

## Moral Objectivism Across the Life Span

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### Abstract

Developmental research on moral intuitions has shown that people begin life as moral objectivists. Other research purports to show that “moral objectivity is a default setting on commonsense metaethics, but the setting is, as indicated by the evidence on the undergraduates, defeasible” and that a sizable number of individuals respond as non-objectivists to moral cases.<sup>1</sup> Because much of the recent research on moral objectivity and non-objectivity focuses on typical undergraduate populations, they are unable to show whether the non-objectivist views embraced by many college students remain with them as they grow older or whether they are later rejected. The aim of the current project is to study the views of ordinary people regarding the objectivity of moral claims across a significant portion of the life span—from seventh grade through the retirement years. The key question in our study is how participants’ assessments of the objectivity of moral claims compare with their assessments of factual and taste claims over the course of a life span.

Recent studies also suggest that people may not treat all moral claims as having the same degree of objectivity or factualness and that the same may be true for empirical claims as well. Another aim of the project has been to investigate some of the factors that lead people to attribute or deny different degrees of objectivity to different kinds of claims. As a result, a secondary question in our research has been whether perceived societal disagreements concerning certain claims correlates with lower objectivity attributions by study participants.

We have found that the vast majority of people endorse moral objectivism and that moral non-objectivism (relativism) appears only as a phase that some individuals go through during the period of their lives that coincides with the college years. Our data also shows that perceived societal disagreement on controversial claims contributes to individuals attributing less objectivity to their views on those claims, although it does not affect their objectiveness concerning non-controversial moral claims. We believe that temporary relativism may be brought on by the college experience. This hypothesis fits the data reported by Shaun Nichols that of his survey respondents, those who had spent more years in college were more likely to respond as non-objectivists.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, we believe participants are less certain in their views

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<sup>1</sup> Nichols, S. (2004). After Objectivity: An Empirical Study of Moral Judgment. *Philosophical Psychology*, 17, 3-26; pp. 4, 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

concerning contested societal claims because they are aware that many individuals hold a view different from their own.

Our study asked each participant to rate their level of agreement with 8 statements selected from the following categories: uncontested ethical claims, contested ethical claims, uncontested taste claims, contested taste claims, uncontested factual claims, and contested factual claims. Here are some key examples:

Uncontested ethical claim: "Treating someone poorly on the basis of their race is morally wrong."

Contested ethical claim: "Scientific research on human embryonic stem cells is morally wrong."

Uncontested taste claim: "Gourmet meals from fancy Italian restaurants taste better than microwavable frozen dinners."

Contested taste claim: "Classical music is better than rock music."

Uncontested factual claim: "New York City is further north than Los Angeles."

Contested factual claim is "Humans evolved from more primitive primate species."

Participants then answered the following two questions about each of the eight statements they received: (1) If someone disagrees with you about [the statement in question], is it possible for both of you to be correct or must one of you be mistaken? (2) On a scale from 1 to 6 [1 = There is no disagreement at all; 6 = There is an extremely large amount of disagreement], please rate the extent to which you think people in our society disagree about [the statement in question].

The first question represents the central test of a participant's views about objectivity of the claim in question. Clearly, if two people disagree about whether NYC is further north than LA, at least one of them must be mistaken. However, if one person thinks that classical music is better, but another thinks that rock music is better, there does not seem to be the same objective basis for saying that at least one of them must be wrong.

The second question above concerning the perceived level of disagreement about a statement was intended to test the hypothesis that participants will be more likely to say that there is no fact of the matter (i.e., that both of two disagreeing parties might be right) when there is a high

degree of perceived disagreement about the matter in our culture. For example, we expect participants to be more strongly objectivist about claims like “Treating someone poorly on the basis of their race is morally wrong” than about “Scientific research on human embryonic stem cells is morally wrong” because there is significantly more disagreement about the latter. In other words, instead of thinking that people will be either objectivists or non-objectivists about empirical, moral and taste claims across the board, we thought it was important to test for the possibility that people will be more objectivist about some claims or issues than about others.

By extending the domain of experimental research on moral objectivism beyond the traditional college classroom, we have found that the metaethical views of many college aged students may be still evolving and are likely to be affected by their recent emancipation from the values imposed by whatever household they came from.