

# **Ethical Intuitionism**

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exempting some moral principle from the general anti-realism they assume: the principle that one *should not* make laws based on mere subjective preferences; that one should not impose parochial conventions on other societies; that one should not make judgments one does not know to be objectively correct; that one should not teach things one does not know to be objectively correct.

I therefore favor a different account of our culture's attitudes towards morality: I suggest that they are incoherent; indeed, blatantly so. Whatever thoughts most individuals have about the nature of value would not withstand a minute of scrutiny. We think that values are subjective but that the Iraq war was objectively wrong; we think that morality is an illusion but that we should all act morally; we think that, because there are no objective values, it is objectively wrong to impose our values on others.

The question is, which of our conflicting beliefs are false, and which if any are correct?

Most who deny the existence of objective values will concede that, at least at first glance, it *seems* natural to suppose there are objective values. Nearly every society throughout history has taken the objectivity of values for granted. And as I've suggested, even members of our own cynical society appear to assume the objectivity of values in their ordinary thinking about particular moral questions. If there really are no objective values, then this must be the most significant discovery of modern philosophy, and perhaps the first time the discipline of philosophy has managed to convince large numbers of people to embrace a massive revision of common sense. If, on the other hand, there *are* objective values, then the widespread opinion to the contrary must be among the greatest errors of modern philosophy, and of modern intellectual culture generally.

The latter is what I believe. I have written this book to defend a thoroughly objectivist, rationalist account of the nature of morality and moral knowledge. The view I defend is known, somewhat misleadingly given the connotations of the term 'intuition' in popular culture, as *ethical intuitionism*. It holds that there are objective evaluative facts—facts such as that it is wrong to cause gratuitous suffering to others—over and above the natural, non-evaluative facts; that we have a kind of intellectual insight into some of these evaluative facts; and that they provide us with reasons for behaving in certain ways, irrespective of what we desire. This position is widely viewed as naive and indefensible. I believe on the contrary that the common objections to it are far weaker than they have been taken to be and could not have moved any reasonably reflective intuitionist to abandon her position.

The first part of the book, following the introductory chapter, is negative: it endeavors to refute three alternative theories about value. The second part explains and defends my own views about value: chapter 5 explains how we know moral truths; chapter 6 deals with the problem of moral disagreement and error; chapter 7 explains how values provide reasons for action; and chapter 8 responds to numerous objections. Finally, chapter 9 offers a review of the main arguments of the book, along with some speculation about why the conclusions I defend are unpopular and why the issues are important.

Who should read this book? I have sought to write a book that could be read with profit by other professors—but I did not seek to write one that could *only* be read by professors. The nature of morality and value is everybody's business. The problems of moral relativism and skepticism, if indeed they are problems, affect students and lay people as much as professional philosophers. So I have aimed my work at both professional and amateur philosophers. This is a difficult undertaking, and doubtless opinions will differ on how successfully I have pursued it. I have sought to advance the state of the field, but I have also explained classic arguments that students new to the field should hear. Some of my colleagues may occasionally be bored by the repetition of old arguments, while some lay people may be confused by technical points. To minimize the latter difficulty, I have marked with asterisks (\*) the more technical sections of the book, including some sections responding to views put forward by specific individuals in the contemporary academic world. The non-specialist can skip these sections without losing the thread of argument.

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## Preface

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We all make value judgments, but hardly any of us understand what we are doing when we do. Through conversations and debates that I have had over a number of years, I have come to the conclusion that nearly all intellectuals in our society think that morality is somehow unreal. I have come to expect, whenever the subject of the nature of values arises, to be told blithely that morality is all a matter of emotions or conventions, that it is all an illusion created by our genes, or that it is a myth sponsored by religion. This seems to be the sophisticated and 'scientific' view. I recently surveyed a class of about forty undergraduates on the subject. After explaining the terms 'subjective' and 'objective', I asked how many of them believed that 'morality is subjective'. *Every single person* in the room raised their hands, save two—those two were myself and my graduate student teaching assistant. This is all the more remarkable for the fact that it is usually all but impossible to attain universal agreement, in a philosophy class, on anything. Professors of philosophy, whose job it is to study such things as the nature of values, are less united—objectivism remains a respectable minority position in the field. Yet most experts seem to agree that morality is in some sense unreal.

None of this seems to stop anyone—whether students, professors, or other intellectuals—from making moral judgments, arguing about what the correct moral views are, or trying to get others to obey the correct moral principles. Even those who declare morality an illusion will often proceed to hold forth on the wrongness of the war in Iraq, or of human cloning, or at least of their boyfriend's cheating on them. And they seem to expect their arguments to be taken as reasons for other people to act in certain ways. This strikes me as odd. If I thought that the giant rabbit standing in the corner of the room was a hallucination, I don't think I would hold forth in public about what his favorite food was, plan my actions around his schedule, or expect others to alter their behavior in the light of my claims about him. If morality is an illusion, it is equally unclear why anyone should care about its hallucinatory dictates. And those who regard morality as a matter of conventions or of emotions do not seem in practice to treat it accordingly. They do not argue about what is moral as one would be expected to argue about what the social

conventions are or what emotions people feel. They seem to treat their moral claims as having some kind of force greater than assertions about conventions or emotions. If abortion fails to cohere with American social conventions, or if it stimulates negative emotions in certain observers, exactly why is that supposed to convince a pregnant woman who does not want a baby to carry the child to term anyway?

Perhaps my questions are naive, and perhaps the moral anti-realists have some sort of sophisticated answers to them. I only report how things seem to me at first glance. At first glance, one would think that modern philosophy's discovery—if that is what it is—that morality is subjective, illusory, or otherwise non-objective would have a profound impact on how we think and talk about moral issues; yet those who embrace the alleged discovery in one instant seem to forget about it the next, devoting almost no thought to what the implications might be for the practice of moral argument, exhortation, and so forth. A simple explanation suggests itself: perhaps most avowals of anti-realism are fundamentally *insincere*. In the context of an abstract philosophy discussion, we *say* morality is unreal, and we may even tell ourselves that we believe that. But what we really believe is revealed more by the way we talk about morality in concrete situations and by the way we order our lives according to moral principles than by what we say in the philosophy room.

But it is not as simple as that. Sometimes moral anti-realism *does* affect how we talk about moral issues. People will argue that the government should not 'legislate morality' because morality is subjective. Or that we should not try to prevent female circumcision because morality is culturally relative. Or that we should refrain from judging others, or that a teacher should not presume to teach moral principles, because no objective moral truths are known. Of course, most professional philosophers would be embarrassed to hear such arguments. If morality is subjective, it does not follow that the government should not legislate it; what follows is that the government should legislate morality if doing so accords with the legislators' subjective preferences. If morality is culturally relative, it does not follow that we should not interfere with the customs of other cultures; what follows is that we should interfere with other cultures if doing so accords with our customs. If no objective moral truths are known, it does not follow that we should refrain from judging others or from teaching moral principles; what follows is that we do not know whether it is objectively true that we should judge others or teach moral principles. All three arguments mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph seem to proceed by unconsciously