

Against Moral Truths

Abstract

I criticize the following three arguments for moral objectivism. 1. Since we assess moral statements, we can arrive at some moral truths (Thomson, 2006). 2. One culture can be closer to truths than another in moral matters because the former can be closer to truths than the latter in scientific matters (Pojman, 2008). 3. A moral judgment is shown to be true when it is backed up by reason (Rachels and Rachels, 2010). Finally, I construct a dilemma against the view that there are moral truths and we can move toward them.

Keywords: Cultural Relativism, Emotivism, Moral Justification, Moral Truths

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1. Introduction

Recently, the Korean government banned corporal punishment in schools. As a result, teachers can no longer use rods against unruly students in Korean schools. This new policy raised a heated debate between liberals and conservatives in Korea. Liberals claim that corporal punishment is right under no circumstance, whereas conservatives contend that it is right under certain circumstances. No agreement between the two parties is forthcoming. Such controversial moral disputes are what Harman calls "intractable moral disagreements" (2006: 8). Intractable moral disagreements raise interesting meta-ethical questions. Why is it difficult to reach agreement on the moral issue? Is it true or false that corporal punishment is wrong? Are there moral truths that transcend diverse cultures? What are we doing when we say that corporal punishment is wrong? Are we describing corporal punishment? Or are we merely expressing our negative emotion toward it? Does the property of being right or wrong exist in the world in the way that descriptive properties like mass, shape, size, and motion do?

If moral properties and facts inhabit the physical universe, how can we discover them? Different answers to these questions will be given by a moral objectivist, a cultural relativist, and an emotivist. Their answers are intricately related to one another, so criticizing moral objectivism, an aim of this paper, inevitably involves the discussion of cultural relativism and emotivism.

Cultural relativism holds that cultural approval is what makes an action moral, and cultural disapproval is what makes an action immoral. On this account, an action can be morally evaluated only in reference to a culture. Thus, corporal punishment is right or wrong, depending on what the frame of reference is. If the frame of reference is a conservative culture, corporal punishment is right. If it is a liberal culture, corporal punishment is wrong. Without reference to a culture, an action is neither right nor wrong. Also, whatever a culture approves of is right, so a culture is infallible concerning moral matters. It follows that neither conservatives nor liberals are incorrect vis-à-vis corporal punishment. There is no fact of the matter as to which culture is morally better than another. There are no moral truths that transcend diverse cultures.

In contrast, moral objectivism entails that there are trans-cultural moral truths. On this account, one culture is morally more correct than another, if the former is closer to moral truths than the latter, which implies that a culture is fallible concerning moral matters. Thus, cultural approval and moral truth come apart. Moral objectivism comprises the epistemological thesis that we can move toward moral truths, and the metaphysical thesis that moral properties and moral facts are parts of the physical universe. For example, the property of being right or wrong exists in the world. So does the moral fact that telling a lie is wrong. The moral judgment that telling a lie is wrong is true, if true, because it corresponds to the moral fact that telling a lie is wrong, just as the factual belief that the Earth is round is true because it corresponds to the fact that the Earth is round.¹ Consequently, on the moral objectivist account, there is no fundamental difference between moral and factual statements.

Last of all, emotivism maintains that there is a fundamental difference between moral and factual statements. A moral statement is merely an expression of emotion whereas a factual statement is a description of the world. To say that corporal punishment is moral is to merely express a positive emotion toward the action, and to say that corporal punishment is

immoral is to merely express a negative emotion toward the action. Given that an emotion is neither true nor false, a moral judgment is likewise neither true nor false, i.e., a moral judgment does not bear the property of being true or false. Consequently, neither the conservatives' judgment nor the liberals' judgment about corporal punishment is true or false. Also, according to emotivism, the world does not contain moral properties or moral facts. Normative properties and facts appear to dwell in the physical world, but on close inspection they do not.

Thomson (2006), Pojman (2008), and Rachels and Rachels (2010) advance brilliant and insightful arguments in support of moral objectivism. In this paper, I will raise difficulties against them, and then construct a dilemma against the moral objectivist view that there are moral truths. This discussion is not only interesting in its own right but also has important practical implications. If cultural relativism is true and moral objectivism is false, the US and China ought not to accuse each other of violating human rights. After all, if no culture is morally better than another, there would be no grounds for them to rebuke each other for being immoral. If emotivism is true and moral objectivism is false, the ultimate resolution of a moral dispute comes not when a moral property hidden in an act is disclosed to opposing cognizers but when they come to feel the same kind of emotion toward the act. After all, according to moral properties do not reside in the world, and emotion is all that there is to moral judgment. Thus, this paper has practical as well as theoretical import.

2. Critiques of Objectivist Arguments

2.1. The Argument from Moral Assessment

Thomson claims that it "is possible to find out about some moral sentences that they are true" (2006: 13). What led her to this optimistic epistemological thesis is the observation that we assess moral statements in our moral life, i.e., we attempt to figure out whether moral statements are true or false:

Moral Assessment Thesis: Moral Assessment is pointless unless it is possible to find out about some moral statements that they are true. (Thomson, 2006: 13)

Put differently, the attempt to determine whether moral statements are true or false would make sense only if it were possible to discover some moral truths. Thus, Thomson's argument for the optimistic view is that we can arrive at moral truths because we attempt to ascertain the truth-values of moral statements.

Is Thomson's argument convincing? In my view, from the fact that we assess statements, it does not follow that we can discover some truths. If we can discover some moral truths because we assess moral statements, then by the same token we should be able to discover some non-moral emotive truths and gustatory truths because we attempt to assess non-moral emotive statements and gustatory statements. Suppose, for example, that you and I have a dispute over whether snakes are creepy or cute, or whether alcohol is palatable or unpalatable. We attempt to determine whose judgments about snakes and alcohol are true. It does not follow, however, that it is possible to reveal the truth or falsity of the non-moral emotive judgment or the gustatory judgment. No matter what information you may adduce, it would not sway my judgments about snakes and alcohol. For example, even if you point out that a snake in front of you and me is not venomous, I would continue to believe that it is repulsive. Even if you point out that drinking alcohol harms my health, I would continue to think that it is palatable. Therefore, it is illegitimate to infer the attainability of some moral truths from our act of appraising moral statements.

Moreover, our act of assessing moral statements can be explained by the alternative hypothesis that we have the desire to propagate our moral views to others. On this psychological account, we attempt to ascertain the truth-values of moral statements not because we can determine whether they are true or false but because we want to convince others of our moral views. For example, Korean liberals provide reasons for thinking that corporal punishment is wrong because they want Korean conservatives to hold the same moral view as they do. The same kind of explanation can be given of the Korean conservatives' attempt to justify their moral view. Thus, Thomson's optimistic view and the just mentioned psychological hypothesis compete with each other vis-à-vis our act of assessing moral statements.

How should we adjudicate between the two hypotheses? The psychological hypothesis is simpler than the optimistic view because the former explains our act of assessing moral

statements without postulating the existence of metaphysically dubious items, viz., moral truths, properties, and facts. This case is analogous to the one involving near death experience (NDE). NDE is an experience that people have when they almost die. Surprisingly, after coming back alive, they tell a similar story: They went through a long tunnel, encountered a bright light at the end of it, experienced a feeling of euphoria, and saw the faces of their family and friends who previously died. Some claim that NDE is evidence for the existence of the world of the dead. Their hypothesis, however, is undercut by a simpler hypothesis: When people experience NDE, an extraordinary amount of endorphins is released in their brains. This alternative hypothesis explains NDE, thereby obviating the need to postulate a metaphysically suspicious item, viz., the world of the dead. We now have no reason to believe that the world of the dead is real. Similarly, we have no reason for thinking that there are moral truths, properties, and facts, because the psychological hypothesis eliminates the need to posit the metaphysically questionable moral items.

The preceding psychological hypothesis can explain away our ascription of descriptive predicates, such as 'true' and 'false,' to moral statements. We talk as if moral statements have truth-values. For examples, we say that it is true that corporal punishment is immoral, instead of just saying that corporal punishment is immoral. On the psychological account, we utter such locutions because we wish to persuade others of our moral views. The word 'true' is a rhetorical device to convince others of our moral views. We use the predicate to embellish our moral views so that they appear to be objective and descriptive. If a statement is true, we should accept it whether we like it or not. By saying that a moral statement is true, we are implicitly sending a message to others that our moral view is objective and descriptive, and hence it is over and beyond our personal feeling. In short, it is otiose to postulate the existence of moral truths to explain our ascription of descriptive predicates to moral statements.

So far I criticized Thomson's argument for moral objectivism. Note that in doing so, I did not appeal to emotivism. Let me now explore how an emotivist would react to Thomson's argument. According to the emotivist, we do not attempt to find out whether moral statements are true or false in the first place, for they are neither true nor false. A moral statement is incapable of being true or false because it is merely an expression of emotion, and an emotion

is not a kind of a mental property that can be true or false. Therefore, on the emotivist view, the phenomenon which Thomson attempted to explain with moral objectivism does not exist in the first place. Moral objectivism is a pointless hypothesis, as far as emotivism is concerned.

Then, what are we doing when we are engaged in argumentation over a moral issue? On the emotivist account, we are not trying to decide whether a moral statement is true or false but trying to get others to feel the same kind of emotion as we do concerning a moral issue. For example, conservatives claim that corporal punishment serves an educational purpose. Liberals reply that corporal punishment violates students' human rights. What they are doing is to attempt to have their opponents feel the same as they do concerning corporal punishment. They are not in the business of unveiling a moral property hidden in the act of corporal punishment. Thus, emotivism has the resources to account for moral argumentation.

2.2. The Argument from Truth in Scientific Matters

The liberal culture in Korea disapproves of corporal punishment, while the conservative culture in Korea approves of corporal punishment. Is the liberal culture closer to the moral truth than the conservative culture in regard to corporal punishment? A cultural relativist would say no, maintaining that no culture is morally superior to another. Pojman, however, argues that we may be justified in believing that our moral beliefs are closer to truths than those of other cultures:

We may not be able to know with certainty that our moral beliefs are closer to the truth than those of another culture or those of others within our own culture, but we may be *justified* in believing that they are. (Pojman, 2008: 21)

Note that Pojman is committed to the existence of moral truths, and that his position is incompatible with the cultural relativist's view that no culture is closer to moral truths than another. He supports his position with the following argument:

If we can be closer to the truth regarding factual or scientific matters, why can't we be closer to the truth on moral matters? Why can't a culture be simply confused or wrong about its moral

perceptions? Why can't we say that the society like the Ik which sees nothing wrong with enjoying watching its own children fall into fires is less moral in that regard than the culture that cherishes children and grants them protection and equal rights? (Pojman, 2008: 21)

Pojman's argument is that one culture can be closer to truths than another in moral matters because the former can be closer to truths than another in scientific matters. We believe, for example, that the Earth is round. Regarding the shape of the Earth, our culture is closer to the scientific truth than another whose members believe that the Earth is flat. Similarly, we denounce child abuse as being morally deplorable. Regarding the moral matter, our culture is closer to the moral truth than another whose members believe that child abuse is morally praiseworthy. Thus, we can make progress toward moral truths.

Let me show that Pojman's conclusion does not follow from his premise by using the aforementioned counterexamples of non-moral emotive and gustatory judgments. Some people feel that snakes are creepy, whereas other people feel that snakes are cute. The former and the latter may form different cultures, making opposing emotive judgments about snakes. In such a situation, if Pojman is right, one of the two cultures will be closer to the truth than the other concerning snakes, the reason being that one culture can be closer to truths than another concerning scientific matters. But Pojman's conclusion would be problematic in this case, and this shows that closeness to scientific truths does not necessitate closeness to non-moral emotive truths. To take another example, some people believe that alcohol is palatable, whereas other people think that alcohol is unpalatable. They form different cultures, the former enjoying alcohol and the latter avoiding alcohol. In such a situation, if Pojman is right, one of the two cultures would be closer to the truth than the other regarding alcohol because one culture can be closer to truths than another regarding scientific matters. But closeness to scientific truths does not guarantee closeness to gustatory truths. In short, it is one thing to claim that one culture can be closer to truths than another concerning scientific matters. It is quite another to claim that one culture can be closer to truths than another concerning non-moral emotive and gustatory matters. Therefore, these counterexamples show that Pojman's argument is invalid.

In response, Pojman may reply that there are non-moral emotive and gustatory truths. On this account, a non-moral emotive judgment has both a descriptive content and an

emotive content. Thus, the statement that snakes are creepy expresses a belief as well as an emotion toward snakes. The gustatory judgment that alcohol is palatable has both a cognitive content as well as a gustatory content. Consequently, the statement ‘Snakes are creepy’ is more than an expression of emotion, and the statement ‘Alcohol is palatable’ is more than an expression of taste. This view of non-moral and gustatory statements is available to Pojman, given that it is controversial in meta-ethics whether a moral statement has merely an emotive content, or has a descriptive content as well as an emotive content. A cognitivist could argue that like a moral statement, both non-moral emotive and gustatory statements have descriptive contents.

We might grant for the sake of argument here that non-moral and gustatory statements have truth-values. However, an epistemological problem arises. How can we know that one culture is closer to non-moral and gustatory truths than another? Recall that some people feel that snakes are creepy and that other people feel that snakes are cute. It is not clear how one party can go about convincing the other party of their view about snakes. No matter what information one party may present to the other party, the latter will not change their preexisting attitude toward snakes, and vice versa. Also, it is not clear how alcohol-lovers would go about proving to alcohol-avoiders that alcohol is indeed palatable. No matter what information alcohol-lovers offer to alcohol-avoiders, alcohol-avoiders would still think that alcohol tastes bitter. Also, no matter what information alcohol-avoiders advance to alcohol-lovers, alcohol-lovers would continue to believe that alcohol tastes sweet. In such a situation, there seems to be no way to prove that one party is closer to the truth than the other party concerning snakes or alcohol.

What would an emotivist say about Pojman’s argument for moral objectivism? For the emotivist, a moral utterance is merely an expression of emotion. To say that a culture approves of an act is to say that the members of the culture commend the act, i.e., cultural approval is reducible to the positive emotion of the members of the culture. To say that a culture disapproves of an act is to say that the members of the culture deplore the act, i.e., cultural disapproval is reducible to the negative emotion of the members of the culture. Given that an emotion is incapable of being true or false, cultural approval or disapproval is

incapable of being true or false too. Since cultural approval or disapproval is neither true nor false, one culture can never be closer to moral truths than another.

Another route to diffuse Pojman's argument for moral objectivism is to defend cultural relativism. If no culture is morally better than another as cultural relativism claims, we can never be justified in believing that one culture is closer to moral truths than another, contrary to what Pojman claims. There is, however, a problem with this cultural relativist response to Pojman because Pojman (2008) raises many incisive criticisms against cultural relativism. For example, he argues that cultural relativism has an absurd consequence that even a heinous crime can be made moral by conjuring a culture which approves of it. I cannot address those criticisms in this paper due to lack of space. I only refer readers to Park (2011) for a defense of cultural relativism from the acute critiques of Pojman and others.

2.3. The Argument from Moral Justification

Let me now turn to Rachels and Rachels's argument for moral objectivism. Before defending moral objectivism, they accuse emotivism of leaving no room for reason in ethics:

If someone says, "I like peaches," she does not need to have a reason; she may be making a statement about her personal taste and nothing more. But moral judgments are different. If someone tells you that a particular act would be wrong, you may ask why, and if there is no satisfactory answer, then you may reject that advice as unfounded. A moral judgment – or for that matter, any kind of value judgment – must be supported by good reasons. Any adequate theory of ethics should be able to explain how reason can support moral judgments. (Rachels and Rachels, 2010: 39-40)

After rejecting emotivism, they propose that a moral statement is true if and only if it is supported by better reasons than its alternatives:

Moral truths are truths of reason; that is, a moral judgment is true if it is backed up by better reasons than the alternatives. (Rachels and Rachels, 2010: 41)

Rachels and Rachels's favorite example is lying. We can provide better reasons for the statement that telling a lie is bad than for the statement that telling a lie is good. After all, society would collapse if people forgo the moral rule that we ought to tell the truth:

And finally, the rule requiring truthfulness is necessary for society to exist – if we could not assume that other people would speak truthfully, communication would be impossible, and if communication were impossible, society would fall apart. (Rachels and Rachels, 2010: 43)

Thus, it is true that telling a lie is bad, and it is false that telling a lie is good. Rachels and Rachels's proposal is respectable, honoring the long and widely held view that we can provide justification for moral positions.

There are a few problems with their proposal that a moral statement is true when it is backed up by better reasons than its alternatives. First, on their proposal, a moral statement is true not because it corresponds to a moral fact but because it is supported by better reasons than its alternatives. Thus, what makes a moral judgment true is not a moral fact inhabiting the world but reasons we can provide for the judgment. In other words, a moral statement is rendered true not by a moral state of affairs but by our weightier reasons for it. On their account, then, even if a moral statement is true, it does not follow that there is a moral property or fact in the world. Suppose, for example, that we have weightier reasons for the judgment that telling a lie is wrong than for the judgment that telling a lie is right. Even in such a situation, we cannot conclude that the property of being wrong exists in the act of lying, or that the world contains the moral fact that telling a lie is wrong. So far as I can tell, Rachels and Rachels established at best that some moral statements are true on their definition of 'moral truth.' They did not establish the metaphysical thesis that moral properties and facts are denizens of the world.

Second, what if there are two opposing reasons of equal weight for two conflicting moral views? Suppose that an abortionist and an antiabortionist adduce reasons to support their conflicting moral positions, and that their reasons are of equal weight. On Rachels and Rachels's account, then, the statement 'Abortion is right' is neither true nor false. So is the statement 'Abortion is wrong.' These moral statements would acquire truth-values the moment one side comes up with a new reason, tipping the scale in its favor. This is not,

however, what we normally think of a factual statement. Suppose, for example, that one scientist says that there is life beyond the Earth, that another scientist says that there is no life outside of the Earth, and that they present evidence of equal weight. Are their statements, then, neither true nor false? The answer is no. Their statements are true or false, even if the evidence for one statement and the evidence for the other statement cancel out each other. For a moral objectivist, there is no fundamental difference between moral and factual statements, so he believes that the moral statements ‘Abortion is right’ and ‘Abortion is wrong’ are true or false even though they are supported by countervailing evidence of equal weight. Since Rachels and Rachels’s account says otherwise, even the moral objectivist would reject it.

A reflection on the historical change of morality also delivers a strike against Rachels and Rachels’s account of moral truth. Suppose that in the past the weight of reasons for slavery was heavier than that of reasons against it. By contrast, today the weight of reasons against slavery is heavier than that of reasons for it. On Rachels and Rachels’s account, then, the moral statement ‘Slavery is right’ was true in the past, but it is false now, i.e., its truth-value has changed from truth to falsehood. This is not, however, what we ordinarily think of a factual statement. Consider the factual statement ‘The Earth is flat.’ We think that it was false in the past, and that it is false now too. Its truth-value did not change in accordance with the change of the weight of the evidence for it or for its alternative. For a moral objectivist, there is no fundamental difference between moral and factual statements, so he believes that the truth-value of the moral statement ‘Slavery is wrong’ did not change as a result of the change of the weight of the evidence for it or for its alternative. Since Rachels and Rachels’s account says otherwise, even the moral objectivist would reject it.

Given that Rachels and Rachels emphasize the role of reason in ethics, they would argue that we can know that a moral statement is true because we can provide a justification for it. For example, we can present reasons for the moral judgment that it is wrong to tell a lie, viz., if people do not hold the moral judgment, communications between individuals would be impossible, and “society would fall apart” (Rachels and Rachels, 2010: 43). The reasons exhibit the probable truth of the moral statement that telling a lie is wrong. Thus, we can arrive at a moral truth through the justification of a moral statement.

What are we to make of these reasons for the moral statement that telling a lie is wrong? In my view, the reasons which Rachels and Rachels cite exhibit not that the statement is likely to be true, but that the statement is likely to be useful. After all, what they are saying is that we are overall happier when we act in accordance with the moral judgment. If people abide by the rule “Don’t tell a lie,” communication would be possible, and that would contribute to the prosperity of their society. The problem here is that it is one thing for a statement to be useful, and quite another for it to be true. It is a truism in epistemology that useful statements do not coincide with true statements (Goldman, 1999: 43-44). For example, the statement that the Earth is at the center of the universe was useful in the past, bringing comfort to many people, but it was false because there was no state of affairs in the world that made it true. Thus, from the fact that we provide a justification for a moral position, it does not follow that the moral position is revealed as being likely to be true. Moral truths are not required to honor the role of reason in ethics, contrary to what Rachels and Rachels contend.

3. The Dilemma of Moral Perception

I now advance an argument against the moral objectivist view that a moral judgment has cognitive content. Notice that a dispute over descriptive properties, such as shape, size, mass, and motion, can be easily resolved with the use of our perceptive faculties. For example, you believe that a cat in front of us is 1kg, whereas I believe that it is 2kg. This kind of dispute can easily come to a settlement, as long as our perceptive faculties function properly. But a moral dispute may not be settled, even if our perceptive faculties work well. Recall that Korean liberals and conservatives have different moral attitudes toward corporal punishment in schools. Both liberals and conservatives can see corporal punishment with their own eyes, and their perceptive faculties work flawlessly. Yet, they do not reach agreement, and their dispute lingers.

By using the preceding example, let me construct what I call the dilemma of moral perception against moral objectivism. Moral objectivism asserts that either the property of being right or the property of being wrong inheres in corporal punishment. In case the property of being right exists, conservatives can be said to have perceived what liberals do

not. In case the property of wrong exists, liberals can be said to have observed what conservatives do not. The problem with either case is that it is mysterious why one party sees what the other party does not when their perceptive faculties are all working normally.

The dilemma of moral perception can be strengthened by the consideration that corporal punishment is a macrophysical action which we can observe with our naked eyes. It is not a microphysical action like an electron's orbiting the nucleus of an atom. Also, corporal punishment is an action occurring in a place physically close to us. It is not an action happening in a distant region of space like a black hole's engulfing of a celestial body. Moreover, corporal punishment is a current practice. It is not a past event like dinosaurs' going extinct. Consequently, it seems wrong to say that we cannot perceive the property of being right or wrong in corporal punishment because it is too small to be seen, because it is physically too remote from us, or because it only existed in the distant past.

In order to account for moral disagreement, a moral objectivist may appeal to the thesis that observation is theory-laden, which I shall call ladenism. On the ladenist account, conservatives and liberals make conflicting moral judgments when they observe the same action, corporal punishment, because their observations are laden with different value systems. Liberals' observation is infected with the liberal value system which includes the moral principle that students' human rights ought not to be violated. Conservatives' perception is contaminated with the conservative value system which includes the moral principle that unruly students must be disciplined. Therefore, it is not surprising that different people issue inconsistent moral judgments when they see the same action. A moral disagreement stems from different moral frameworks through which subjects see the world.

It seems to me, however, that invoking ladenism backfires on moral objectivism. In philosophy of science, it is the skeptic who wields ladenism against scientific realism. If ladenism is true in science, it is circular to justify a scientific theory with theory-impregnated data. Moreover, scientists of opposing paradigms cannot share data, and thus observations cannot serve as neutral arbiters between competing theories. It follows that we should be skeptical that scientific theories are true. Analogously, if ladenism is true in ethics, observations cannot determine which of the rival moral judgments is true. Thus, ladenism

makes observations epistemically impotent in ethics, thereby expelling moral truths to an epistemically remote realm, to the despair of the moral objectivist.

Moreover, ladenism as an empirical hypothesis about observational data is problematic. As Park (2009: 118) notes, scientists of opposing paradigms have shared observational data in the history of science. For example, Kepler, a Copernican scientist, borrowed observational data from Tycho, a Ptolemaic scientist, in order to improve the Copernican theory. Einstein used Michelson-Morley's experimental result to devise the special theory of relativity. Setting these historical examples aside, it sounds implausible to argue that conservatives and liberals do not share observational data due to theory-ladenness of observation. After all, they can agree that a 50cm long rod was in a teacher's hand, that it moved at 50km/h, and that it reached a student's shoulder. Since ladenism is problematic, it is of no use for a moral objectivist to invoke it to account for moral disagreement.

Unlike a moral objectivist, an emotivist has a neat explanation of intractable moral disagreements. On the emotivist account, it is difficult to resolve the dispute between conservatives and liberals in Korea not because it is difficult to perceive the property of being right or wrong in corporal punishment but because the opposing parties merely have different emotions toward corporal punishment, and because their emotions are so entrenched in their minds that they are immune to the influx of information from the world and to persuasion from others. Entrenched emotions are found not only in moral matters but also in non-moral emotive matters and gustatory matters. Suppose that snakes are creepy, and that alcohol tastes good to Jill, a pregnant woman. Her feeling toward snakes and her taste for alcohol are so deeply ingrained in her mind that they cannot be dislodged no matter what new factual information about snakes and alcohol flows into her mind. Even if she is informed that a snake is not poisonous, it may still be repulsive to her. Even if she newly learns that alcohol causes a deformity to her embryo, it may still taste good to her. Thus, some moral disagreements are not amenable to resolution not because moral properties are undetectable but because opposing parties have opposing entrenched emotions.

A caveat is in order here. I am not saying that all emotions are entrenched in our minds. Obviously, factual information can easily remove some emotions from our minds in certain cases. For instance, I may feel anger toward my friend because I misunderstood his intention.

If new factual information about his intention flows into my mind, my anger may subside. My anger toward my friend was not entrenched. Thus, information from the world cannot solve a moral dispute only when an entrenched emotion, not just any emotion, is involved in a moral judgment.

Critics may retort that many serious objections have been raised against emotivism in the meta-ethics literature. Contra an emotivist, for example, some meta-ethicists argue that a moral judgment has cognitive as well as emotive content, so that both a belief and an emotion are constitutive of a moral judgment. My reply to this objection is that if a moral statement is true or false as moral objectivism asserts, we are plunged into the unsavory position that conservatives see a property which liberals do not see, or vice versa, when their perceptive faculties are not dysfunctioning and the property is observable. Put differently, a moral objectivist faces the dilemma of moral perception sketched above. How about other criticisms leveled against emotivism in the literature? For example, there are disagreements in our moral life, but if emotivism is true, there is no moral disagreement because opposing parties merely cheer against each other like opposing fans at a sports event. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address such objections. A full-fledged defense of emotivism is postponed for a separate occasion.

4. Conclusion

The arguments of Thomson, Pojman, and Rachels and Rachels have failed to establish the optimistic view that we can move toward moral truths. From the fact that we assess moral statements, it does not follow that we can discover some moral truths. Truths are not needed to explain our act of evaluating moral statements. From the fact that one culture can be closer to truths than another in scientific matters, it does not follow that one culture can be closer to truths than another in moral matters. Progress is not necessarily carried over from science to morality. From the fact that a moral statement is justified, it does not follow that it is exhibited to be likely true. It may only be shown to be likely to be useful. Finally, the dilemma of moral perception spells trouble for the moral objectivist view that there are moral truths and we can move toward them.

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¹ I operate under the correspondence theory of truth in this paper because I believe along with Goldman (1999, Chapter 2) that it is the best theory of truth. Any attempt to establish moral truths under other theories of truth, such as the coherence theory, the deflationary theory, and the pragmatic theory, falls outside the range of this paper.