ELSEVIER

The psychology of meta-ethics: Exploring objectivism ☆

Geoffrey P. Goodwin *, John M. Darley

Department of Psychology, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA

Received 26 October 2006; revised 29 May 2007; accepted 22 June 2007

Abstract

How do lay individuals think about the objectivity of their ethical beliefs? Do they regard them as factual and objective, or as more subjective and opinion-based, and what might predict such differences? In three experiments, we set out a methodology for assessing the perceived objectivity of ethical beliefs, and use it to document several novel findings. Experiment 1 showed that individuals tend to regard ethical statements as clearly more objective than social conventions and tastes, and almost as objective as scientific facts. Yet, there was considerable variation in objectivism, both across different ethical statements, and across individuals. The extent to which individuals treat ethical beliefs as objective was predicted by the way they grounded their ethical systems. Groundings which emphasize the religious, pragmatic, and self-identity underpinnings of ethical belief each independently predicted greater ethical objectivity. Experiment 2 replicated and extended these findings with a refined measure of ethical objectivism. Experiment 3 demonstrated the robustness of the religious grounding of ethics, and differentiates it from mere religious belief and from political orientation. The results shed light on the nature of ethical belief, and have implications for the resolution of ethical disputes.
© 2007 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Debates about ethical issues commonly arise in everyday life. One sort of debate concerns the correct means to achieve an agreed upon end – for instance, is low taxation an efficient way to achieve a just and productive society? Another sort of debate concerns ethical ends themselves – for instance, is terminating the life of a terminally ill and pain-ridden individual morally defensible? The first sort of debate could in principle be resolved empirically. But the second sort of debate arguably cannot be resolved empirically. Here, instead, the focus is on foundational ethical principles. These sorts of disagreement are potentially irresolvable and are likely to be psychologically complex. And they are the focus of this paper.

Deep ethical disagreements are interesting partly because they give individuals occasion to think about how they would defend or justify their ethical beliefs. Reflective individuals might even be inclined to think about the epistemic status of their ethical beliefs, and what sort of ground they might have. Philosophers, of course, have spent a good deal of time on such "meta-ethical" issues. Some philosophers have argued that there are no moral facts, and that morality is not objective (e.g., Ayer, 1936; Blackburn, 1984; Hare, 1952; Harman, 1975; Mackie, 1977; Williams, 1985), whereas others have argued for the opposite position (e.g., Brink, 1986; Kant, 1959; Nagel, 1970; Railton, 1986; Smith, 1994; Sturgeon, 1985). This debate is real and not settled in the philosophical community. Indeed, within philosophy, "there are no dominant views" (Smith, 1994, p. 4).

But, how do ordinary individuals perceive and think about meta-ethics? Do they regard their ethical beliefs as factual and objective, or as more subjective and preferential? Curiously, this question has been largely unexplored. Most psychological investigations of morality to date have been concerned with questions of practical ethics, that is, with questions about the ethical beliefs and practices that individuals abide by (e.g., Baron & Spranca, 1997; Darley & Shultz, 1990; Haidt, 2001; Kohlberg, 1969, 1981; Maio & Olson, 1998; Piaget, 1965; Tetlock, 2003). The psychology of meta-ethics has been explored tangentially in the child development literature, which has focused on whether and at what age children are capable of distinguishing conventional from ethical rules. The evidence from this literature is extremely controversial (see e.g., Gabennesch, 1990a, 1990b; Helwig, Tisak, & Turiel, 1990; Shantz, 1982; Shweder, 1990; Tisak & Turiel, 1988; Turiel, 1978).

Moreover, psychological research that has specifically focused on meta-ethics, has not addressed questions concerning ethical objectivism. Instead, it has focused on the distinction between ethical universalism and ethical relativism – i.e., whether individuals treat their ethical beliefs as applying to all people, and all cultures (Nichols & Folds-Bennett, 2003). Participants in these studies are asked whether a particular moral belief they hold is shared by, or applicable to, all people or all cultures (e.g., Nichols & Folds-Bennett, 2003; Turiel, 1978), or whether ethics generally is depen-