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MORAL OBJECTIVITY AND RESPONSIBILITY IN ETHICS: A SOCRATIC RESPONSE TO HUME'S LEGACY IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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Current debate in metaethics includes the question of objectivity. What does it mean for a moral prescription to be objective? It is easy to see how matters of fact are objective, and it is also easy to see how matters of taste are subjective. But what about matters of morality? Given the diversity in moral beliefs and practices it appears these cannot be matters of fact. Are they thus matters of taste? If so, we are left with the unlivable conclusion that all moral prescriptions are beyond rational scrutiny. David Hume expressed these problems in a way that continues to be influential today: 'Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowled'd lesser good to my greater' (Hume, 2003: 2.III.ii). Resolving problems about moral objectivity is further complicated by the philosophical presuppositions of analytic philosophy that have dominated the 20th century, initiated in the work of G.E. Moore, and promulgated in theories such as logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy. Contemporary thinkers from both the cognitivist and the non-cognitivist camps have tried to demonstrate that moral claims are objective in the sense of being subject independent. By considering contemporary appeals to the ideally rational self to establish objectivity, and objections to rationality as a ground for objectivity, it will be argued that objectivity can be grounded in the good which in turn is grounded in human nature. This approach can be found in the Socratic denial of knowingly doing evil, and out of this a foundation for moral objectivity can be developed that does not require an appeal to the individual's mental state and which preserves individual responsibility for knowing the good.

I. RESPONSIBILITY, OBJECTIVITY AND CLARITY

Interpersonal responsibility requires objectivity. An individual might be responsible to himself/herself to achieve personal goals, but if there is to be interpersonal responsibility, then there must be an objective good that can be rationally justified rather than only personally justified. Objectivity in morality has been a problem in contemporary philosophy because of presuppositions about the nature of language and rationality. If language is only meaningful when it refers to observable objects, or its meaning is determined by common usage, then it becomes difficult to see how moral claims are objective. But if meaning is connected to the use of reason to form concepts (distinguishing 'a' from 'non-a'), putting these together into judgments, and then connecting these into arguments, moral claims can be objective if: i) they are mind independent – based on concepts, judgments, and arguments that can be analyzed by any rational being; ii) are moral in that they are about the human good and what is required to achieve the good; iii) claims about the human good and what is required to achieve the good can be tested for truth/falsity in relation to an objective human nature.

Interpersonal responsibility also requires clarity. There must be a clear distinction between *good* and *non-good* if humans are responsible for knowing/acting on the

difference. If there is only personal justification for the good, then there cannot be responsibility for knowing what is good. It might be that there are degrees of responsibility relative to degrees of clarity, but the highest level of responsibility would require the highest level of clarity. Ultimate responsibility, requires ultimate clarity. For the good to be clear to reason means that it is based on human nature, and that there is a clear distinction between *human* and *non-human*, and between *good* and *non-good*. Thus, reason distinguishes human from non-human, and in this act denotes the qualities that all humans share. In doing this, reason has also made clear what it is to be an excellent/flourishing human as opposed to what violates human nature and is destructive of human nature.

Something is *objective* if it is independent of an individual's mind (Harman, 1997: 85). In contrast, something is *subjective* if it is not mind independent, and a claim is *relative* if its truth depends on its relation to a subject's mind. This requires understanding human nature (the set of qualities that all humans share). A Socratic example is that what is good for a human is not the same as what is good for a horse.[1] 'Now care in each case has the same effect; it aims at the good and the benefit of the object cared for, as you can see that horses cared for by horse breeders are benefited and become better' (*Euthyphro*, 1997: 13.b). For a human to flourish (achieve the good) is for a human to achieve excellence as a human. Or, to put this another way, what is good for a human is what is according to human nature, and what is evil for a human is what is destructive of that nature. Although Aristotle develops this view into a full theory, I will rely on the simple Socratic presentation in order to avoid assumptions imported by Aristotle.

The most basic quality that distinguishes humans from non-humans is the potential for rationality. Socrates discussed how humans differ from vegetables and animals due to this quality. This is the most basic quality because the very act of denying rationality requires the use of rationality (it is unavoidable), and because to affirm any other human characteristic/activity (tool making, question asking, music making, etc) is to use reason to identify traits. Reason is important for objectivity because in seeking for what is objective we are seeking for rational justification as opposed to personal justification. Reason, as the laws of thought, governs mental activity but is not mind dependent.

II. SOCRATES AND OBJECTIVITY

Does just anything count as excellence or flourishing? In the *Apology* Socrates is charged with harming the Athenians, and he replies: 'Do not the wicked do some harm to those who are ever closest to them, whereas good people benefit them? – Certainly. And does the man exist who would rather be harmed than benefited by his associate? . . . Of course not' (*Apology*, 1997: 25.d). This Socratic view, where a person chooses what he/she believes is best in a situation, stands in stark contrast to Hume's claim that it is not unreasonable for a person to prefer a lesser good. What is the source of this difference, and how does it relate to objectivity?

The Enlightenment tradition came to speak in a different way than did Socrates about *human nature*. In this tradition, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau spoke of the state of nature, and of human nature as 'what humans do.' This tradition sought for ways to change human nature for the better. This is a different use of the phrase 'human nature' than is found in the Socratic discussions. Socrates is concerned with the questions 'what am I, or, what is it to be a human?' so that 'human nature' refers to those qualities which distinguish humans from non-humans, and 'what is beneficial to human nature?' Thus, what is good is

what promotes human nature, what is evil is what destroys human nature, so that when persons choose what is destructive to their nature they cease to be (this can come in degrees, perhaps on a spectrum from excellence to foulness). Here I will continue to use the concept as it is used by Socrates. Socrates could ask of Hobbes: 'Although humans are brutal to each other in the state of nature, in so behaving are they living according to their nature or acting contrary to their nature (more like animals)?' Humans do act this way, but how should they act?

And so the Socratic question is: Given that humans are thinkers as well as doers, what is it to be an excellent human? We'll see that Hume, and many in the 20th century, attempt to disconnect reason and preferences. But in rooting human nature in the desire (preference) to understand, Socrates lays the groundwork for rejecting the division between thought and desire. Consider the question: Why should I prefer to understand? Such a question seeks to understand. The desire to understand, and the satisfaction that is derived from achieving understanding, is unavoidable apart from not thinking, and if one is in an unthinking state, then one cannot also participate in discourses about the good. In this case, there can be no other preference; this is the most basic preference – to understand. The preference to not understand becomes unintelligible. Socrates illustrates this in his consideration of the liar: In order to lie one must know the truth – in order to prefer not understanding one must understand what is being preferred.

In the *Greater Hippias*, Socrates discusses what it is to be excellent, or fine. He says 'let this be fine for us: whatever is useful' (1997: 295.c). In order to determine what is useful for a thing, 'we look at the nature it's got, its manufacture, its condition; then we call what is useful 'fine' in respect of *the way* it is useful, *what* it is useful *for*, and *when* it is useful; but anything useless in all those respects we call 'foul'' (295.d). This might seem to support a view of humans which says that if they are not useful to society in a commercial sense then they are *foul* and can be discarded. However, Socrates clearly does not mean this in that he says 'wisdom is really the finest thing of all, and ignorance the foulest' (296.a). This is distinct from simply having knowledge, in that a person could have encyclopedic knowledge and yet not know how to use it: 'If there exists the knowledge of how to make men immortal, but without the knowledge of how to use this immortality, there seems to be no value in it' (296.a).

In the *Lesser Hippias*, Socrates discusses the possibility of knowingly doing evil in the specific case of lying. In order to lie, one must know the truth (1997: 367.a). In order to knowingly do evil, one must know both what is evil and what is good. Furthermore, a person who tells a lie, such as Odysseus, and knows both the truth and falsehood, is able to choose one over the other and so acts voluntarily (375.c). 'So the one who voluntarily misses the mark and does what is shameful and unjust, Hippias – *that is, if there is such a person* – would be no other than the good man' (376.b).[2] Socrates does not think there is such a person. A person who knows both what is good and evil will always choose what is good, and persons who are ignorant of what is truly good and evil will always choose what they believe to be good in that circumstance.

This follows from the Socratic view of human nature. Humans, as thinkers, are living according to their nature if they are coming to have knowledge. What is useful is what helps them do so. This is explained in the Allegory of the Cave (*Republic*, 1997: VII.514). The worst condition is one of ignorance, the best that of knowledge of the highest order, knowledge of what is eternal and changeless. It is for this reason that Socrates can say, hypothetically, that it is a good person who can knowingly do evil because such a person has knowledge of good and evil, while an ignorant person cannot knowingly do either

good or evil. And so knowingly doing evil equates to knowingly doing what will keep me ignorant, or knowingly doing what will harm my nature and undermine my humanity.

Thus, Socrates provided a standard for objectivity and personal responsibility: Human nature and the attainment of knowledge – specifically knowledge of the highest reality. Humans are responsible to know what is good because they are responsible to know what it is to be a human. Hume's assertion about there being nothing contrary to reason in choosing what is a lesser good is simply an impossibility – a person who knows the good and evil (or lesser goods), and prefers the lesser good where 'preferring' means knowing what is the greater good in contrast to evil (or lesser goods). To prefer a lesser good is a sign of ignorance and is therefore contrary to reason. In order to choose a lesser good one must know both goods. But then in choosing a lesser good one is acting on a principle such as: My preference is for the lesser good because it brings immediate pleasure.' But what this really means is that this is the greater good for bringing immediate pleasure. Or, if the principle is: 'I prefer it and I don't want to think about why,' then this is contrary to reason in that it is non-thinking. Either way, there cannot be a situation where a person knows both the greater and lesser good, and chooses the lesser good without violating reason.

Socrates does recognize the influence of the emotions and senses. Indeed, the latter are symbolized as five chains that keep humans from the highest levels of knowledge (Allegory of the Cave). Can Hume be reconciled to the Socratic view by saying that Hume is simply noting that emotions are not guided by the intellect? Is this simply an expression of the 'two horses' that Socrates discusses in the *Phaedrus* (1997:253.d), where one horse is good and the other evil (this one apparently associated with emotions or senses)? If so, Hume could say that it is part of human nature to sometimes prefer the latter. This will work because the point Socrates is making is that the latter horse is contrary to reason. Furthermore, there is a third part to the soul, the charioteer, who attempts to control the horses. Cashing out the metaphor, as humans we are presented with choices and we can choose between them. To make the best choice requires knowing what is good and evil. Thus, to prefer what is a lesser good is a sign of ignorance, a failure to use reason, and therefore is indeed contrary to reason. If this is so, why did Hume make such a statement about rationality and preference, and how has this influenced 20th century thinkers?

III. THE PROBLEM OF OBJECTIVITY

Hume's claim that moral preferences are outside the scope of reason continued to be influential in the 20th century. G.E. Moore[3] set the tone for this century in his *Principia Ethica*. In his study of the 20th century, Paul Johnson notes Moore's participation in the secret society at Cambridge known as 'The Apostles', and its relationship to the Bloomsbury group and all the political and social concerns that this entails. This helps put Moore in a historical context, namely, he is actively responding to specific religious, political, as well as ethical systems that he rejects. Johnson says:

Its last two chapters [*Principia Ethica*], 'Ethics in Relation to Conduct' and 'The Ideal', were, by implication, a frontal assault on the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of personal accountability to an absolute moral code and the concept of public duty, substituting for it a non-responsible form of hedonism based on personal relationships. 'By far the most valuable things which we know or can imagine', Moore wrote, 'are certain states of consciousnesses which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of personal objects. No one, probably, who has asked himself the

question, has ever doubted that personal affection and the appreciation of what is beautiful in Art and Nature are good in themselves' (Johnson, 1985: 167).

Apart from considerations about Moore's relationship to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, he is offering a view contrary to the Socratic position which states that the good is knowledge of the highest reality, and instead relies on Humean skepticism about the human ability to know the highest reality. His 'naturalistic fallacy' is meant to expose as incomplete any attempt to define 'the good.'

When a man confuses two natural objects with one another, defining the one by the other, if for instance, he confuses himself, who is one natural object, with 'pleased' or with 'pleasure' which are others, then there is no reason to call the fallacy naturalistic. But if he confuses 'good,' which is not in the same sense a natural object, with any natural object whatever, then there is a reason for calling that a naturalistic fallacy; its being made with regard to 'good' marks it as something quite specific, and this specific mistake deserves a name because it is so common . . . even if it [the good] were a natural object, that would not alter the nature of the fallacy nor diminish its importance one whit. . . . Why, if good is good and indefinable, should I be held to deny that pleasure is good? Is there any difficulty in holding both to be true at once? On the contrary, there is no meaning in saying that pleasure is good, unless good is something different from pleasure (Moore, 1993: #12).

If pleasure, or happiness, or knowledge, is said to be 'good,' Moore says the follow-up question 'why is it so good?' cannot be answered. Some things (beauty, relationships) are good in themselves and one must simply 'see' this. Here is the influence of Hume: Moral claims cannot be said to be more or less rational, one simply has them. But, of course, if the individual is the final arbiter of what is good, then disagreements about beauty or relationships are incommensurable – there is no hope for a universal moral law based on a universal good grounded in a universal human nature. This sets the problem of objectivity for the 20th century, and attempts to give a subject relative account (mind dependent) of morality within the framework of Moore's ethical philosophy.

Cognitivists and Non-Cognitivists work within the intellectual context established by Moore. Rather than seeking to ground morality in an objective reality such as God or the good, these thinkers dispute about how morality is related to the individual's mind. A noted member of this discussion is Gilbert Harman.[4] Harman gives an account of morality that focuses on subject dependent attitudes. Harman describes the problem about objectivity that concerns both cognitivists and non-cognitivists. In his work 'Ethics and Observation,' Harman asks: 'Can moral principles be tested and confirmed in the way scientific principles can?' (Harman, 1997: 83). His answer is 'no.' Objectivity requires a subject independent standard that can be confirmed by others. While scientific observations can be confirmed by others, it does not seem that moral observation can be confirmed by others. 'In the moral case, it would seem that you need only make assumptions about the psychology or moral sensibility of the person making the moral observation. In the scientific case, theory is tested against the world' (85). Here is the problem of objectivity: If objectivity means 'mind independent,' yet moral sensibility can be explained in light of the person making the moral observation, then moral sensibility is not objective.

Harman gives an example of a person observing a group of children setting a cat on fire. 'In one sense, your observation is that what the children are doing is wrong. In another sense, your observation is your thinking that thought' (86). He claims that moral principles can help explain the first sense, but not the second. That is, the fact that I think the action of the children is wrong can account for my moral declaration about the observation, but it cannot account for my thinking that this action is wrong (86). 'In the second sense of

'observation,' moral principles cannot clearly be tested by observation, since they do not appear to help explain observations in this second sense of 'observation'' (86).

Harman considers the differences with this example and that of observing a proton passing through a cloud chamber. The scientist sees a trail in the cloud chamber and concludes that a proton has passed through. This does not seem to be a claim about the scientist, but about the cloud chamber and the impact of a proton. What explains the wrongness of the children's act is not that it is wrong, as if there were some object in the world called 'wrong,' but that the person who observes it believes it is wrong. In contrast, what explains the scientist's belief about a proton is not something about him, but about the effect a proton will have on a cloud chamber. Therefore, 'the scientific realm is accessible to observation in a way the moral realm is not' (87).

Accordingly, moral claims are not objective: their explanation need only include an explanation of the observer's beliefs, and not anything independent of the observer. However, while there might not be an independent object/quality in the world called 'wrong,' is there something objective about human nature that makes an action wrong? And is it precisely the diversity of beliefs about human nature that results in the diversity of beliefs about morality? To answer these questions, we turn now to the cognitivist/non-cognitivist search for objectivity through the ideal self.

IV. OBJECTIVITY IN NON-COGNITIVISM AND COGNITIVISM

In contrast to Harman, but still illustrative of 20th century presuppositions, Allan Gibbard [5]attempts to give an account of how moral claims can be mind independent from a non-cognitivist perspective (1997: 181). His solution is that 'morally right action simply is action that is truly rational' (181). 'Wrongness' depends on the feeling of guilt. For Gibbard, 'what a person does is *morally wrong* if and only if it is rational for him to feel guilty for having done it, and for others to be angry at him for having done it' (181). This is the non-cognitivist perspective, but it also introduces an objective standard for morality. It implies that there is a subject independent standard for moral claims that is related in an essential way to rationality. Thus, a claim may be relative to a subject, but the justification for the claim can be objectified by an appeal to what is rational.

But what does it mean to say that something is rational? Gibbard says 'that to *think something rational* is to accept norms that, on balance, permit it' (182). But if my claim that an action is rational depends on what norms I accept, is not this still subject dependent, and therefore not objective? Is there an objective way to determine which norms we should accept? Gibbard thinks that there is in that the correct definition for 'rational action' is that if a person thinks there is a reason for an action then that person thinks this would be a reason even if he did not think it were so; these are the norms that an ideal self would accept, or would have the non-ideal self accept.

Peter Railton[6] also provides a naturalist account of how moral claims can be objective. Specifically, he posits an idealized self whose desires for the real self constitute objective moral claims. 'Let us introduce the notion of an *objectified subjective interest for individual A*' (1997: 142). If we equip an actual individual with unqualified cognitive and imaginative powers, and full factual and nomological information about himself, this person A will become A+ (142). We are not interested in what A+ wants for himself, but what A+ wants for A. We can interpret Railton's view as positing an ideally rational self, a self who is rational to the extent of having all relevant knowledge with respect to himself so that he

can make the correct decisions for his non-ideal self. So again, objectivity is connected to rationality which is an objective standard.

The ideal self as a ground for objectivity is also developed by Michael Smith[7], who attempts to establish objectivity in the postulation of a fully rational self. Smith articulates a view where if a person values a specific action, then that person would desire to perform that action in his/her actual situation if he/she were fully rational (Holton, 1996: 484). Smith believes that there are normative reasons for action that can be objectively grounded in a fully rational self (1994: 143). His definition of a normative reason is: 'to say that we have a normative reason to φ in certain circumstances C is to say that we would want ourselves to φ in C if we were fully rational' (182). This establishes the objectivity of moral claims because what is fully rational is not dependent on the subject. This is a Kantian approach in that it focuses the morality of an object in the will (nothing is good without qualification but a good will), yet directs the will through universal, objective principles (only act on what one can will to be universal).

Both cognitivists and non-cognitivists appeal to reason as the foundation for moral objectivity. While there are important differences between Gibbard, Railton, and Smith, the similarity is that rationality plays the central role in determining what is objective. In the one case it has to do with what norms I would want myself to accept even if I did not in fact accept them (determined by the ideal self), in the other it is what my ideally rational self would desire for my non-ideal self. The *ideal self* replaces Kant's categorical imperative without explaining how this would be different. What imperatives would the ideal self apply? If we can know such imperatives, do we really need to mediate our knowledge of them through the ideal self?

That rationality means a claim is based on norms I would accept, on objectified self-interest, or what I would accept if I were fully rational, retains an element of the subjective and encounters the is/ought problem. Norms that I accept, and the idealized self, continue to be mind-dependent and so do not attain what is required for objectivity. Objectified self-interest leaves unanswered the most important question: what is it that is in my self interest, what is good? None of these approaches actually answer the question about what is good. Indeed, they are kept from doing so by the constraints of their 20th century analytic philosophy presuppositions: they are explaining what people mean when they speak about morality without explaining what actually is good. In other words, even if they have helped us with the question 'what do people *mean* when they make *ought* statements?' they have not helped us answer the question 'what ought I to do?' In thinking about ethics (metaethics) they have left the main concepts of ethics empty of meaning.

This is illustrated by the is/ought problem. Even if my idealized self would do x in situation y, this does not tell me that I *ought* to do it. What is true for my idealized self does not translate to an *ought* for my self without adding in an explanation about the good. The Socratic approach does not encounter this same problem because for Socrates *ought* claims are statements about what must be done to achieve the good given the nature of a thing. The is of human nature requires specific kinds of actions to achieve the good, and so one *ought* to do these. For Socrates, desire enters the equation in that all humans desire what is good. While a particular conception of the good is mind dependent for a given person, desire for the good is mind independent in that it is the nature of the good to be desirable. Thus, these 20th century examples of attempts to respond to subjective moral theories do not advance the discussion as much as would an application of insights given by Socrates.

From these thinkers we can formulate a claim about finding objectivity: An action is right if I would judge (believe, desire) it to be so were I fully rational and in possession of

the relevant knowledge. This addresses the problem as stated by Harman. Harman's example of a scientific and therefore objective claim was that a proton passed through a cloud chamber when a vapor trail is seen. We can re-word this to say that if a scientist is fully rational then that scientist will conclude that a proton is present in a cloud chamber when a vapor trail is present given the relevant knowledge about this experiment. A less than fully rational scientist might not conclude in this way. Similarly, a fully-rational person will accept certain moral claims. Reason provides a foundation for objectivity. But as stated this definition is not very helpful because of the need to define the term 'reason,' and the need to understand the relationship between reason/knowledge and desire. What if the reasonable is not the desirable, or if reason is not valued by some people?

V. MUGGLETONIANS AND THE REJECTION OF REASON

An objection to Smith's approach is given by Richard Holton[8] in his 'Reason, Value, and the Muggletonians.' Holton summarizes Smith's view as stating that 'An individual X values her potential action φ iff X believes that were she fully rational, she would desire that she perform φ if she were situated as she actually is' (1996: 484). To fill out Smith's view, he adds that the fully-rational person would have no false beliefs, have all relevant true beliefs, and deliberate correctly (484). To object to this position Holton presents some claims about reason from a 17th century thinker named Ludowick Muggleton: 'It was the Spirit of Reason in Man that always blasphemed and fought against God, and persecuted and killed the Just and Righteous. Rational Truth is not the Truth of Christ but of Pilate. It is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil' (484). Would the followers of Muggleton, called Muggletonians, accept Smith's standard for objectivity? Apparently, the Muggletonians do not value being rational, and therefore would not want to do what their fully rational self would prescribe. Holton's argument is that our conceptions about an *ideal self* are still mind dependent, and claims about what constitutes the ideal self are relative to the speaker's values.

Holton considers three possible solutions each of which he believes fails, and then concludes that the 'attempt to analyze value in terms of rationality' must be abandoned (487). While most of us value rationality, not everyone does. Using the fully rational self as a standard for objectivity is still subject dependent: it is dependent on the fact that most people value rationality. Holton's criticism is important because he raises a question about the relationship between reason and desire. Can a person use reason to know what is good and yet not desire the good? Before this can be addressed, it is worth noting that Holton and the Muggletonians have an insufficient understanding of reason, perhaps more akin to 'common sense' or 'thinking apart from God's plan' than the formative and critical functions of reason defined earlier.

According to the Muggletonians, the kind of thinking displayed by the serpent in Eden, or Pontius Pilate, are attempts to arrive at knowledge apart from special revelation. But this is not the most basic definition of 'reason,' as was given above. While Muggletonians reject thinking apart from scriptures, when such a Muggletonian comes to the scripture he/she must engage the mind to understand what is written. Furthermore, a Muggletonian would give various arguments to show that a person should accept what is written in the scriptures. This might involve an argument about regeneration: the unregenerate do not reason correctly and therefore would not listen even if a reasonable argument was given in support of scripture – what is required is the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. In

such a situation the unregenerate are shown to be exemplars of irrationality (as inconsistency): they reject reason and the conclusion of rational arguments, but continue to think (which is a function of reason). The Muggletonians are using reason as defined here (it is inescapable), but are rejecting a certain kind of reasoning, what might be called 'worldly reason,' which must be distinguished from reason in itself. To give an argument about why reason should be rejected is self-referentially absurd; to use reason critically to analyze unbeliever's reasons is to use reason presuppositionally. Therefore, while Holton may be correct that many constructions of what counts as the *ideally rational self* are constructs based on unproven premises, this is not enough to deny that there is a mind independent rationality-laws of thought. What Holton's observation should move us to do is take care in identifying what is universal, to come to recognize what counts as the laws of thought, and not to abandon such work.

VI. OBJECTIVITY GROUNDED IN THE IDEAL SELF IS UNSUCCESSFUL

There are two significant problems with grounding objectivity in an ideal self. The first is that it is simply unhelpful. It answers the question 'what ought I to do' with 'I ought to do what my ideal self (fully rational self) would have me do.' This is because the ideal self knows what is good for me to do in the circumstances. Therefore, the answer becomes: I should do what I would have myself do if I knew what is good in these circumstances. Either I do know what is good, and therefore do not need to posit the ideal self, or I do not know what is good, which also means I do not know what the ideal self would have me do. The ideal self is unhelpful, and instead what is important is knowing what is good in my circumstances.

Second, it is often claimed that reason does not motivate (Blackburn, 1998: 238). This is sometimes called philosophical incontinence, and is described phenomenologically when a person says 'I know what is good/right but I don't want to do it.' In his discussion with Socrates, Meno reports it this way: 'There are some who believe that the bad things benefit them, others who know that the bad things harm them' (*Meno* 77.d). It is said that learning facts, or growing in knowledge, does not help motivate a person to do what is good. 'Abstract or demonstrative reasoning, therefore, never influences any of our actions, but only as it directs our judgment concerning causes and effects' (Hume, 2003: 294). I might believe something is good without desiring it, and 'since reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition, I infer, that the same faculty is as incapable of preventing volition, or of disputing the preference with any passion or emotion' (295). I might learn the facts of the matter without changing my values, or I might know what is the case without knowing what I ought to do. 'Satan and other fallen angles, for example, presumably know a good deal about God's commands; however, they are not motivated to act in accordance with them' (Swan, 2006: 14). Milton portrays Satan saying: 'Evil, be thou my good' (*Paradise Lost* IV.110). Therefore, I might know what the ideal self would have me to do without wanting to do it.

This also applies to practical rationality. Objectivity is sometimes sought by grounding it in the relationship between ends and means. To achieve a given end/goal, I must act in specific ways. This is phrased as a hypothetical imperative: If I want x then I must do y. But the problem is that a person could claim to know that x is good without wanting it, and therefore the hypothetical imperative is unhelpful. Reason tells us about the relationship between cause and effect (Hume, 2003: 294), and means/ends, but not which ends to desire. This is more than being practically irrational (Copp, 1997: 38). The problem is not in

knowing the means/ends relationship, but in knowing which end to pursue. The person suffering from philosophical incontinence will say: 'I know that x is good, and that to achieve x I must do y, but I want a and therefore I'm going to do b.' Hume says:

'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger'. 'Tis not contrary to reason for me to chuse my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an *Indian* or person wholly unknown to me.' 'Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledg'd lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter.' A trivial good may, from certain circumstances, produce a desire superior to what arises from the greatest and most valuable enjoyment; nor is there any thing more extraordinary in this, than in mechanics to see one pound weight raise up a hundred by the advantage of its situation (Hume, 2003: 296).

If there is no connection between belief and desire then it appears that motivation requires an effect of the desires rather than a change of belief. This is the critical objection to the use of an ideal self as the ground for objectivity, as well as the use of reason as a foundation for objectivity. In order to provide a moral law grounded on human nature it must be shown that there is a direct relationship among human nature, reason, and desire.

VII. SOCRATES VS. HUME

Socrates rejected the claim that persons knowingly do evil or that they knowingly choose the lesser good.

Socrates: And do you think that those who believe that bad things benefit them know that they are bad? *Meno*: No, that I cannot altogether believe. *Socrates*: It is clear then that those who do not know things to be bad do not desire what is bad, but they desire those things that they believe to be good but that are in fact bad. It follows that those who have no knowledge of these things and believe them to be good clearly desire good things (77e).

This is relevant here because Socrates connects belief and desire in a way that avoids the problems raised by Hume.

Hume's analogy to a one pound weight raising up a hundred by the advantage of its situation sheds light on the solution. The desire of a trivial good to one that will bring extraordinary enjoyment must be put in context. Just like the one pound weight does not lift the hundred pound weight period, but only when placed in the right situation in relation to pulleys or a lever, so too a trivial good does not override a greater good period, but in a specific context. Once the context has been filled in, then it is difficult to see how the 'trivial good' remains trivial to the person in that context. Socrates is correct, the person desires what they believe to be good in the context (although hindsight is often 20/20), and they do not know it to be bad.

Hume's contention is that it is not contrary to reason to *desire* a trivial good over a greater good. However, couldn't this be true and it still be contrary to reason to *choose* a trivial good over a greater good? In other words, while I may prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger, my preferences do not necessitate an action. That I prefer/desire it does not mean that I ought to choose it. In other words, what is interesting is not that I prefer, but that I choose to act on that preference. This reveals my thinking process in making decisions, and such a thinking process can be objectively evaluated (this is the basis for all pedagogy).

It is sometimes objected that in the Socratic picture it seems that beliefs and desires are connected in a way that is not found in life. Hume's view, that reason and desire are

disconnected, has the appearance of being more consistent with ordinary experience. However, I believe the Socratic picture is more robust because it describes inconsistency and tension that exists within a person better than does Hume. Hume notices the tension between a desire and a belief. Socrates notices that behind this desire is another belief, so that the real tension is between two beliefs. I may desire to satisfy my immediate impulse through gluttony, but also recognize that this is temporary and not as important as self-discipline and health. Behind this desire is the belief that the pleasure from gluttony is good. The real conflict, as Socrates notes, is over what I believe to be good and evil.

VIII. THE PROBLEM OF MOTIVATION

The problem of motivation is solved by noting that persons always do what they believe to be good: tension between belief and desire is only apparent, and a more robust analysis shows that the real tension is between beliefs about what is good. Reason motivates in the sense that people desire to do what they believe will make them happy. When something is believed to be nonsense, meaningless, a contradiction, it will also be rejected as not bringing happiness. The problem is therefore not a conflict between belief and desire, but 'what do I believe to be good,' and the tension that arises between conflicting beliefs about the good. For instance, Milton portrays Satan not as pursuing evil, but as calling evil good: 'Evil, be thou my good' (*Paradise Lost*, IV.110).

Finding objectivity in a rationally ideal self is insufficient to help us know what we ought to do. But I asserted earlier that objectivity can be found the concept of human nature and human flourishing. Two problems remain: how can we know what is flourishing and what is not, and how does this solve the problem of motivation – I may know what it is to flourish but not desire to do so. Having solved these problems I will then argue that the problem of objectivity as posed by Gibbard can also be solved.

To discuss flourishing, or the good life, might not appear to help in the problem of objectivity. What it is to flourish is thought to be a matter of opinion. Here I argue that there is a fundamental sense of flourish that is more basic than any other. To flourish as a human is to have understanding and meaning. To understand the world is to find meaning in the world. Power, strength, beauty, money, all presuppose understanding. At the very least, without understanding one will not realize that one has these other things, but more important one will not know how to use them or how to live. To have understanding is to live as a human, to fail to have understanding is to deny one's humanity. To argue against understanding as the basic feature of human nature would be self-referentially absurd – it would be to try and make one's position understood by others.

From knowing that finding meaning through understanding is the good life it does not necessarily follow that one will be motivated to do so. Here we must be specific about what exactly it is that must be understood to find meaning. In seeking meaning a person is seeking to make sense of the world. Minimally, this requires understanding what goals must be achieved to be happy. A more robust understanding that seeks to avoid temporary happiness, and seeks lasting happiness, requires knowing what is real in order to understand human nature and what is good for human nature. Failing to note the distinction between temporary happiness and lasting happiness is an error that will lead to acting in ways that are objectively wrong in that they are not furthering one's pursuing of what is good (but only what will make one happy at the time).

There is a relationship between the highest reality, knowledge of the highest reality as supremely satisfying, and doing what is necessary to achieve this knowledge. This relationship overcomes the problems facing practical rationalities construction of a moral law; the problem there was 'how do I know what end to desire?' That knowledge of the highest reality is desirable in itself cannot be denied without making a self-referentially absurd claim. The discussion is not often carried out at this basic level – it is usually carried out at a level with numerous presuppositions, as in the case of a group of boys burning a cat. But if we move the discussion to the most basic level, a level that is presupposed by other discussion but does not itself have presuppositions, then we must deal with questions about our ability to know what is real, the desirability of such knowledge, and we will see that at this level the is/ought distinction collapses: knowledge of the highest reality is desirable in itself, and any argument to the contrary is itself making a knowledge claim about the highest reality and about the desirability of engaging in such discussions. If we cannot know what is real, what is of highest reality, or the relationship between the good and the real, then other questions occupying the time of the metaethicicists are not knowable or important either. It is as if one were to say: 'I can't know what is real or good, but I sure am concerned about that cat.' The only real alternative is silence.

'Ought' statements are claims about what a person must do to achieve the good. If the good is finding meaning in the world and living accordingly, then an 'ought' claim is about what must be done in order to find meaning and live accordingly. The following are initial examples that can be fleshed out further: one ought to know what is clear about reality – one ought not to be culpably ignorant; one ought to be consistent in what one believes and says; one ought to treat others with human dignity; one ought to seek justice through knowing the truth; one ought to avoid being discontent by knowing what is truly good. These are objective in that the reality of human nature and the good is not subject dependent, although the extent to which a person understands the good and pursues it is dependent on that person's level of understanding.

IX. RESPONDING TO HUME

Now we are able to respond to the intellectual tradition that has dominated the 20th century although it has roots in Hume's analysis of morality. We can reject the assumption that morality is grounded in the individual's preferences, and the search for objectivity in some form of the idealized self is not sufficient. Rather, moral statements are claims about whether a person is living according to human nature. Consider the cat example: arbitrarily inflicting pain on a living being, or finding personal pleasure in doing so, is contrary to the goal of human flourishing. This example is an ordinary but trivial one, and most likely this kind of activity on the part of the persons involved fits within a larger lifestyle of finding enjoyment through reckless behavior. Rather than taking one such instance, the larger framework of how these persons live their lives should be considered. What do they view to be the good and how are they pursuing this? Is what they believe to be the good really the good?

Those who ground moral norms in the subject's attitudes/desires, like Gibbard or Hume, will respond by saying: all that needs to be known about a moral claim is what the person believes, it is subject dependent. However, I argue that it is subject dependent in a way that that scientific observation is also subject dependent. In the example given by Harman, the scientist who sees a trail in the cloud chamber will only draw the correct

conclusion (that a proton has passed through) if he has the correct understanding and set of beliefs about what is real. Similarly with moral claims: a person will only draw the correct conclusion about an action and its sufficiency in achieving the good if that person has the correct beliefs about what is real. A false belief about reality, say an Aristotelian view of matter, will lead to a false conclusion about protons. A false belief about human nature will lead to a false conclusion about the good.

Moral claims and scientific claims are not different in kind. Discussions about whether or not moral claims are objective involve discussing their relation to the subject. Are they dependent on the subject's desires and tastes, or can they be shown to be real features of the world. I have argued that an appeal to an ideally rational self does not solve the problem of objectivity. However, I have also argued that the Socratic position can provide a solution by arguing that the good is based on human nature which is a subject independent reality. The subjectivist defends his position by noting the diversity of moral theories but the apparent unity of scientific observation. It is true that there is great diversity about what is good and what ought to be done, but I argue that this is due to the level of understanding about the good and the means to the good on the part of the person making moral claims. This is also true in science, where a misunderstanding on the part of a scientist will lead to a false conclusion. This does not mean that morality or science is subject dependent. Rather, the extent to which an individual finds meaning in the world, whether in morality or science, is relative to the extent that the person has used reason to understand. Moral diversity should not be seen as the end of the pursuit of objectivity and unity, but as a challenge for greater effort to be put forth in coming to a common understanding of the good.

X. CONCLUSION

Having traced this intellectual history, and evaluated arguments given by 20th century thinkers about the nature of moral objectivity, a final question is: why accept the Socratic view? Even if it does resolve the difficulties noted above in grounding morality in claims about the idealized self (*etc.*), it does not follow that we should accept it as the correct view. Furthermore, the ways that it was developed by Aristotle face significant problems of their own. What Socrates helps us to do is keep in focus the central question of ethics, which is: what is the good? Furthermore, he helps us in answering the question by grounding the good in human nature: what is good for a thing is based on the nature of the thing. He thus calls us back to basic questions in philosophy, questions which can be lost in the compounded presuppositions of modernity. To know the good one must know what it is to be a human – human nature is objective and so the good is objective. Additionally, human nature is what is shared by all humans, so the good too is what is common to all humans. The good serves as a basis for unity and for further inquiry.

We began by considering what is necessary for personal and interpersonal responsibility. If objectivity is necessary for responsibility, then this provides another reason to reconsider the presuppositions of 20th century metaethics and look again at the good. It adds the further requirement that the good must be readily knowable if there is to be responsibility. It is on this point that I believe Plato and Aristotle encounter many difficulties, and which leaves significant work for contemporary philosophers. Therefore, we can end with a question: Is it clear what is good so that humans are responsible for choosing it?

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Notes

1 Here I speak of Socrates as the protagonist in the Platonic dialogues without distinguishing his voice from that of Plato. I am also looking at the Socratic view and not the Aristotelian view which shares important features because of problems with the latter that I discuss in my article 'Metaphysical Foundations for Natural Law' in New Blackfriars 87.1012. I am also not meaning for the Socratic position to be equated with the natural law tradition which faces problems that I consider in my article 'Contemporary Natural Law Theory' in New Blackfriars 86.1005.

2 emphasis mine

3 Professor at Cambridge, he defended ethical non-naturalism, and sought to ground moral claims in the preferences of the individual.

4 Gilbert Harman is a professor of philosophy at Princeton University. His ethical theory is that moral claims are actually statements about the speaker's preferences. Consequently, his work falls into the intellectual tradition traced here to Moore and Hume.

5 Allan Gibbard is the Richard B. Brandt Distinguished University Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan. Intellectually, he is also heir to Hume and Moore in grounding the meaning of moral claims in preferences, although he gives an account of how these can be objective. In his research he seeks to understand the meaning of moral statements, doing so within the confines of analytic philosophy and linguistic theory.

6 Peter Railton is the John Stephenson Perrin Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan. His research involves how empirical data can be used to understand the meaning of morality.

7 Michael Smith is professor of philosophy at Princeton University. While Smith's research recognizes the relationship between reason and objectivity, he fits within the intellectual history traced here because he seeks to ground what is rational in what an ideal person would do.

8 Richard Holton is professor of philosophy at MIT. Although what is considered here are his objections to grounding morality in an ideally rational agent, his own research fits within this intellectual history in that he also grounds morality in the psychology of the agent.