and wonder how best to organize a society which embodies these values. But if it turned out that a liberal society was an unworthy ideal, then the solution would be a solution to a problem not worth solving. Even if those who hold liberal views see themselves as bound by this solution, in fact it should not be followed. Rawls' solution is therefore only of partial interest. The normative authority of its conclusions depends on the correctness of its input value judgments. One advantage of un-restricted constructivism, says Street, is that it does not face a similar limitation (Street 2016, p. 9 in draft). Since un-restricted constructivism is a theory about how *all* our reasons are constructed out of our input value judgments, it is impossible to complain that if these input value judgments are incorrect then the construction procedure will yield non-reasons. It is impossible to make this complaint because, according to un-restricted constructivism, the only measure of correctness of any value judgment is the output of the construction procedure. Independently of that procedure the question of correctness does not make sense. Normative realists, who think that facts about reasons are independent not only of our actual values but also of the values we would have if we were rational and fully informed, disagree. Realists claim that even if one were to show that every agent, on pain of irrationality, must see herself as bound by certain demands, these agents might nevertheless not be so bound since the measure of correctness of a normative standard is independent of the output of any constructivist procedure. Street, who has argued against normative realism elsewhere, assumes that this meta-ethical position is false and claims that as long as we reject it her un-restricted constructivist position will be seen to have a unique advantage: if one accepts the details of her vindication of moral objectivity one is bound to accept the normative authority of its conclusions (Street 2016, p. 9 in draft).

This last claim seems to me incorrect. Normative realists are not the only ones who could present a principled challenge to an unrestricted constructivist vindication of moral objectivity. Nihilists about practical reason will also question that vindication. Nihilists will argue that since there are no practical reasons of any sort, no value judgments can be correct – neither the input ones nor the output ones. In particular, they will argue, the supposed requirements of morality lack authority. So the appeal to

constructivism in order to vindicate moral objectivity requires that we assume both normative realism and nihilism to be false.

There are further theoretical complications. Fellow non-restricted constructivists might challenge Street's analysis of practical reasons.<sup>4</sup> Street argues that the construction of reasons starts with normative judgments (Street 2016, p. 12),<sup>5</sup> but others might think that it starts with the attitude of love, or with simple desires<sup>6</sup>. And fellow non-restricted constructivists might also challenge her analysis of the rules of construction<sup>7</sup>. Thus Street's vindication of moral objectivity also depends on the rejection of all alternative constructivist positions. Street has not claimed otherwise, and indeed has explicitly stated that she assumes the truth of constructivism in general and relies on her previous work for a full defense of her own version of the view. However, the dependence on these assumptions undermines the generality of her solution. Street hopes to identify a universal problem and show that the best solution to this problem is to adopt the ethical standpoint. But a 'problem' is a normative concept: a state of affairs counts as a problem only if there is a reason to overcome it. Thus any view (realism, nihilism and alternative forms of constructivism) which disagrees with Street's understanding of the concept of a reason might reject the normative authority of her proof's conclusions.

Let us then assume with Street that un-restricted constructivism is the right meta-ethical position and that her version of it is the one we should accept and turn our attention to the details of her vindication of moral objectivity.

### **The Problem of Attachment and Loss**

Everything we value, says Street, is subject to loss, in the sense that everything we value might be destroyed or might not come about. This is the biggest problem each one of us faces since for each one of us, the problem is as big as the value of the thing whose loss we most dread (Street 2016, p. 17 in draft). In one sense the problem is unsolvable because "...for any individual, finite evaluative point of view on

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4 Street herself has challenged Korsgaard's constructivism (Street 2012, section 4).

5 For a clear analysis of this aspect of Street's view see Bratman (2012 p.85-91).

6 I think here in particular of Frankfurt (2004, chapter 2, section 9), and Williams (1981).

7 Street sees these rules as constitutive of the attitude of valuing, but others, like Velleman (2000, p. 26-9), argue that the rules of construction of practical reasons have their origins in the goal of self-understanding. Street has often described Korsgaard as a fellow non-restricted constructivist, but does not, to my knowledge, think of Williams, Frankfurt and Velleman as constructivists. I am not sure why, but in any case, their challenges to her analysis of practical reasons is neither a realist, nor a nihilist one. Furthermore, these challenges are of great significance since on these views moral objectivity may not be vindicated at all.

the world, the gap between what that being loves and longs for, and the way the world is, has the potential to become unbearably large, with no hope of repair” (Street 2016, p. 18 in Draft ). As an example Street presents the story of Kisa Gotami whose little son has died and who wants more than anything to bring him back to life. The three obvious solutions in such situations, to change the world, to change what one loves or to retreat from the world, are often either impossible or undesirable. Nevertheless, according to Street, there exists a solution: the practice of mindfulness meditation, a form of mental training in which we pay attention “to everything that is happening in [our] field of awareness” (Street 2016, p. 19 in draft) and whereby we come to identify with a universal and transcendental point of view which is not vulnerable to loss. Crucially, says Street, once we occupy the transcendental point of view, we already occupy the ethical standpoint.

### **Two problems with the problem of loss**

The solution to the problem of loss and the connection between this solution and the ethical point of view are presented by Street as kernels of ideas to be developed in future work. I will, therefore, not concern myself here with the question of how and whether this solution works. I do however wish to consider the problem of loss itself. According to Street the problem has two central features that together allow it to ground the vindication of moral objectivity. First, that while the problem has different manifestations for different people, it is nevertheless the biggest problem each one of us faces. And second, that since the different manifestations of the problem have a single form, namely, that the gap left by loss is unbridgeable, a unique solution can be found that suits each one of us: mindfulness meditation. So we have identified a universal biggest problem with a unique best solution.

The first problem with the problem of loss is that its two central features depend on different understandings of the idea of loss and that each one of these is incompatible with one of the two features. On the one hand, we understand the problem as the general problem of a gap “between the world as it as a matter of fact is, and the world as the valuer thinks it would be good or desirable for the world to be” (Street 2016, p. 14 in draft). Call this the ‘wide understanding’. This understanding allows us to claim that the problem of loss is the biggest problem that each one of us faces. On the other hand, we understand it as the specific problem faced by those who have experienced a loss that cannot be repaired; for example, those whose loved one has died or whose life project has fallen apart. Call this the ‘narrow understanding’. This understanding allows us to identify a unique problem that can be given a concrete unique solution, namely, meditation. However, when we focus on the wide understanding we lose the potential for a unique solution. After all, the gap between the way the world is and the way we want it to be has many manifestations, and it is often the case that the most urgent of these has better solutions than

meditation. The biggest problem some people face is political persecution; scientists warn us that the biggest problem we all face are rising ocean levels; and for some of us our biggest problem is attachment to money, career, or influence. Those problems have different best solutions. The best solution to some of them might be immigration, to others the best solution might require global cooperation, and to others the best solution might involve an attempt to change ourselves. There is therefore no unique solution to our biggest problems; the solutions are diverse. On the other hand when we focus on the narrow understanding of loss, we might be able to identify a unique solution but we can no longer claim that the problem we solve is the biggest problem each one of us faces.

The second problem with the problem of loss is that it is not a problem. The problem of loss, or at any rate the one that can be solved by mindfulness meditation, is the problem of seeing the world from too subjective a perspective. Once we occupy “the standpoint of pure awareness”, and identify “with a universal point of view on the world that transcends any particular, finite point of view” then the problem disappears, because this transcendental point of view is “a point of view that is not itself vulnerable to loss” (Street 2016, p. 19 in draft). But now one of three options presents itself. Consider Kisa, and ask yourself, how is she meant to reach the transcendental point of view? Either Kisa needs to change herself by losing her sentiments for her dead child and this is undesirable, or she stays the same person but pretends to adopt the transcendental point of view, and then it is not really her point of view, and she merely tricks herself to think the problem is gone, or, and this is the intended option, the transcendental point of view was her point of view all along, and the problem was never really a problem, just a pseudo problem she had to see through. As Street puts it, through meditation “[Kisa] sees that 'she' is not ultimately the same as these loves [her sentiments to her son Y.S.]” (Street 2016, p. 19 in draft). This is not to say that Kisa had no problem to start with. Her problem was the problem of suffering, but she suffered because she didn't see the world, and her place in it, aright, and meditation would have helped her correct her skewed vision.

What does it mean that Kisa's problem of loss is not a problem? It means that her ideal of not losing her son was never really an ideal; that from the real, transcendental, universal, point of view, it is neither better nor worse if *her* son lived or died. It is not better nor worse because from this point of view one has no special attachment to one's *own* child and does not ascribe special value to their life.<sup>8</sup>

I think that the understanding of the problem of loss that emerges from Street's suggestion is unacceptable. A further reflection might help establish my objection. Imagine that Kisa not only lost her

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<sup>8</sup> It is possible that even from the transcendental point of view a death of a human being is to be lamented. But this general problem is not Kissa's problem; hers was the death of *her own* child.

son, but that this loss was the result of a grave injustice. And imagine that she suffers because of the death of her son and even more so because of the fact that this death was the result of such injustice. On Street's suggestion, in order to overcome her suffering, Kisa should meditate and thus reach the ethical standpoint, a standpoint which is part and parcel (Street 2016, p. 19 in draft) of the standpoint of pure awareness. The standpoint of pure awareness is not vulnerable to loss because in occupying it one realizes that her attachments are 'part of the world like everything else' (Street 2016, p. 19 in draft). Kisa, in other words, should adopt the ethical point of view and in doing so will realize that the loss she has suffered as a result of grave injustice, and therefore, the existence of that injustice itself, were not so harmful after all. Or put differently, if through mindfulness meditation we come to occupy the ethical standpoint, we shall realize that nothing we do *really* harms anyone, at least not personally<sup>9</sup>.

## Second part – Moral Objectivity

### **Moral Objectivity and the Moral Phenomena**

Moral objectivists hold that there are fundamental moral demands and that these demands' normative authority is independent of our judgment, choices, desires<sup>10</sup> or person.<sup>11</sup> The objectivist view needs clarifying in two respects. First, the notion of normative authority: on the assumption that our fundamental normative concept is that of a reason, a moral demand is normatively authoritative if it is reason giving. Second, scope: if moral objectivism is correct then moral demands are independent of the relevant attitudes and identity of any person, both the agent to whom the demand applies and any other person or group of persons. According to some objectivists, who Street calls normative realists, fundamental moral reasons are independent even of the attitudes that fully informed and fully rational agents would have. Others, such as Korsgaard, think that fundamental moral reasons are independent of the values of actual persons – even if these are fully informed and *instrumentally* rational - but not of the attitudes of fully informed and overall rational persons. Street argues that fundamental moral reasons are independent of the attitudes of actual persons, but not of the attitudes of fully informed and instrumentally rational persons. I treat all three variants as forms of moral objectivism, and will refer to demands that

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that it would be impossible to describe a notion of harm from the universal point of view, but that harm would be a general harm, a harm done to humanity, not a personal harm.

<sup>10</sup> I will henceforth refer to this trio simply as 'our attitudes'.

<sup>11</sup> While Rosen (1994, p.279) argues that it is impossible to find a general notion of objectivity that would apply cross domains, Joyce (2015) suggests that the task is not insurmountable when we focus on a particular domain. The understanding suggested here follows Enoch (2011, p. 3-4) and to a lesser extent Scanlon (2012, p. 233). I have however made the intended rejection of relativism explicit by excluding dependence on the person herself. Objectivism may be more modestly understood as the claim that *some* fundamental moral demands feature this kind of objectivity.

feature any of the three forms of independence as 'objective demands' or 'universal demands'. I will call the view accepted by moral objectivists 'moral objectivity'.

Assuming, again, that our fundamental normative concept is that of a reason, moral objectivism is compatible with almost all meta-normative positions. For example, it is compatible with cognitivism and expressivism<sup>12</sup> about reasons, it is compatible with naturalism, and non-naturalism about reasons; it is compatible with subjectivism and objectivism about reasons, and it is compatible with all views about the epistemology of reasons.

Some arguments against moral objectivism are arguments against the more general possibility of objective normative facts. Thus Mackie doubts that objective facts could be prescriptive (Mackie 1977), and Williams argues that objective normative facts cannot be explanatory (Williams 1981).

Many defenses of objectivism are attempts to reply to the sorts of arguments put forward by Mackie and Williams. That is, they are attempts to show that objective prescriptive or action-explaining facts are possible<sup>13</sup>. Since, as I understand it, moral objectivism is independent of normative objectivism more generally and since I am happy, for argument's sake, to grant the success of these replies, my focus will be elsewhere.

There are at least two general arguments for moral objectivity<sup>14</sup>. The first is an inference to the best explanation. It is suggested by Mackie and Harman<sup>15</sup> and then defended by the Cornell realists<sup>16</sup>. The argument says that the best explanation of the moral phenomena involves, in part, the truth of objectivism. The second argument is implicit in the often made contention that subjectivism about morality conflicts with objectivist intuitions. An explicit version of the argument is described by Scanlon as a form of reflective equilibrium (Scanlon 2014, p.77) and by Brink as an appeal to coherentism (Brink 1989, p. 211): Moral objectivism, the argument says, should be accepted because it is the only view that coheres with our objectivist moral intuitions, which themselves impose a significant constraint on any attempt to find a theory which withstands the scrutiny of reflective equilibrium. Which intuitions?

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12 Later on I will use the locution 'the truth of moral demands' there as well I will mean it in a way that is compatible with expressivist accounts.

13 For example: Scanlon (2014, ch.2, sections 1-2), Korsgaard (1996, section VI), and Enoch (2011, ch. 6).

14 As we shall see there have been numerous attempts to show that particular moral demands are objective. If such attempts would have been successful it would be trivially possible to conclude that there are some objective moral demands. My focus here is on more general arguments for moral objectivity.

15 Both Harman (1996, sections 1.2, 1.3) and Mackie (1977, part 1, section 8) think the conclusion will not support objectivism.

16 Though in their case mostly as an argument in support of a judgment independent form of realism that is neutral on other sorts of attitude independence (Sturgeon 1986, p. 75; Brink 1989, p. 195). See also Huemer (2015).

Different authors focus on different intuitions: Clarke thought it was obviously true that there is an objective demand to promote the welfare of all (Clarke 1991, p. 192-3); Scanlon argues that it is obviously true that there is an objective demand to avoid driving into bystanders (Scanlon 2014, p. 2-3); and Enoch argues that it is obviously true that when our disputes are non-moral and non-factual we are bound by an objective demand for impartiality whereas when the dispute is moral we are bound by an objective demand for partiality (Enoch 2011, pp. 17-20).

As just stated, the second argument assumes too much. It assumes that a theory which conflicts with our objectivist intuitions should be presumed false, and this is tantamount to the assumption that objectivism is presumed to be true. On a more charitable interpretation the argument requires that as long as we cannot explain away our objectivist intuitions we must take their content seriously in reflective equilibrium. However, on this interpretation the argument faces a problem. Since our objectivist intuitions are part of the moral phenomena, the fate of the argument depends on the success of the first argument. If it turns out that the better explanation of the presence of our objectivist intuitions is not the truth of moral objectivity, or even if turned out that the truth of moral objectivity is only one of many equally good explanations of the presence of our intuitions, the second argument would lose its force. I will thus focus my attention on the first argument, namely on the inference to the best explanation that has as its basis the moral phenomena.

The moral phenomena consist of a combination of beliefs, passions and practices. Those include, among other things, the content of moral education, the content and structure of our legal systems, the content of our less codified moral rules, our moral passions and reactive attitudes, our decision making, and our moral beliefs. Here are some examples: we lock away murderers, we shun hypocrites, we get offended when a promise is broken, and we try not to lie. To this list we can add our belief that we are justified in our moral decision making in general and more specifically in our participation in moral practices. Finally some of us have particular beliefs in the objectivity of moral demands; these beliefs are the intuitions I have spoken of above. For reasons that will become clear shortly I wish to distinguish between our beliefs in moral objectivity and the rest of the moral phenomena. Let us call the moral phenomena minus the belief in objectivity ‘MP-’<sup>17</sup>.

### **Explaining (most of) the Moral Phenomena**

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<sup>17</sup> Huemer (2015) argues that the moral phenomenon includes a convergence over time towards liberal views, and that this convergence is the basis of an argument for objectivism. Since I doubt that such convergence is taking place, or for that matter, that we have a clear sense of what ‘liberalism’ is, I do not count it as part of the explananda.

MP- may be explained by the existence of objective moral demands: our beliefs and/or passions track objective moral demands and since we are by and large reason responsive creatures, these beliefs and/or passions explain the rest of our moral lives. The truth of moral objectivity is, however, not the only possible explanation of MP-. Various other theories could explain the same data. Some of these explanations are grounded in non-normative facts: The force of traditions, fear, evolved sympathies, evolved or conscious attempts to strike a balance between the need to protect ourselves and the desire to have control over our lives, the need to cooperate, etc., may all explain our moral behavior and moral sentiments. What about our beliefs that we are justified in our moral practices?<sup>18</sup> Some have claimed that these, or similar theories, can also explain those moral beliefs. Mackie, for example, thought that moral beliefs are best explained by the tendency to internalize the moral practices of our social surroundings (Mackie 1977, p.36). You might, however, think that an explanation of our moral beliefs that treats all of them as unjustified cannot be satisfying. To avoid supposing such a large scale error we therefore need to supplement these non-normative theories. We need to appeal to a normative story that would show we have reasons to obey the law, to shun the hypocrite, to be offended when betrayed, and so on. Specifically, to explain MP-, these theories must justify the moral beliefs included in MP- but need not justify our beliefs in moral objectivity. Neo-humean views are famous examples of normative attempts to justify MP- without committing to ethical objectivity (Williams 1981, p.112-113). What all such accounts have in common is the idea that our non-morally-objective reasons<sup>19</sup> justify *for most of us, most of the time*, our moral practices. I am going to use a term of art and call theories that explain and justify MP- without appeal to the truth of moral objectivity intersubjective theories, and their proponents, intersubjectivists. Note that what I call an intersubjectivist theory is not limited either in the type of reason it appeals to or in the range of phenomena it can account for. It can avail itself of any one of the multiple metanormative accounts of reasons (cognitivist or not, natural or not, sentiment based or plan based) and can account for emotional patterns and linguistic practices as well as behavioral codes and reactive attitudes. For example, an intersubjectivist account could claim that given our sympathy with others, given our objective reason to stay alive and avoid pain, given our desire to live peacefully with others, given our risk averseness, most of us, most of the time have reasons to abide by a moral code and in particular by a moral code that treats every other person in accordance with uniform moral standards. Are intersubjective theories, worse, equally good, or better than views that appeal to the truth of objective moral rules, at explaining MP-? My view is that *if MP- was all the data to be explained* then intersubjective explanations would be at least as good as, if not better than, objectivist explanations. The argument for this claim is simple: even the

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18 For now, I am only speaking of those moral beliefs that are part of MP-.

19 The fact that a reason is not morally-objective doesn't mean that it is non-moral. What Hume called natural and artificial virtues would, in the eyes of a contemporary neo-humean, be considered moral reasons.

objectivist accepts the facts that ground the intersubjectivist explanation, and given these facts the truth of objectivism is not needed in order to explain the phenomena.

This simple argument must be properly defended, and I don't have the space to provide this defense here. Since I assume that many will be willing to accept its conclusion, I will take it for granted in what follows.

If we accept the argument then, as far as MP- goes, the truth of moral objectivity is not the best explanation of the phenomena,<sup>20</sup> and is arguably worse than alternative explanations.

### **Beliefs in Moral Objectivity and Idolatry**

What of the explanation of objectivist beliefs? Objectivist beliefs include, among others, the belief that the justification of fundamental moral demands cannot be attitude dependent, the general belief that there exist objective moral demands, the particular beliefs that certain moral demands such as 'divert your car if you are about to hit a bystander' or 'human dignity must be respected' are objective, and so on. What theory must we adopt in order to explain beliefs of this sort? One option is to appeal to objective moral truths. Those who think that objective moral truths best explain MP- will certainly take that path<sup>21</sup>. Intersubjectivists can also appeal to the truth of objective moral truths to explain our objectivist beliefs. That is, they can claim that in addition to the intersubjective apparatus that explains MP-, we should appeal to the truth of objective moral demands in order to explain objectivist beliefs. Such intersubjectivists are thus also objectivists<sup>22</sup>. In any case, both approaches will claim that objectivist moral beliefs are justified. A third approach is to explain our objectivist moral beliefs without justifying them. This is the option of adopting an error theory with respect to objectivist moral beliefs. Such an error theory, when combined with an intersubjectivist position, is limited in the scope of the error that it attributes to us. It justifies the vast majority of our moral beliefs and practices but claims that we are in

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20 Objectivism in itself does not provide an explanation of MP-. Objectivists need to supplement their view with an account of the way or ways in which the truth of objective moral demands causes our moral beliefs, moral practices and moral sentiments. Such an explanation is notoriously hard to provide for non-naturalists, but maybe easier for others.

21 This way of arguing for objectivism need not be circular. The proponent of objectivism need not appeal to his own objectivist beliefs in order to support his belief in objectivism. Rather the proponent of objectivism may appeal to the prevalence of objectivist beliefs in the general population.

22 Street's earlier work positioned her clearly in the intersubjectivist camp (Street 2008, 2012). Her most recent paper (Street 2016) suggests she now leans towards the kind of combined view I discuss here.

error whenever we hold the additional, second order belief that the moral demands that apply to us are objective. Call the combined view Limited Error Theory.<sup>23, 24</sup>

What evidence do we have for the truth of objectivism? According to some the moral phenomena as a whole provides evidence for the truth of objectivism. Let us concede that it provides a prima facie, non-conclusive evidence for objectivism and ask: what evidence favors objectivism over limited error theory? Since we have assumed that there are multiple intersubjectivist accounts capable of explaining MP- at least as well as the appeal to moral objectivity, the answer to our last question must be that the only evidence<sup>25</sup> which could potentially favor objectivism over limited error theory consists of our objectivist moral beliefs. How good an evidence for objectivism are these beliefs? First, we should note that the appearance of multiple pieces of evidence is misleading. Objectivist beliefs stand and fall together. Views about the truth, content, and justification of moral demands are interlinked. If a person stopped believing that central moral demands are universal she would also stop believing that the authority of a moral demand over a particular person cannot be justified by appeal to that person's desires and beliefs. Indeed if a person stopped believing that the demand to treat every human with dignity is universal, she would also stop believing that respecting people's privacy is a universal demand, or that the prohibition on murder is universal<sup>26</sup>. Thus to the extent that objectivist beliefs are evidence for objectivism, this evidence is rather limited. The group of objectivist beliefs does not provide us with multiple and independent pieces of evidence. The evidence for objectivism is better spoken of in the singular: our objectivist belief.

We should further ask whether these beliefs (or this belief) are sufficient to establish the truth of objectivism. Some objectivists<sup>27</sup> think that they are. But many, both today and throughout the history of philosophy, thought they are not. They thought that this evidence provides us at most with some reason to

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23 Whether such a limited error theory describes a sufficiently systematic error to deserve the label 'error theory' is a terminological question of no consequences. Limited error theory denies any conceptual connection between morality and objectivity. Such denial is not common but can be found in the work of Foot (1972), Harman (1975), and Finlay (2004).

24 The error theories of Mackie, Joyce, and Olson differ in two respects from the limited error theory I describe here. First, they think that moral truths, as a matter of conceptual necessity, must be objective. I don't think there is any such conceptual limitation on the idea of a moral truth. Second, the skepticism that grounds their view is often metaethical. They claim that objective reasons (not only moral ones) cannot exist or could not possibly be known by us, or could not have motivational or prescriptive force (Mackie 1977, p. 38-41; Joyce 2001, p.109; Olson, 2011, section 5). The limited error theory I discuss here does not depend on in any such metaethical skepticism.

25 In the context of an attempt to justify objectivism by appeal to an inference to the best explanation.

26 The implicit assumption made here is not, of course, that the objectivist is committed to a simplistic exceptionless rule, but rather that however complex the rule, its authority is independent of the desires and beliefs of the actor.

27 Among others, those mentioned in footnote 17.

look for an independent proof for objectivism; to vindicate objectivism. This is Street's view and this probably was the view of Plato, Hobbes, Rousseau, and on some interpretations Kant<sup>28</sup>. All these philosophers thought we had a relatively clear grasp of what it means for a non-moral reason to apply to us, and further thought that the truth of moral objectivism must be shown to be derived from, that is, must be justified on the ground of, these non-moral reasons. Whether they concluded that moral rules are objective or only near-universal is a complicated exegetical question the answer to which varied from one to the other. What they all had in common was the view that our objectivist beliefs are insufficient to establish the truth of moral objectivism. But what reasons are there for thinking that our objectivist beliefs are insufficient to establish the truth of objectivism? One strong reason is the existence of alternative explanations of the provenance of these beliefs. I offer three alternative explanations:

1. Over-generalization or *Secundum quid*. If the reasons to follow moral rules are near universal it's quite plausible that we have been over-generalizing and treating them as universal<sup>29</sup>. The tendency to over-generalize is natural and understandable, and is the result of obvious and familiar evolutionary pressures<sup>30</sup>. We do it all the time, both in the practical domain and in our scientific inquiries. There is, therefore, no reason to think that moral deliberation would be exempt.

2. Cognitive dissonance<sup>31</sup>. We have good reasons to treat moral rules as if they provide universal reasons. As Hobbes emphasized, treating moral rules as universal helps ensure cooperation. And as Hume pointed out, treating moral rules as universal simplifies moral communication. We can add that it simplifies the tasks of educators, of law makers and of judges. Treating moral rules as if they were universal also simplifies our own personal moral life. Moral judging, moral decision making and the production of reactive attitudes are simpler tasks if we treat moral rules as providing objective reasons. But if we treat moral rules as if they provide universal reasons<sup>32</sup> and don't believe that they are, cognitive dissonance arises, and as often happens, we adjust our beliefs to alleviate the tension<sup>33</sup>.

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28 'On some interpretations' because Kant is sometimes understood to have had as his justificatory target not the existence of objective moral demands but rather their possibility given the nature of obligations or our moral psychology (Stern 2010).

29 One often-made distinction is that between conventional and moral (cross cultural) rules. The distinction can easily be explained and justified by the cross-cultural commonality of certain needs and emotions. However, treated without caution, the relativisation to these needs and emotions can be forgotten.

30 See for instance Zebrowitz (2003).

31 See for instance Cooper (2007). The effect of cognitive dissonance is likely to be exacerbated by the influence of the just-world fallacy (Furnham 2003).

32 Strictly speaking pragmatic considerations of the kind mentioned here give us reasons to adopt policies of acting and thinking as if moral rules provide universal reasons. Policies are liable to be open for reconsideration in particular cases, but those who adopt such policies are likely to be affected by cognitive dissonance all the same

3. Idolatry. We are afraid; we are afraid of other people, of nature, of meaninglessness, of loss, of the afterlife and of ourselves. Most, but not all, of these fears arise from the desire to protect what is important to us. The combination of desires and fears sets up for us, as Street would put it, problems. Some of these problems have no solutions at all, most have only partial, complex solutions which require hard and continuous work, and even then there is the fear that our efforts will flounder. But we hope for a solution anyway; a solution that will ensure success with solvable problems and make our struggle to solve them easier. And we even hope for a solution to our unsolvable problems. As a species we have mastered the art of conjuring up these solutions. We make up entities and then with the help of wishful thinking we forget they are our own creations and start believing in them. We have thus created local gods and idols to represent them, abstract universal gods, and religious identities. The idea, subconscious to be sure, is in every instance the same: conjure an entity that would, if it really existed, help solve our problems, or at the very least ensure that a solution exists. God ensures the existence of heaven, can prevent our ships from sinking, and gives meaning to our lives. At the same time we realize that the solution is all too easy. Could so much good descend upon us without a price? Confused, we assume that if we pay a price the benefits will be delivered. We thus imagine that a price is demanded of us, and work hard to obey the demand. We submit and obey.

There are different forms of idolatry. The monotheistic god is omniscient, whereas the Greco-Roman ones were not. Religious identity gives meaning but does not prevent ships from sinking. What most of these forms of idolatry have in common is the establishment of objective moral systems. Such systems do not answer all our fears but they answer many of them. They provide meaning and purpose. They supply us with simple rules to follow if we want to avoid eternal punishment. They establish standards for a universal exchange of works and benefits – ensuring that if we do enough good, our lives will go well. They protect us from violence and greed. They alleviate our sense of loss by giving us perspective: they help us realize how unimportant our personal pain is in relation to the all important universal good. And they help us overcome the fear of temptation: without simple objective rules, the right path is obscure, and in its shadows, so we fear, temptation will prevail. Seen from this perspective, the central role of gods is to ensure that we follow the rules. What we are really after are the objective rules themselves. Objectivity is the greatest idol of them all.

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since the distinction between adopting a policy of treating them as providing universal reasons and treating them as providing universal reasons tout court is in practice too subtle to be noticed.

33 As mentioned before, I use 'universal' to mean roughly belief independent and choice independent; I do not mean to imply anything about the scope of the rule. Particularists can be, and often are, objectivists.

The phenomenon of idolatry is varied and its sources no doubt complex. What is important for our purposes is the role played by wishful thinking (Bastardi 2011) in its emergence. While the effects of wishful thinking are well documented the mechanisms that underlie this bias are not fully understood. It is thought that a central role is played by attention bias and interpretation bias. People attend to evidence that supports their desired outcome and neglect contradicting evidence, and furthermore, they attribute more importance to evidence that supports the desired outcome<sup>34</sup>.

Over-generalization, cognitive dissonance and idolatrous inclinations plant the seed of moral objectivism. Confirmation bias helps establish it as a conviction. This quartet offers, I believe, the best explanation of our moral objectivist beliefs; indeed each one of the three initial components offers an explanation that is at least as good as, if not better than, the appeal to the truth of objectivism. If this is right then objectivism does not offer the best explanation of our objectivist beliefs and these beliefs give us no reason for accepting objectivism.

Objectivists may complain that I have reached my conclusion by mis-characterizing the phenomena. I have assumed, they will say, that objectivist beliefs are ordinary beliefs, but this is not the case. Objectivist beliefs are distinguished from other beliefs by a unique fingerprint. They are extremely common; they are persistent, that is, those who have them keep having them irrespective of the circumstances in which they find themselves; and they have a characteristic phenomenology: they are strong, clear, immediate and most importantly, they present their content as evidently true. Cognitive biases, the objector might claim, cannot explain the special character of these beliefs.

I disagree. The purported 'special' character of objectivist beliefs is easy to explain and is not particularly special. Consider first the fact that these beliefs are common and persistent. Note that even though they are common, they are not accepted by all. Indeed, they are less common than the moral beliefs included in MP-. Since according to our explanation, objectivist beliefs are generalizations of the moral beliefs included in MP-, their prevalence and persistence can be explained by any of the evolutionary, social and psychological explanations for MP-. Second, consider the purported unique phenomenology of our objectivist moral beliefs: their strength, clarity and apparent necessity. Their strength, clarity and immediacy are most apparent in the case of beliefs in specific moral demands such as the demand not to torture babies for fun. The strength, clarity and immediacy of those objectivist beliefs can be explained by

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<sup>34</sup> The biases which underlie Idolatry are no doubt innate. It may be that more particular objectivist tendencies, such as the tendency to see rules that prohibit the infliction of pain as authority-independent, are also innate. The evolutionary advantages gained by such a tendency seem clear: it would lower violence. We thus have yet another debunking explanation of our objectivist beliefs. Though, see Enoch (2011, ch. 7) for an alternative understanding of evolutionary explanations.

the strong and clear emotions with which they are associated, emotions that themselves have a simple evolutionary explanation. Finally, consider the way in which the content of these beliefs purportedly appears to the believer as evidently true. I must admit that I am not personally familiar with that phenomenology; I don't know what it feels like to be presented with a content of a moral belief as evident, as opposed to merely thinking that the content is undoubtedly true. But even assuming that moral objectivist beliefs do present their content in this light to some believers, they are not unique in this respect. Kant was convinced that the rules of Euclidean geometry present themselves as evident, and James describes religious experience as one which presents its content as knowledge. Clearly there are better explanations of the phenomenology of beliefs which appear evident than their truth.

I thus reiterate my initial conclusion: an inference to the best explanation does not support moral objectivism.

### **The Irrational Search for Moral Objectivity**

On the assumption that an inference to the best explanation and reflective equilibrium arguments cannot prove moral objectivism, the view could only be established if we found a further independent argument in its support. The question I want to explore next is how much effort we should invest in looking for that argument. The implicit answer which the philosophical community has given to this question was and still is: *until a proof is found*. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to describe the history of ethics from Plato to Korsgaard as one long attempt to find that proof. Even subjectivists have joined the war effort (Schroeder 2007, p. 115; Street 2016). Street has summed it up nicely: "Objectivism is the Holy Grail" (Street 2016, p.4).

I disagree. We have looked for a vindication of objectivism long enough and come up empty. Hampton argues that Hobbes has failed; Korsgaard thinks that Hume has failed; many think Kant has failed; Street argues that Korsgaard has failed, and I have adduced some reasons to doubt Street's own proof.<sup>35</sup> The claimed failure is not a failure to vindicate morality, rather it is the much more specific failure to vindicate morality as a system of objective rules. Past failures, to be sure, are no proof that an argument is non-existent. But the combination of these past failures and the availability of multiple debunking explanations of objectivist beliefs should convince us, I think, that the search for such a proof squanders precious intellectual resources. As a community we should stop treating objectivism as a Holy Grail and

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35 Schroeder claims that all attempts other than his own have failed (Schroeder 2007, p. 115).

adopt a more rational approach to the study of morality. Let me say a bit more about the problems with our current approach.

Methodology. The central evidence for objectivism are our objectivist beliefs. Objectivist beliefs are nothing but, well, beliefs. However, philosophers treat them as much more than that. Some philosophers think that in themselves they prove objectivism<sup>36</sup>. And even those who think that an independent proof for objectivism is needed overestimate their weight as evidence. Such an overestimation is the most plausible explanation of the unrelenting search for a vindication. And the most plausible explanation for this overestimation is the trio of biases which give rise to these beliefs. Rational investigators faced with the possibility that their beliefs are grounded in such biases would not assume that their felt strength tracks their strength as evidence, and would take special precautions against the relevant biases in their investigation. Non-philosophers faced with similar biases do take special precautions. Medical researchers conduct double blind experiments. Social scientists let multiple independent uninvolved staff code the data. Orchestras run auditions behind screens and HR departments ask for anonymized CV's. What do we, philosophers, do when our beliefs provide questionable evidence? We call them 'intuitions' and imagine they have thereby gained extra justificatory weight. As a community we have failed to develop procedures and mechanisms to guard against anticipated intellectual biases. Investigating without proper precautions is a form of irrationality.

Research strategy. Consider an example. Imagine you have just completed a visit to one of those grand English country houses: dozens of rooms on multiple floors, gardens and cellars, grounds and parking lots. You distinctly remember that at the start of the visit your car key was in your pocket. Now the tour is over, you stand at the entry hall ready to go back to the car, but the key is gone. You contemplate multiple theories to explain its absence – you may have left it in the attic, it may have fallen when you were doing somersaults in the yard, it may have fallen when you bent over the fountain, and so on. Where should you search; which theory should you try to vindicate? Why not start right here at the entry hall? After all, it would be wonderful if it could be found here. No need to go back all the way to the attic, no need to search in the vast grounds and get your shoes muddy, and no need to arrive home late. It would be wonderful if the key were somewhere in this room. And the chance of it being here is no smaller than the chance of it being elsewhere. So you search in the entry hall for 10 minutes, for half an hour, for an hour, for 2500 years. Isn't it time to give up and search for the key somewhere else?

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36 See footnote 17.

Searching in the entry hall is perfectly rational, but searching only there, because it would be nice if the key were there, is irrational. The mechanism that makes us focus our philosophical efforts on proving moral objectivism is similar to the mechanism that would make one keep searching for the key in the entry hall. We try to vindicate objectivism because we keep hoping objectivism to be true, and we keep hoping it's true because it would calm many of our fears and satisfy many of our desires. The fact that we wish objectivism were true does not make the view that it is true less plausible, it only explains why we keep adhering to an irrational search pattern. What makes our search pattern irrational is the fact that the effort exerted on the search doesn't match the likelihood that it is the right theory.

## **Objections**

Consider two possible replies to my discussion of research strategy above:

- A. It would be much worse if objectivism were true and we didn't know it than if a non-objective moral system were true and we didn't know it. So we have a reason to put more effort into trying to vindicate objectivism than into trying to vindicate non-objective moral systems<sup>37</sup>.
- B. We have very good reasons to want people to have objectivist beliefs, and it is much easier to sustain objectivist beliefs if we have reasons to think that objectivism is true. So we have a reason to put more effort into trying to vindicate objectivism than into trying to vindicate non-objectivist moral systems<sup>38</sup>.

The appeal of the first objection comes from the implicit analogies on which it rests. It would be much worse if the person we were searching for in the rubble were still alive and we did not know it than if he were dead and we did not know it. Similarly, the thought is that it would be much worse if murder were wrong and we didn't know it than if it were permissible and we didn't know it. Notice that in the analogy the comparative judgment is based on an agreed normative perspective. It is from the same normative perspective that we assess the value of knowing that the person in the rubble is alive and the value of knowing that he is not. Therefore, the question we should ask ourselves is, what agreed normative perspective grounds the comparative judgments implicit in the objection? Of course, if it were the normative perspective of moral objectivism then it would be bad indeed if objectivism were true and we didn't know it. On the other hand, if objectivism is false, then mistakenly thinking that it is true might be equally bad. Crucially, in assessing the objection, we cannot assume any of these perspectives, and we therefore cannot compare the 'badness' in one case with the 'badness' in the other case.

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37 Thanks to Ilya Shemmer for this objection.

38 Thanks to Jenny Saul for this objection.

Could the objector claim that there is no symmetry between the two perspectives since non-objectivism isn't a single normative perspective? Even if we assume that the alternative to objectivism is a vindication of a moral system on intersubjective grounds it is still the case that each one of us might have different reasons for action – even different moral reasons. The only sense in which intersubjectivism grounds a *unique* moral system is that most of us have sufficient common interests and sufficient similarities in emotional make-up to converge on a single moral system. Such convergence, claims the objector, doesn't provide us with single alternative normative perspective, since 'most' is not 'all'. The objector is right, I think, to claim that no such symmetry exists between objectivism and intersubjectivism. This, however, does not help the objection, since it does not grant objectivism any special status as a perspective of assessment prior to its vindication.

But the objector might insist that if murder is not objectively forbidden and we don't know it then the worst that could happen is that people are not murdered. How bad could that be?

The answer depends on one's perspective. If there are individuals whose reasons to murder<sup>39</sup> are greater than their reasons not to murder then for them not knowing the reasons to murder would be bad. Of course most of us think that the harm to the person who is murdered is much greater than the harm to the would be murderer, and this in part is why we can live together with other individuals who share our perspective. What is important in assessing the objection, however, is that if intersubjectivism is correct then this common way of life is not grounded in interests and judgments that track objective truths, and thus cannot afford us a unique perspective from which to prefer the vindication of objectivism.

Let us now turn to the second objection. This objection takes us back to the idolatrous impetus for objectivism. Even according to intersubjectivism we have good reasons, says the objector, to follow objective looking rules<sup>40</sup>. The point of these rules is roughly, let us say, to protect us from the aggression and egoism of others. People are much more likely to follow the rules if they believe they reflect objective demands and these beliefs are much more likely to be stable if it were found that moral demands are in fact objective. Thus, says the objector, while the idolatrous impetus is not a reason to think objectivism true, it is a reason to make a special effort to try and show that it is true.

I disagree. The objectivist argues not merely that there are reasons to look for a vindication of objectivism but rather that the strength of these reasons need not be proportional to the strength of the evidence for its truth. The argument rests on the assumption that rational people are more likely to follow objective looking rules if they believe that these rules reflect objective demands, and on the further assumption that

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39 After all MP- reasons have been taken into account.

40 It's possible that all of us have such reasons, and it is almost certainly the case that most of us do.

people are by and large rational. But why think that this is the case? Even if we grant that people are by and large rational, we must still settle the question of what rules rational people are most likely to follow. And it seems to me that rational people are most likely to follow a rule if they think that they are justified in following it. If, as the objection concedes, intersubjectivist considerations give us reasons to follow objective looking rules, then it is already the case that these are the rules that rational people are most likely to follow.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that Street has not identified a universal problem of great significance that could ground a vindication of moral objectivity. I have then claimed that the philosophical crusade to vindicate moral objectivity rests on irrational grounds. The argument for that claim had two parts. I first argued that if we put aside objectivist beliefs, the rest of the moral phenomena is best explained without appeal to the truth of objectivism. I then argued that our beliefs in moral objectivity offer only scant evidence for the truth of moral objectivity, since idolatrous tendencies and other cognitive biases offer multiple alternative explanations of these beliefs. As our beliefs in moral objectivity are the only reason, prior to any independent proof of objectivism, to prefer objectivism over limited error theory, there is no ground for the common philosophical confidence that such proof will be found. I have concluded that as a research community we have failed, at least with regards to the significance we attach to beliefs in moral objectivity, to take precautions against cognitive biases; and that as a result we have irrationally focused our philosophical resources on the holy grail of moral objectivity.

Street has hoped to convince readers “that secular analytic metaethics in the western tradition may have a great deal to learn from eastern meditative traditions” (Street 2016, p. 5). Learning from different traditions is a good idea and I wish to recommend another insight whose origins are outside our philosophical canon. It is to be found in a more familiar ancient text, and reads: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them” (Exodus 20:3).

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