

Morality as Both Objective and Subjective: Baumgarten's Way to Moral Realism and Its Impact on Kant

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abstract: In § 37 of the *Initia*, Baumgarten provides important qualifications to the controversial notion of 'objective morality', which had long been at the centre of the dispute between realists like Wolff and his adversaries. The chapter shall examine how he construes his view of morality in §§ 36-38 with a specific focus on the central § 37. I shall analyse that section, first considering how Baumgarten understands the key notion of 'objective morality' and how he argues for it, focusing both on its relational character and its connection with God's will. Then I will examine the last, and arguably most surprising of the implications that he draws *per negativum* from the main claim, namely that affirming objective morality does not amount to rule out what Baumgarten calls 'subjective morality'. Finally, I will briefly consider how Baumgarten's distinctive way to take side in the Wolffian camp in that dispute reflects, through the close dialogue with the *Elements* in Kant's private notes and lectures, on the development of Kant's own views in practical philosophy.

1. Introduction

In the pivotal first chapter of Baumgarten's *Elements of First Practical Philosophy*, section 37 catches the attention of the reader for its tone and complexity. There Baumgarten maintains that it must be acknowledged that actions have *as such* moral worth, that is, that they possess what he calls "objective morality". The section is striking for this bold main claim as well as for the way it is spelled out. For Baumgarten stresses that it does *not* commit him to a series of further claims that *prima facie* would appear to follow from it. Thereby he points out that the notion of objective morality is *not* to be taken to entail that the moral worth of actions is such as can be determined by considering them in isolation, independently from every relation either to the whole of nature or to God's will.

This bold claim represents Baumgarten's way of taking a stance in the long-standing dispute that had divided German philosophers in two rather neatly opposing fronts for more than three decades by the time his *Elements* was published. The very terms in which he articulates his position are a clear indication to that effect. "Objective morality" is the distinctive phrase that was used to characterize the Wolffian rationalist view that the moral worth of actions does not depend on any act of will, even on the imposition of the divine will.

As Wolff himself had put it, *moralitas obiectiva* is the name for the “truth” that “the reason why an action is good or evil is to be found in the nature and essence of the human being”.¹ In his *Philosophical Lexicon*, Johann Georg Walch helpfully summarized the ensuing discussion as a quarrel between defenders of theological voluntarism and those who took up a view that had gone out of fashion at that time, namely that the morality of actions is ontologically independent.² In Walch’s eyes, this is a Scholastic view, which is thus appropriately phrased in Scholastic terms: the Wolffians, holding that view, are advocates of *moralitas obiectiva*. On the opposite side, Wolff employs the same label when referring approvingly to the “Scholastics” and their notion of *moralitas obiectiva*.³ In these terms Wolff and his opponents take opposite stances to what is classically known as the Euthyphro Dilemma. In § 37 of the *Elements*, Baumgarten’s distinctive way to dealing with this issue emerges as a position that combines the official defense of the core of the Wolffian view with significant additions.

Now, besides the first sentence, in which Baumgarten (unsurprisingly) endorses the Wolffian-Scholastic view, § 37 includes important caveats that aim to clarify how that view is to be understood, in order to prevent any misunderstandings.⁴ In this light, that section has a significant structural similarity to another important section in the *Elements*, namely § 71, in which Baumgarten analogously observes that his views on natural law do *not* entail a number of implications that might be easily associated with it. In both cases Baumgarten maintains a definite view, while at the same time adding that the relevant claim does not involve several further claims to which the advocates of that view are usually assumed to be committed. Sections structured that way aim to show that, properly construed, the view of the rationalist camp is in fact broader than most would suspect, so that it is able to accommodate important insights on which the opposite camp insists. In § 37, Baumgarten maintains that the notion of objective morality not only does not amount to a rejection of the view that God’s will provides its sufficient ground, but also does not dismiss the apparently antithetical conception of “subjective morality.” This is all the more surprising, since *moralitas obiectiva* and *moralitas subiectiva* were commonly employed as contrasting, mutually-exclusive labels for the two camps in the debate.⁵ In this respect, § 37 is paradigmatic of Baumgarten’s overall integrative strategy.⁶ An important part of its meaning lies in how Baumgarten refers to a debate that he makes *ipso facto* more complex, moving beyond its original shape.

¹ See Wolff 1726, § 137, 392; my translation.

² See Walch, article “Moralität”, in Walch 1733, 1839.

³ See Wolff 1726, § 137, 392. On the general debate see Grote 2017, chap. 1.

⁴ Meier, whose *Universal Practical Philosophy* closely follows Baumgarten’s *Elements*, presents roughly the same caveats remarks in §§ 54-56, observing that such clarifications are needed because “the disputes of the scholars” have made the central claim “confused” and generated “a great amount of false thoughts” on the matter at issue (Meier 1764, § 54, 108).

⁵ See e.g., still in the 1760s, rather close to the publication of Baumgarten’s *Elements*, the survey in Seydlitz 1765, §§ 100 ff., which contrasts advocates of objective morality to those of subjective morality.

⁶ The integrative character of Baumgarten’s general outlook has been repeatedly stressed by Schwaiger (see e.g. Schwaiger 2011, 27-29, 118-126). See also Grote 2017, chap. 4.

Moreover, the main claim of § 37 and the appended clarifications also deserve attention because of their place in the overall argument of the *Elements*. The propositions presented in that section, along with the definitions of § 36 and the implications drawn in § 38 connect Baumgarten's treatment of the goodness of actions (§§ 32-35) to the final part of Chapter 1, in which he puts forward his formulas of the moral imperatives (§§ 39-49). The view defended in §§ 36-38 makes that delicate transition possible, as it explains how the objective moral worth of actions can go together with, in fact even requires, their being connected to the imposition of a superior will.⁷ In this respect, too, the brief, but incisive treatment of objective morality represents a distinctive aspect of Baumgarten's account of the foundations of practical philosophy.

These three features of § 37 provide the main reasons for devoting closer attention to that transition in the *Elements*. To properly appraise its significance, in the following I shall examine how Baumgarten construes his view of morality in §§ 36-38 with a specific focus on the central § 37. I shall first consider how he understands and argues for the key notion of "objective morality." Then I will analyze the last, and arguably most surprising of the implications that he draws *per negativum* from the main claim, namely that affirming objective morality does not amount to a rejection of what Baumgarten calls "subjective morality." Finally, I will briefly examine how Baumgarten's distinctive way of taking sides in the Wolffian camp reverberates through the close dialogue with the *Elements* in Kant's private notes and lectures, thereby deeply influencing the development of the latter's own views in practical philosophy.

2. A New Take on the "Scholastic" Objective Morality as a Relational Property

The main claim in §37 is that we must attribute objective morality to actions, that is, we must appraise them as good or evil in themselves, independently from the imposition of a superior will that gives them that worth. This entails that even one who is not willing to accept the existence of God must nevertheless recognize that moral actions have objective moral worth. In accordance with the traditional vocabulary, Baumgarten equates "objective morality" with "perseity before the will of God [*perseitas ante voluntatem Dei*]" (§ 37), thereby making his commitment to the so-called Scholastic view explicit beyond any possible doubt. Up to the first sentence of § 37, thus, the *Elements* would seem to provide nothing more than a resolute restatement of the traditional Wolffian view. The five following points that make up the rest of the section, however, show that Baumgarten's aim is in fact to offer a richer

⁷ Despite their importance, those sections of the *Elements* have not attracted much attention, to the best of my knowledge. Schwaiger (2021, 61-63) has considered them with a specific focus on the meaning of the notion of 'morality'. While Grote has convincingly shown how Baumgarten embraces a few points made by Wolff's critics such as J.L. Zimmermann and J.G. Walch (see Grote 2017, chap. 4), he has not given consideration to how Baumgarten understands the central idea of objective morality, nor to how he introduces subjective morality.

conception of what objective morality consists in, thereby putting the contrast with the opponents of the Wolffian in a different light.

In the second part of § 37, Baumgarten suggests that defending the view that actions have moral worth *as such*, prior to any command, even from God's will (hereafter, the "Objective Morality Claim", for the sake of brevity), does not have the implications the opponents of that view usually point at. More precisely, Baumgarten suggests in § 37 that the rationalist view does *not* amount to holding that the morality of actions lies in, or has its foundations, in their specific intrinsic properties, although the talk of *perseitas* and good or evil actions *per se* could very well give that impression. The first four of the five points making up the second part of § 37 articulate that general idea.⁸

The first clarification that Baumgarten considers necessary to avoid misconstrual of the 'Scholastic' view he defends, in fact, is that the Objective Morality Claim does not imply "that actions external to every nexus, even the nexus with perfection and their own implications, are already considered good or evil" (§ 37). If we maintain that actions are good or evil *per se*, prior to any possible command, the thought that goodness and badness are features that can be attributed to them considered in isolation seems to suggest itself. Goodness and badness would then be construed as (something like) intrinsic properties. This way of understanding the Objective Morality Claim would motivate one of the main objections of its opponents, that is, that 'good' and 'evil' as non-reducible properties become obscure words, as goodness and badness seem to be presented as *qualitates occultae* of sorts.⁹ However, to Baumgarten's eyes, that is but a misunderstanding of the Objective Morality Claim, as follows from the definitions given in § 33 and § 36: actions are good and evil prior to any command, but nevertheless only with regard to their connection to perfection.¹⁰ In fact, the elucidations in § 37 unfold a notion already advanced in § 36, where morality is defined precisely in relational terms, namely as the "relation and convenience [*respectus et habitudo*] of a free action to perfection"

⁸ I shall comment on the first two points here, on the following two in the next section, and on the fifth in § 4. Similarly, Meier (1764) presents the first four remarks in § 54 and the equivalent to Baumgarten's fifth remark in § 56.

⁹ See Walch 1733, 1842: "the Scholastic doctrine is very obscure, as it delivers empty words without real concepts".

¹⁰ On Baumgarten's understanding of perfection, which I cannot examine here, see Schwaiger 2011, 162-165.

(§ 36; compare § 82 and Baumgarten 1763, § 54).¹¹ Thus, in Baumgarten's view, good and evil cannot be conceived of as intrinsic properties, as they are essentially relational.¹²

The train of thought initiated in the first point of § 37 is further pursued in the (on the face of it, less perspicuous) second point. Baumgarten remarks that on the view that he defends morality is not “only in the intellect like some, but who knows what, thought entity [*ens rationis*]” (§ 37). If goodness or badness are construed as specific properties that are taken to be possible, but cannot in fact be determined as to their existence, then that would boil down to construing them as mere fictions, inviting again the objection of obscurity. Here Baumgarten refers to § 62 of his *Metaphysics*, which defines a non-entity precisely in those terms.¹³ If objective morality were to be understood that way, that would entail that the moral predicates ‘good’ and ‘bad’ would be merely fictional or mental entities, since they would denote qualities that are *per se* only as lacking connection with anything else.¹⁴ But then again, that has already been ruled out by presenting goodness and badness as relational properties of actions. Because they lie in the connection of actions “with perfection and their own implications”, the notions of good and bad are not mere representations that could turn out to be merely abstract thoughts, which the mind would apply to actions only in playing a pointless game. The goodness and badness of action can very well be determined as to their *existence* because they consist in a relation to human nature and reality at large.

¹¹ Here I do not follow Fugate and Hymers's translation of the *Elements*, which renders *respectus et habitudo* with ‘the respect and habituation.’ Aware of the terminological difficulty, Fugate and Hymers add the remark that “[b]y habituation, Baumgarten clearly means that one's morality (i.e. morality, subjectively considered) is one's condition or character with respect to perfection” (BIP, 51, fn. 88; compare BIP, 7: “Morality is the habituation towards perfection in action”). That does not seem to match the specific context of Baumgarten's definition, though. The topic at issue is not an *agent's* conscious attitude or consistency in a certain way of conduct, which yield a habit, but the moral quality of *token actions*. In fact, the meaning of ‘*habitudo*’ in Scholastic Latin is not anything like ‘habit’ (*habitus*), but very close to ‘relation’, more specifically a relation of purposiveness or suitability (see e.g. Penner 2013, 3), which I try to render here with ‘convenience.’ Thus, unlike a habit, a *habitudo* can be ascribed to things, while habits are ascribed to agents. Baumgarten's phrasing clearly shows that the term is understood in that meaning: “*respectus sive habitudo*” is virtually a hendiadys, which puts an emphasis on the purposive character of the relation. Note that also Baumgarten's *Metaphysics* gives clear indication in that sense. There he provides the following definition: “The respective determinations of possible things are *respects* [*respectus*] (habituations [*habitudines*], *ta pros ti*, relations in a broad sense, either external or internal)” (* . § 37). ‘*Habitudo*’ is thus to be taken as roughly synonymous with ‘relation.’ Accordingly, Meier, whose work closely follows the *Elements** of his teacher Baumgarten, defines morality (*Sittlichkeit*) of actions as “their relation [*Beziehung*] to the perfection or imperfection of the human being” (Meier 1764, § 50, 102). Aichele's rendering of *habitudo* with *Beziehung* can thus better convey the proper meaning of the term (see Baumgarten 2018, 55). Quite the same holds true for § 82 of the *Elements*, to which Fugate and Hymers appropriately refer in their annotation.

¹² See *Initia*, § 36: “Good free actions are related to perfection as means”.

¹³ See *Met.*, § 62: “A *non-being* (negative, cf. §54) would be something possible but not determinable with regard to existence (§61). But this is impossible, and if it appears to be a being, it is a *fictional being* (a being of reasoning reason)”.

¹⁴ In this regard, Meier invokes the risk of a sort of moral idealism implied by that misunderstanding of objective morality (or internal morality, in his vocabulary): “For, if one would maintain that, should no rational beings represent themselves a free action as morally good or evil, then no action would be good or evil, then one could just as well conclude that nothing would be actual if there were no thinking beings who represent something to themselves. Consequently, one could just as well infer that everything exists in thoughts” (Meier 1764, § 54, 109 f.).

Notably, the thought, central to Baumgarten's view, that morality is essentially relational also justifies his terminological choice in those sections. When he discusses the matter at issue giving the notion of objective morality centre stage, Baumgarten distinguishes himself from Wolff and most Wolffians, including his teacher Heinrich Koehler. All of them had rather employed the notion of 'internal (or intrinsic) morality' (*innere Sittlichkeit, moralitas intrinseca*), which they take to be synonymous with 'objective morality'.¹⁵ A few years later, Baumgarten's pupil Meier would have done the same as well.¹⁶ It is also remarkable that, while Baumgarten often suggests conceptual and terminological connections, adding to many terms further corresponding concepts in brackets, he conspicuously does *not* do so with regard to objective morality. We should thus assume that he does not consider the term as properly equivalent to 'internal morality' (*moralitas interna*) as opposed to 'external morality'. In fact, the label 'external' would denote a relational determination, while 'internal' would not include relations.¹⁷ But Baumgarten's main point is, on the contrary, that morality is to be articulated in terms of relations. Thus the label 'internal' would be misleading at best. It is precisely because objective morality is commonly conceived of as 'internal' that we need to focus on its profoundly relational character.

3. Objective Morality and God's Will

The insistence on the relational character of objective morality leads to Baumgarten's third point: the Objective Morality Claim is compatible with the thought that "the existence of morality in deeds [*in factis*]" *cannot* have "a sufficient ground outside the will of God" (§ 37). In fact, the Objective Morality Claim is not merely compatible with it, but requires support from the idea, as Baumgarten's reference to § 933 of his *Metaphysics* makes clear. There he had argued that the world goes back to God's perfect will.¹⁸ Although the objective moral quality of an action is independent of any prior command, even imposed by God's will, that quality is rooted, *through relations*, in the fabric of the world that has in God its ultimate sufficient ground. If the goodness and badness of actions lies in their relation to perfection, it can *exist* – that is, actions can actually be good or bad –, if and only if those relations hold.¹⁹ This, in turn,

¹⁵ See e.g. Thümmig 1726, § 12: "actiones aliae per se sunt bonae, aliae per se malae. Atque in eo consistit *intrinseca* actionum liberarum *moralitas*." See also Koehler 1738, § 327.

¹⁶ See Meier 1764, §§ 51 ff.

¹⁷ Baumgarten had equated objective with internal and subjective with external in § 29, with regard to obligation. He never does so with regard to morality.

¹⁸ See *Met.*, § 933: "God created this world most freely (§ 932). Therefore, he willed to create it (§ 893). He willed it efficiently (§ 671) and hence completely, because he is infallible (§ 879), and consequently from complete motives."

¹⁹ On the Baumgarten's conception of existence see *Met.*, § 55. See also Fugate 2018.

depends on the overall order or the world, which has its ultimate ground in God.²⁰ Thus, in Baumgarten's view, the Objective Morality Claim not only does not rule out, but in fact *requires* backing by, the thought that God's will is the ultimate sufficient ground of the world. With his third point, Baumgarten rejects what might be called 'independent moral realism', that is, the view that objective morality exists necessarily, independent from any act of God's will, which it in fact governs.²¹ On the contrary, Baumgarten argues, God's will is indispensable to the existence of objective morality, because objective morality exists necessarily in relations grounded on God's will.

At this point it has become clear that what Baumgarten is willing to grant to the atheist only a narrowly limited ability to cognize morality.²² His view on the matter is phrased, from a different angle, also in the fourth point. Other Wolffians are prepared to emphasise that, since the morality of actions is directly related to the features of human nature, even one who is not prepared to acknowledge the divine order of the world can grasp the essential moral properties of actions, that is, their "internal morality", and can thus become a virtuous person.²³ That is precisely what the fourth of Baumgarten's points in § 37 refrains from conceding. He stresses that the Objective Morality Claim does *not* entail "that all implications of free actions are determined through the nature of the action or agent *alone* (§ 33, BM § 408)" (§ 37; emphasis added). Baumgarten thus insists that referring to the features of human nature cannot be enough, because *objective* morality is to be properly grasped only with regard to the system of relations it is rooted in, which in turn cannot leave out the ultimate ground of that system, namely God. He supports his view by referring back to the section of the *Elements* in which Baumgarten had defined that the moral worth of action depends on the implications, or consequences (*consectaria*), of that action. What matters, now, is that Baumgarten holds that those consequences can be both natural and "chosen" (*arbitraria*), that is, depend on "the free choice [*arbitrium*] of someone" (§ 33). The connection of an action to its consequences, therefore, cannot be exhausted by considering only the features of human nature, without referring to God's will. Moreover, those connections are in fact part of a larger system, as the reference to *Metaphysics* § 408 suggests, where Baumgarten argues that all

²⁰ Analogously, Meier distinguishes between "next and immediate sufficient ground", which lies in human nature and the internal quality of its actions, and "the first sufficient ground of everything that is actual in the world", which lies in God's choice (Meier 1764, § 53, 107).

²¹ See Miller 2019, 207.

²² In his *Metaphysics* (§ 999), Baumgarten had defined "the (theoretical) atheist" as one who "denies the existence of God", in contrast to the "naturalist in the stricter sense", who denies divine revelation.

²³ See Meier 1764, § 53, 107: "when we attribute [...] all actions of human beings an internal and natural morality, we do not maintain anything but that they have a morality that has its next and immediate sufficient ground in human nature and the internal quality of all free human actions. Thus even if someone were an atheist, denying God's existence, if only he maintained that the human being has free will, he could, his denial of God notwithstanding, become properly convinced [*gründlich überzeugt*] that all his free actions are either internally morally good or internally morally evil". In his *Natural Law*, Meier goes as far as maintaining that the atheist could be "convinced of natural law [*Recht der Natur*] through the empirical method" (Meier 1767, § 8, 17; my emphasis).

elements of the world are interconnected.²⁴ Combined with the claim made *per negativum* in the third point of § 37, Baumgarten's fourth point about objective morality is that actions are good and evil by virtue of the network of connections with their consequences that is arranged by God's will.²⁵

In this light, even the first sentence of § 37 does not grant so much to the atheist as it might appear at first glance. It rather puts a *demand* on him: "Objective morality *must* be attributed [*tribuenda est*] to free determinations by the theoretical atheists themselves" (§ 37). Somehow reversing the more conciliatory view that the atheist *can* grasp features of the world that allow him to reach a certain grade of apprehension of morality, Baumgarten remarks that, properly speaking, *objective* morality pushes the atheist beyond the limits of his untenable position. If morality, as objective, is rooted in relations that bring together the overall order of the world, someone who is not prepared to recognise God as its ultimate ground cannot cognise objective morality as such either. An atheist can maybe appreciate some connections of certain actions to the perfection of some traits of human nature, but that is only scratching the surface of objective morality, which remains unattainable to him in its entirety. Objective morality "*must* be attributed" to action even by the atheist, who however would thus be committed to give up his atheism. In accordance with this take on the issue, Baumgarten, unlike Wolff, never refers approvingly to Grotius' 'impossible hypothesis' that morality would hold even if there were no God.²⁶

Thus Baumgarten has a viable response to a further objection of Wolff's adversaries, namely that only the theological voluntarist that holds a divine command theory can properly account for the morality of actions, without ending up in a regress, since he can point at a first cause that has made some actions good and some bad.²⁷ On his part, Baumgarten intends to provide such an account, without making morality dependent from anything else and thereby contingent, that is, without giving up genuine *objective* morality. In his view, the ultimate cause of morality is the same as nature's, that is, God's will. It is God's will which sustains the features of human nature and its perfection, in relation to which the morality of actions is determined.

²⁴ See *Met.*, § 408: "The simultaneous monads of this world mutually determine each other's place [...] (§ 281, 285); hence, they mutually influence each other (§ 211)".

²⁵ Note that this entails that Baumgarten cannot actually endorse the talk of *perseitas*, although he employs that term in brackets after introducing the notion of objective morality, as I have mentioned earlier: "morality is attributed as *objective* to actions either insofar as they are seen as good or evil per se (perseity before the will of God, etc.)" (§ 36). 'Perseitas' would denote what is purely self-standing and can be considered independently from any relation *at all*. But that would counter Baumgarten's idea of universal connection, as put forward in *Met.*, § 408. The fact that the term 'perseitas' *never* occurs in Baumgarten's *Metaphysics* strongly suggests that he uses it in the *Initia* only to make reference to the debate on the foundations of morality, without actually endorsing its traditional meaning. On Baumgarten's use of '*per se*', however, compare *Met.*, § 15. (Thanks to Courtney Fugate for pressing me on this.)

²⁶ See e.g. Wolff 1720, § 5, 7, and Wolff 1726, 395.

²⁷ See Walch 1733, 1841.

Thus the compressed argument sketched in the remarks 1 to 4 of § 37, supported by the important sections of the *Metaphysics* that Baumgarten refers to, points out that the objective morality of actions should not be construed as an intrinsic property, or with regard to intrinsic properties, of actions, although that would appear to be the most natural way for actions to be recognised as good or bad *per se*. Rather, Baumgarten argues, morality lies in relations, primarily to human nature, and mediately to the entire order of the world as sustained by the action of God's will. That result brings Baumgarten to the fifth and most surprising of the claims in § 37, namely that *objective* morality does not rule out *subjective* morality. I shall thus turn to that last point.

4. Subjective Morality: The Prescriptive Character of Moral Demands

The last of the five crucial elucidations given in § 37 formulates the outcome of the revision of the Objective Morality Claim articulated in the first four points. At the end of his reworking of the implications of that claim, Baumgarten simply observes that, since holding that there is an objective morality does not entail any of the consequences examined up to that point, then (“hence”) it does not amount to maintain “that there is no subjective morality” either (§ 37). In the previous section he had distinguished between the morality that is to attributed to actions “insofar as they are seen as good or evil *per se*” and the morality attributed to them “insofar as they are good or evil because of someone’s free will” (§ 36). If, as I have noted above, Baumgarten’s choice to focus on the notion of objective morality, instead of the more common talk of ‘internal morality’, is already unusual, it was even more so to maintain that the two can go together. In fact, however, Baumgarten argues for more than the mere possibility of that connection.

The very laconic phrasing of the fifth point in § 37 (only four words in the original Latin) requires clarification. That remark would *prima facie* seem to mean that subjective morality must not be ruled out. Analogously, the first sentence of § 38 reads that “subjective morality, through the positing of objective morality, *is not denied* even in actions that are good or evil *per se*, and it does not deny objective morality” (§ 38; my emphasis). The carefully phrased sentence would seem merely to allow that attributing objective morality to actions does not deny that there is room for subjective morality too. The reference to § 36 and the previous four points, though, make clear that Baumgarten argues for a stronger and more meaningful view. Once the elucidations in § 37 have explained that objective morality does not rule out, in fact *requires*, that the moral worth of the same actions is to be related back to God's will, then it becomes apparent that the distinction in § 36 does not differentiate between cases, but between perspectives from which genuine moral worth is attributed to actions.²⁸ Crucially, though, those perspectives are not optional, but both apply to all actions, even to

²⁸ A similar view seems to be suggested by Baumgarten’s teacher Koehler. See Koehler 1738, § 411: “We shall note a double source of morality, springing from a different way to consider. For the morality of actions is referred either to their implications or to a law that represents their implications [*Annotemus duplicem fontem moralitatis, ex diverso modo considerandi oriundum. Moralitas enim actionum vel refertur ad consecraria earum, vel ad legem, consecraria repraesentantem*]”.

those that are *per se* good or bad. Besides § 37, the relevant background for that conclusion is provided by an elusive statement in § 33, which is bound to remain rather obscure in its original context, before the further development of the argument. There Baumgarten had remarked that the implications of actions are natural, as they are “more closely and adequately connected with a free determination through its nature and that of the subject to whom it belongs, and are natural” or “chosen”, if they are connected with the action “through the free choice of someone”. However, since the implications can be “connected through both”, “it is wrong to conclude that if the implication is natural, it for that reason is utterly not chosen, and that if it is chosen, then for that reason it is utterly not natural” (§ 33). God’s will, thus, gives a teleological order to the elements of the world that make the morality of actions both objective and subjective.

In Baumgarten’s actual, stronger view, thus, the Objective Morality Claim entails that subjective morality *must* be attributed to actions as well, that is, that their objective morality *must* be connected with their subjective morality: they are good or bad *per se* just *in view of the fact that* “they are good or evil because of someone’s free will” (§ 36), namely God’s. Recall that the third remark in § 37 has established that the *existence* of morality (where ‘morality’ was appropriately *not* qualified) requires a connection to God’s will. In the terms that we have now reached, therefore, that means that morality *exists* – that is, actions actually have moral worth (or must be recognised as having such) – only as *both* objective *and* subjective, that is, as both belonging to the very nature of things (primarily human nature) and as sustained by God’s own will.²⁹

The epistemological implications of that claim are made explicit in § 38. If morality has those two faces, it can be properly cognised from both sides: “it is valid to conclude with certainty, due to the choice [*arbitrium*] of God, from a subjective morality known from elsewhere to a similar objective morality”, as much as “it is valid to conclude with certainty, in regard to the choice of God, from an objective morality known from elsewhere to a subjective one” (§ 38).³⁰ Importantly, the path from nature (that provides evidence of objective morality) brings us beyond the domain of nature, that is, to our equate of it with the subjective morality of the relevant actions with regard to God’s will. The cognition of morality through natural relations ultimately leads to the domain of natural theology. Notably, this does not contrast with Baumgarten’s initial definition of practical philosophy as “the science of the obligations of a person that are to be known without faith” (§ 1), since natural theology shares the same feature: it is “the science of God, insofar as he can be known without faith” (*Met.*, § 800). Accordingly, “whatever a creature understands through its own nature about the mind of God according to universal nature, it knows through divine revelation (§ 982), which is natural (§ 469)” (*Met.*, § 983). A case in point seems to be exactly what one can infer from objective morality with regard to subjective morality. Once again, after the analogous point in the first

²⁹ A similar claim had been already defended by Baumgarten about obligation: “Since some obligations can likewise be more closely and adequately known from nature and choice, the obligation to one and the same thing can be simultaneously objective and subjective, or natural and chosen” (§ 30).

³⁰ Baumgarten makes the same point again later on in § 82 in terms of natural laws and divine positive laws.

sentence of § 36, the atheist's ability to cognise morality is acknowledged and yet at the same time its limits are clearly marked, since he would either have to refrain from making the "certain inference" or be compelled to give up his atheistic view.

By suggesting that the Objective Morality Claim entails that morality is at the same time subjective with regard to God's will, Baumgarten provides his response to a further charge raised against the Wolffian view, namely that the mere notion of objective (that is, internal or natural, for most Wolffians) morality is not sufficient to account for obligation.³¹ In Baumgarten's view, the source of the bindingness of moral requirements does not merely lie in natural obligation as rooted in the nature of things, as Wolff had maintained.³² Baumgarten now suggests that the very nature of things (primarily human nature) is originally normative because it is at the same time sustained by God's will. The Anti-Wolffians observed that obligation lies in limiting freedom to the pursuit of a final end, which cannot happen merely within objective morality.³³ Now the new take on objective morality proposed by Baumgarten provides exactly that: insofar as it is at the same time subjective, that is, is sustained by God's will, objective morality displays a teleological orientation towards a specific final end, namely perfection.

Now, on this view, as both objective and subjective, morality is essentially prescriptive. It is, I believe, a stronger view than it might appear at first. By emphasising the mutual implication between objective morality and subjective morality Baumgarten certainly prepares the stage for addressing the relation between the non-contingent moral worth of certain actions and the corresponding explicit norms. An important part of Baumgarten's account is that practical norms (both ethical and juridical) are grounded and authoritative insofar as they draw on objective morality (see *Initia*, § 62). That sort of connection would only be accidental, though: any given norm should find its proper foundation in objective morality, thereby possessing subjective morality, but that would *not* by itself prove that objective morality necessarily needs a corresponding subjective morality. That possibility is not viable, though, because of the mutual implication between objective and subjective morality. There cannot be subjective morality without objective morality, but also the other way around, there is no objective morality without a corresponding subjective morality. The Objective Morality Claim implies, on Baumgarten's view, that subjective morality *must* be attributed to all actions as well, if only by virtue of the connection to God's will. Thus Baumgarten argues not only that morality might appropriately yield concrete norms,³⁴ nor does he suggest, as Kant would later, that the prescriptive character of moral norms depends on the limits of the faculties of finite beings like humans. Rather, on Baumgarten's view, morality is essentially prescriptive, that is, it *must* be spelled out in norms.

³¹ See e.g. Walch 1733, 1841 f..

³² See e.g. Wolff 1720, § 9.

³³ See Walch 1733, 1842.

³⁴ Something of the sort seems to be suggested by Schwaiger's remark on this point: "Mit dieser Erweiterung von Wolffs Doktrin trägt Baumgarten der Tatsache Rechnung, dass sich Sittlichkeit stets auch in der persönlichen Einstellung zu konkreten geschichtlich-gesellschaftlichen Moralnormen niederschlägt" (Schwaiger 2021, 62 f.).

Baumgarten's distinctive emphasis on obligation from the outset of the *Elements* entails a modified understanding of objective morality that goes beyond the Wolffian view.³⁵ Drawing on Wolffian materials, Baumgarten adds with the claims of §§ 36-38 an important argumentative step to the common Wolffian view. If we consider how Wolff's view unfolds both in the *German Ethics* and the later *Philosophia Practica Universalis*, we notice that he starts with an account of the features of free actions, arguing then that they are good or bad in themselves because of their natural features. That natural morality is presented as the source of obligation and the content of the law of nature.³⁶ Baumgarten's careful treatment of objective morality finds no direct correspondence in the steps of Wolff's argumentative path, not to mention the notion of subjective morality. Unlike the (other) Wolffians, Baumgarten begins with examining the notion of obligation, which determines the overall outlook of the entire *Elements*.³⁷ Only after having established how obligation is to be conceived of in its different components, he considers how the goodness and badness of actions can be construed in that light (§§ 32-35). Then, unlike the (others) Wolffians, Baumgarten needs to show where proper obligation has its foundations and why in turn those foundations yield prescriptions. This is achieved with the thesis that the Objective Morality Claim involves that subjective morality *must* be attributed to all actions as well.

Thus the conclusion that morality is to be spelled out in norms justifies the role that the sections on (objective and subjective) morality (§§ 36-38) play in the overall argument of the first chapter of Baumgarten's *Elements*. Only once he has established the claims that I have examined so far, Baumgarten can introduce the main imperatives in which morality is spelled out: "do the good", "seek perfection", "do what is the best for you to do", "live according to nature". These fundamental prescriptions are the main focus of the last sections of the foundational chapter of his entire practical philosophy (§§ 39-49). There he simply observes that "the imperatives in the practical disciplines indicate that the human being is under an obligation [*significant, hominem obligari*]" (§ 39; translation modified).³⁸ They express the fact that the "human being is obligated to commit the good, and hence to omit evil". That requirement, however, does not merely follow from the fact that human beings are subjected to a specific commanding authority. That demand primarily articulates the existence of morality as sustained by God's will, that is, as both objective and subjective.

5. Impact on Kant

The sections of Baumgarten's *Elements* that I have examined so far also play a role in the decades-long dialogue with that work that crucially contributed to the development of Kant's

³⁵ Schwaiger 2021, 62 f., sees here an "Erweiterung von Wolffs Doktrin" on Baumgarten's part.

³⁶ See Wolff 1720, §§ 1-20, Wolff 1738, chaps 1-2 (§§ 9-114 and §§ 115-). See also the compact survey in Wolff 1726, § 137. Compare, e.g., Thümmig 1726, Part I, Chaps. 1-2; Gottsched 1734, chaps. 1-2 (§§ 14-29).

³⁷ See Schwaiger 2011; Bacin 2015, 19-24.

³⁸ On Baumgarten's notion of imperatives and its impact on Kant see Schwaiger 1999, 165 ff.

views in practical philosophy.³⁹ Their impact, however, is partially ambivalent. On the one hand, Kant focuses on the distinction between an objective and a subjective side of morality, but does not accept it in Baumgarten's terms. On the other, he draws on those sections with regard to the connection between objective morality and bindingness. The latter aspect comes closer to the spirit of Baumgarten's claims, without however subscribing to them.

We can best follow both lines of Kant's considerations on §§ 36-38 examining two sets of the students' notes from his moral philosophy classes, which provide extended comments on that matter. In lectures from the mid-1770s, Kant first addresses the thought that "we can regard all objective morality as the subjective morality of the divine will" (Kaehler, 40; cf. XXVII 263). Unlike Baumgarten, however, he immediately stresses that the same does not hold true with regard to the human will. Thus he ends up apparently rejecting the central distinction put forward by Baumgarten in §§ 36-38: "if we distinguish morality into objective and subjective, this is wholly absurd, for all morality is objective, only the condition of its application can be subjective" (Kaehler 41; cf. XXVII 264). Differently from Baumgarten, then, 'subjective morality' indicates here for Kant the morality of which a subject is capable, depending on his or her powers. The distinction between subjective and objective thereby assumes a different shape, as it distinguishes a necessary standard and from the way in which that standard can be met according to the constitutive conditions of specific subjects. Kant's distance from Baumgarten becomes apparent when Kant is eventually able to phrase his view on moral motivation in terms that are then only superficially similar to Baumgarten's, characterising the moral incentive as "morality [*Sittlichkeit*] itself subjectively considered as an incentive" (V 76).

Accordingly, Kant puts aside Baumgarten's thought of the mutual implication between objective and subjective morality, to focus only on the need that the former provides as the proper ground for the latter.⁴⁰ He writes in private notes: "The *moralitas subjectiva* is based on the objective. Because it is good to obey, I obey" (XIX 125; cf. XIX 22). This follows from Kant's modified construal of the distinction: Objective morality is the necessary and immutable standard on which every realisation according to the constitution of the faculties of a subject is to be measured. Now, since the full correspondence between the necessary standard and its realisation is only possible in the divine will, Kant can in fact acknowledge that objective morality amounts to God's subjective morality. Thus Kant is reported to have commented on those sections at the time of the *Groundwork*:

Can we regard objective morality alone as one that arises from the divine will? – Yes, for since the divine will is the idea of the most perfect will, we can say the most perfect will commands it. (XXIX 616)⁴¹

³⁹ On the main features of that dialogue, with references to further literature, see Bacin 2015, and the introduction and the materials collected in Fugate and Hymers' translation of the *Elements*.

⁴⁰ In one peculiar case, Kant experiments with employing the distinction between objective and subjective morality to distinguish "degrees of the practical worth of actions": see XIX 301 f.

⁴¹ For the new critical edition of the *Moral Mroogovius II* and the English translation, see Kant (forthcoming).

However, Kant refuses to regard that correspondence as a mutual implication. Only objective morality is genuinely necessary and hence it is independent from the other. Even in God's will, subjective morality would be unjustified if it were not backed up by the objective. To Kant's eyes, Baumgarten's view is affected by the same weakness as theological accounts.⁴² Thus Kant goes on observing:

it does not follow from this that moral laws must be derived from the divine will; in that case, we would not be able to cognize them as necessary. [...] If we have an objective morality we have no need of one that is subjective. Objective morality cannot be derived from subjective morality. If I can see from the nature of the matter that an action is moral I do not need the divine will. (XXIX 616)

Kant thereby rejects Baumgarten's insistence that objective morality should be regarded at the same time as subjective morality because God's will is its ultimate sufficient ground. Nevertheless, that conception gave expression to the underlying thought that morality must be conceived of as necessary and, at the same time, connected to the corresponding determination of a will. As Kant's appraisal of the prior views brings more and more to light, an adequate account of morality should explain both that moral demands cannot have merely positive character and, still, they are essentially binding.⁴³ In this regard, Baumgarten's view could be seen as a case in point, as it gives centre stage to that characteristic dual aspect of morality. His remarks on the issue could display an acute awareness of the need to account for both the foundations of moral normativity (or evaluative properties) and its (their) constitutive prescriptive force. In this respect, Baumgarten's *Elements* could provide Kant with an example of a view that aimed at overcoming the weaknesses affecting traditional rationalist views, that is, primarily the inability to account for the bindingness of morality.

Now, if Baumgarten's view could have been of help in identifying the central issue and the shortcomings of the previous discussion, for Kant it did not provide a viable solution, as we gather from his comments. Thus the account of morality that Kant developed did not follow the lines suggested by Baumgarten's. Most significantly, Kant was not prepared to endorse the strongly teleological view of nature that is integral to Baumgarten's account, which centres on the order sustained by God's will. If anything, Kant moved in the opposite direction. While Baumgarten aimed to suggest a more convincing way to regard normative properties as rooted in the nature of things, Kant eventually argued that what is morally relevant cannot have its foundations within nature, precisely because that would rule out the objectivity of morality (i.e., its necessity and immutability). Accordingly, one of Kant's notes to § 36 stresses, against Baumgarten: "Goodness is either moral or physical" (XIX 21). Kant endorses the Objective Morality Claim, but construes it not in terms of properties or natural relations, but of laws: the moral worth of actions is necessary and immutable because of their (non-natural) relation to the moral law.⁴⁴

⁴² On this see Bacin 2018a, 55-57.

⁴³ On Kant's appraisal of prior rationalist accounts of morality, see Bacin 2018a.

⁴⁴ On how Kant's account unfolds from the aim of presenting a hybrid view along these lines, see Bacin 2018b.

6. Concluding Remarks

A closer look at §§ 36-38 of the *Elements* thus reveals important aspects of Baumgarten's distinctive way of embracing the moral realism of Wolffian rationalism. Baumgarten aims to defend the view advocated by prior Wolffians, but he does so in original terms. Instead of suggesting that actions are *per se* good or evil simply because of some essential attributes, he proposes to construe their moral worth in relational terms. This view opens up a broader perspective, in which the morality of actions is determined only within the larger context of the teleological structure of reality. This in turn leads to understand their worth as belonging to the overall order of the world supported by God's will. Thus, he argues, objective morality must be regarded, at the same time, as subjective. Because of that dual character, morality is at the same time necessary and immediately prescriptive.

Baumgarten thereby moves between what I have earlier called independent moral realism and divine command theory. In his view, God is the metaphysical ground of moral properties, but indirectly, namely in a way that depends upon the overall structure of the world. Thus moral properties can indeed be considered *per se*, but only when the focus is only on their relations with the connected implications in nature. That cannot but remain a partial and superficial consideration, though, as it misses the proper ground of the normative importance of those connections. The atheist – whom we might probably also call the 'naturalist', as he only accepts natural explanations – cannot but fail to account for the emergence of normative properties. In his account, Baumgarten tries to combine a Wolffian position with elements of a quasi-voluntarist account, in order to explain the fundamental bindingness of morality. On his view, neither horn of the Euthyphro dilemma is sufficient. Its solution is to find the proper way to combine both horns.

This proposal is presented in the *Elements* as an attempt to make a case for a Wolffian view, defending the Objective Morality Claim. Yet, because of its distinctive features, it can be seen as an attempt to move beyond the original terms of the debate. Four decades after the publication of Wolff's *German Ethics*, the ensuing discussion was worn out enough that merely taking a stance in one or the other camp was hardly reasonable or appropriate. Re-affirming one view or the other in their traditional terms could by then sound like nothing else than a verbal dispute.⁴⁵ Contributing to the debate required a new perspective on the issue, accommodating the desiderata of both factions. The hybrid, conciliatory character of Baumgarten's take is also a reaction to the state that the debate had reached by then. Also because of that character Baumgarten's distinctive treatment of objective morality could provide Kant with a thoughtful attempt at pursuing an integrative strategy in accounting for its most fundamental features, namely its necessity and bindingness.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See e.g. Ahlwardt 1752, § 765: "The whole quarrel as to whether morality depend on God's will or there is a *moralitas objectiva* is, in our view, a mere, useless battle of words".

⁴⁶ I should like to thank Courtney Fugate for his helpful remarks on a previous version of my chapter.

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