

■ ADVANCES IN THEORETICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PSYCHOLOGY

ROUTLEDGE

A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON FOLK MORAL OBJECTIVISM

THOMAS PÖLZLER



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Philosophers have long debated whether morality is objective. But how do lay people think about this matter? *A Philosophical Perspective on Folk Moral Objectivism* discusses the philosophical aspects of this question in an accessible, integrated and coherent way.

The first part argues that many empirical studies have been unsuccessful in fully or exclusively measuring beliefs about moral objectivity. Still, there are a few lessons that can be drawn from them. Most importantly, lay people are not objectivists. They believe that moral statements only express desires or that their truth is relative to individuals or cultures. The book's second part considers ways in which these empirical findings may help assess philosophical theories about moral objectivity. Overall, findings about people's moral objectivity beliefs suggest that morality is not objective. The truth of the matter may even lie beyond the traditional objectivism/non-objectivism dichotomy.

This book develops a unique perspective on a thriving new area of research. It is a valuable resource for upper level undergraduates, postgraduates and researchers in moral psychology, theoretical psychology, experimental philosophy, metaethics and philosophy of the mind.

Thomas Pölzler is a researcher and lecturer at the Philosophy Department of the University of Graz, Austria. He mainly works on moral psychology and metaethics. Among his many publications are *Moral Reality and the Empirical Sciences* (Routledge, 2018) as well as articles in journals such as *Synthese*, *Inquiry* and *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*.

ADVANCES IN THEORETICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Advances in Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology

Series Foreword

Brent D. Slife, Series Editor

Psychologists need to face the facts. Their commitment to empiricism for answering disciplinary questions does not prevent pivotal questions from arising that cannot be evaluated exclusively through empirical methods, hence the title of this series: *Advances in Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*. For example, such moral questions as “What is the nature of a good life?” are crucial to psychotherapists but are not answerable through empirical methods alone. And what of these methods? Many have worried that our current psychological means of investigation are not adequate for fully understanding the person (e.g., Gantt & Williams, 2018; Schiff, 2019). How do we address this concern through empirical methods without running headlong into the dilemma of methods investigating themselves? Such questions are in some sense philosophical, to be sure, but the discipline of psychology cannot advance even its own empirical agenda without addressing questions like these in defensible ways.

How then should the discipline of psychology deal with such distinctly theoretical and philosophical questions? We could leave the answers exclusively to professional philosophers, but this option would mean that the conceptual foundations of the discipline, including the conceptual framework of empiricism itself, are left to scholars who are *outside* the discipline. As undoubtedly helpful as philosophers are and will be, this situation would mean that the people doing the actual psychological work, psychologists themselves, are divorced from the people who formulate and re-formulate the conceptual foundations of that work. This division of labor would not seem to serve the long-term viability of the discipline.

Instead, the founders of psychology — scholars such as Wundt, Freud, and James — recognized the importance of psychologists in formulating their own foundations. These parents of psychology not only did their own theorizing, in cooperation with many other disciplines; they also realized the significance of psychologists continuously *re-examining* these theories and philosophies. This re-examination process allowed for the people most directly involved in and knowledgeable about the discipline to be the ones to decide *what* changes were needed, and *how* such changes would best be implemented. This book series is dedicated to that task, the examining and re-examining of psychology’s foundations.

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1

INTRODUCTION

Would it be better, from a moral point of view, to pursue a career in journalism than in finance? Does one have a duty to reduce one's emissions of greenhouse gases? Is it permissible to lie to one's partner so as to not hurt his or her feelings? People regularly ask themselves questions such as these — *moral* questions. Their answers to these questions significantly shape who they are, what they do, what they aim for, and even how they see the world (e.g., Ketelaar & Au 2003; Knobe 2010; Strohminger et al. 2017).

Given that morality is such a significant aspect of people's lives, it is important to understand it as well as possible. Philosophers have traditionally tried to do so in two main ways. The most natural way of engaging with moral questions is to simply try to answer them and to provide justifications for these answers. For example, one might claim that telling white lies is impermissible because if everybody acted on this action's underlying maxim then some practical contradiction would arise (Kant [1785] 1993). Answers and justifications of this sort fall into the realm of what philosophers call "normative" or "first-order" ethics.

In addition, however, some philosophers approach moral questions from a different perspective as well. They make more fundamental, morally neutral philosophical claims about these questions: they look at them, so to speak, from above; they attempt to understand these questions' philosophical properties without trying to actually answer them. This is an endeavor that philosophers typically refer to as "metaethics" or "second-order" ethics (e.g., Miller 2013; van Roojen 2015).¹

One of the most important metaethical questions concerns the metaphysical status of morality, in particular, its objectivity. Very roughly, the question is whether actions have moral properties that are mind-independent, i.e., independent from what anybody thinks about them (e.g., Huemer 2005; Joyce 2021; Miller 2009; Shafer-Landau 2003). For example, is telling lies to spare your partner's feeling really morally impermissible (as opposed to neither permissible nor impermissible)? If yes,

2 Introduction

would it still be if you yourself believed that it actually was permissible? Or what if most people within your culture believed so? Would that make it permissible?

Put more metaphorically, where are properties like moral rightness, wrongness, goodness, badness, etc. located in the world? Are they “out there”, waiting for them to be discovered (in the same way in which other facts about the objective world can be discovered)? Are they rather constructions, introduced and determined by what we as individuals or cultures believe about morality? Or do such properties maybe not exist at all?

Moral objectivists believe that mind-independent moral properties exist. Moral non-objectivists, in contrast, deny this proposition. They hold that these properties are either mind-dependent or do not exist at all.

Philosophers have discussed the truth of moral objectivism ever since the beginning of the discipline. For example, Plato ([375 BC] 2012) described moral norms as eternal, unchanging and immaterial forms that people can recollect from previous lives in the spirit realm. Xunzi ([3rd century BC] 2014) held that morality was invented by wise kings to prevent conflicts between humans and bring order and a long-term perspective to their inner lives. Hume ([1740] 1978) attempted to show that moral values are subjective in that they are grounded in our passions, not in some external reality. And Moore ([1903] 1993) argued that moral goodness cannot be identical with any natural property (such as maximizing happiness), because it is always an open question whether something that has this property is also good.

These examples illustrate how philosophers’ interest in the question of moral objectivity has typically been to answer this question, i.e., to figure out whether there are in fact objective moral properties. In this book I will be concerned with this philosophical question as well, especially in the second part. However, I will not attempt to answer it in any comprehensive, all-things-considered way. I will only ask about the extent and ways in which this question of morality’s objectivity can be informed by a very particular kind of empirical hypothesis.

The empirical hypotheses that I am interested in concern how lay people (people without philosophical training) think about morality’s objectivity. Do lay people believe in objectivism or non-objectivism? Which factors correlate with their metaethical beliefs? Which factors cause these beliefs or are themselves caused by them? I will investigate in what ways, if any, answers to these empirical questions can help us to determine whether morality is or is not an objective domain — in what ways, if any, these answers support objectivist or non-objectivist metaethical views.

The suggestion to consult lay people’s beliefs in investigating whether morality is objective might seem surprising. After all, specialists do not typically consult lay people’s beliefs when they want to figure out the truth about many other matters, such as about how to most effectively fight poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa or about whether string theory is true. So why should these beliefs be relevant to metaethics? But of course, arguments from hypotheses about folk moral objectivism are not as simplistic as this comparison suggests. They do not claim that there are, or are no,

objective moral properties just because lay people believe so. Rather, philosophers have inferred objectivist or non-objectivist conclusions in more sophisticated and qualified ways (e.g., Brink 1989; Colebrook 2021; Mackie [1977] 2011).

Arguments from folk moral objectivism involve two kinds of claims: (1) an empirical hypothesis about how lay people think about morality's objectivity, and (2) philosophical claims according to which this hypothesis allows certain conclusions about the truth or falsity of objectivism. It is helpful to distinguish discussions about these kinds of claims. This book is accordingly divided into two main parts. The first part attempts to assess empirical hypotheses that have been claimed to be metaethically relevant. The second part focuses on the philosophical question of whether these empirical hypotheses can really support moral objectivism's truth or falsity.

In their objectivist and non-objectivist arguments philosophers have appealed to four kinds of empirical hypotheses about lay people's moral objectivity beliefs: hypotheses about these beliefs' (1) content, (2) correlates, (3) causes and (4) consequences. A growing number of psychological studies have attempted to test different versions of these hypotheses in the last two decades (e.g., Beebe 2014; Goodwin & Darley 2008; Nichols 2004; Pölzler & Wright 2020; Sarkissian et al. 2011; Wright et al. 2013). The book's first part will provide a comprehensive review of these studies.

This review will be particularly tailored to the needs of philosophers. Not only will it be limited to those kinds of empirical hypotheses that have played or might play some role in metaethical discussions; my style of writing, presentation of results and methodological criticisms will presumably be more familiar to philosophers as well. Finally, and most importantly, I will only be interested in how lay people think about moral objectivity in the very sense of "objectivity" that has been discussed in metaethics (and not in studies that have assumed a somewhat different sense, and are hence less relevant to metaethics).

The second part of the book will then consider whether empirical hypotheses about the content, correlates, causes and consequences of lay people's moral objectivity beliefs can really have philosophical implications. To this effect, I will analyze a number of prominent arguments that are based on such hypotheses: (1) the presumptive argument (e.g., Brink 1989; Huemer 2005), (2) the debunking argument (e.g., Colebrook 2021; Levy & Weinshtock-Saadon forthcoming), (3) the conceptual argument (e.g., Mackie [1977] 2011), and (4) some additional arguments (e.g., Garner 2007; Joyce 2009a).

I will relate my assessments of the book's first part to each of these arguments' specific empirical hypotheses. Moreover, I will also assess the arguments' philosophical premises. That is, I will ask: if true, would the arguments' underlying hypotheses about lay people's moral objectivity beliefs really support moral objectivism or non-objectivism in the ways that have been suggested? And how strong would this support be?

However, before I move on to the above-mentioned tasks, I feel that some more preliminary remarks are in order. These remarks will make up the rest of this

introduction. First, I will explain why I turn to psychology in assessing empirical hypotheses about folk moral objectivism. Then I will clarify further what I mean by “beliefs” about “moral objectivity”. And finally, I will outline the contents of the book in more detail.

1.1 Approach

Philosophers have made claims about folk metaethics for a long time, most often to the effect that the majority of lay people tend towards moral objectivism (e.g., Brink 1989; Enoch 2011; Huemer 2005). In justifying these claims they have so far considered hardly any psychological studies at all. The evidence that they have appealed to has been almost exclusively non-scientific. In particular, they have relied on (1) moral phenomenology, i.e., the way in which it seems to people to make a moral judgment, to be in a moral disagreement, etc.; and (2) inferences from moral practice, i.e., from the way people think, speak and act with regard to morality.

As an example of the phenomenological approach, consider the following passages from McNaughton (1988) and Dancy (1986). They refer to how morality is “experienced” by or “presents itself” to us, and they suggest that this experience or presentation is objectivist in nature.

[...] we take moral value to be part of the fabric of the world; taking our experience at face value, we judge it to be experience of the moral properties of actions and agents in the world.

Dancy 1986: 172

Moral value is presented to us as something independent of our beliefs or feelings about it; something which may require careful thought or attention to be discovered.

McNaughton 1988: 40

Proponents of the moral practice approach have argued that the fact that moral practice has certain features allows us to infer that lay people are moral objectivists — not necessarily in the sense that they explicitly believe this theory but at least in the sense that they presuppose it. In the following passage, for example, Brink (1989) lists several features that, in his view, suggest that the folk are implicitly committed to objectivism.

In making [...] moral judgments, we (or at least those who make them) certainly seem to presuppose [...] the possibility of moral knowledge. [...] Commonsense moral thinking also supports moral realism insofar as we act as if there are moral facts. [...] we disagree and argue with others as if there were right answers to the moral issues about which we disagree. If our dispute is not the result of nonmoral disagreement, we regard our opponents as

morally mistaken. [...] In moral deliberation and argument we try and hope to arrive at the correct answer, that is, at the answer that is correct prior to, and independently of, our coming upon it.

Brink 1989: 25–26, 29

In my view, both the phenomenological and the moral practice approach to investigating how lay people think about moral objectivity are unlikely to deliver reliable results. The main problem with the phenomenological approach is generalizability. Even if philosophers like Dancy and McNaughton are correct about how morality seems *to them* (e.g., that it seems objective), who is to say that it seems that way to all or most or even only many other people as well?

In fact, without evidence that supports such generalizations, they seem rather dubious. Academic philosophers who participate in discussions of moral objectivism from an analytic perspective tend to occupy very peculiar social positions. They are extremely highly educated; they are dominantly Western, dominantly male and dominantly white; they tend to be more liberal, more wealthy and less religious than the average person; and so on (e.g., Bourget & Chalmers 2020a; Schwitzgebel et al. 2021). In short, in many respects philosophers who have generalized from their own moral phenomenology to that of lay people are very different from the overwhelming majority of lay people.

The moral practice approach is more promising. As we will see, in some sense much psychological research on folk moral objectivism is in fact based on it. But the approach suffers from a serious shortcoming as well, namely lack of relevant evidence. Think back to Brink's above quotation. In this passage he claims that in making moral judgements people presuppose the possibility of moral knowledge, that we act as if there are moral facts, that we disagree and argue with others as if there were right answers to moral issues, and so on. But why ought we to believe these claims? In fact, Brink (1989) and most other proponents of the approach (e.g., Shafer-Landau 2003; Smith 1994) have not presented any evidence for these claims at all.

A potential reply to this objection is that proponents of the moral practice approach actually do have evidence for their hypotheses about folk moral objectivism. These hypotheses are based on their own observations of moral practice. After all, philosophers are active participants of this practice and they observe how others behave; for example, when they teach their students, interact with family and friends, and so on. But this reply straightforwardly leads back to the generalizability worry. Academic philosophers also mostly only interact with people who share many of their demographic features (e.g., who are more liberal, wealthier and less religious than the average person). Moreover, occasional personal observations of moral practice are vulnerable to all sorts of biases and other problems.

In my view, the most reliable way of addressing how lay people think about moral objectivity is the way of science: the way of gathering systematic third-person evidence through empirical studies. The particular scientific discipline that is most

relevant to addressing folk moral objectivism is psychology.² Thus, as said, in this book I will rely on psychology in assessing hypotheses about how lay people think about the existence of objective moral properties — on the increasing number of studies that have recently been conducted on this question.

1.2 Clarifications

The empirical hypotheses that will be addressed in this book are about lay people's beliefs about moral objectivity. Many terms in this formulation would merit clarification.³ Here I will focus on the two that are most likely to be interpreted in unintended ways, namely “objectivity” and “beliefs”.

1.2.1 Objectivity

Above I have already stated that in this book objectivity will be understood in the sense of mind-independence (e.g., Huemer 2005; Joyce 2021; Miller 2009; Shafer-Landau 2003). Let me explain this conception in a bit more detail. In the first instance philosophers take objectivity to be an attribute of properties. For a property to be objective in the mind-independence sense means that whether a thing has this property is independent from the mental states of any observers — from what individuals believe about the property, from what cultures believe about it, and so on.

Moral objectivism and non-objectivism are, of course, about *moral* properties; properties such as moral rightness, wrongness, goodness or badness. Still, in understanding this definition it can be helpful to consider non-moral examples first. As an example of an objective non-moral property consider rectangularity. Whether a thing is rectangular is determined by whether it has four sides and equal angles. It does not matter whether any observer or group of observers believes that the thing is rectangular, desires that it is rectangular, hopes that it is rectangular, and so on (Huemer 2005). For example, even if I believed that the computer screen in front of me was not rectangular it would still remain rectangular. Hence, the property of being rectangular is objective.

In contrast, the property of being tasty seems to be subjective. It does depend on the mental states of observers. For a thing to be tasty simply means that a person — or perhaps some number of persons — believes that it is tasty. For example, if I stopped believing that vanilla ice cream is tasty then vanilla ice cream may no longer be tasty (for me). It would cease to have this property. Hence, we can say that the property of being tasty is subjective.

The question that moral objectivists and non-objectivists disagree about concerns whether moral properties have the same metaphysical status as rectangularity. Objectivists claim that this is the case. According to them, some actions are morally right, wrong, good, bad, etc., and they have these properties even if I myself believed them to not have these properties, even if most people in my culture believed them to not have these properties, and so on (e.g., Brink 1989; Enoch

2011; Huemer 2005). Non-objectivists, in contrast, deny the existence of mind-independent moral properties. Many of them believe that these properties in some way depend on people's mental states (like being tasty) (e.g., Harman 1975; Prinz 2007b). Some even deny that there are things that are morally right, wrong, good, bad, etc. at all (e.g., Blackburn 1998; Mackie [1977] 2011).

This definition of "objectivity" in terms of mind-independence is still rough and leaves many questions open (see, e.g., Huemer 2005; Joyce 2009a; Miller 2009).⁴ At the moment, however, there is no need for us to consider it in more detail. The only important further information that I would like to add is terminological. Even though objectivity is in the first instance an attribute of properties, one can also say of other things that they are objective in the mind-independence sense. In particular, for a *fact* to be objective means that it consists in the exemplification of an objective property; and for a *statement* to be objective means for it to be true and to be made true by an objective fact.

In the following chapter I will accordingly also speak of objective moral facts (meaning facts that consist in the exemplification of objective moral properties) and of objective moral statements (meaning statements that are true and made true by objective moral facts).

1.2.2 Beliefs

A second term that requires some initial clarification is "beliefs". The mental attitude by which lay people affirm or deny moral objectivism has been labeled in a number of different ways. For example, philosophers and psychologists have talked about "beliefs" (e.g., Beebe et al. 2015), "intuitions" (e.g., Beebe & Sackris 2016; Joyce 2021; Sarkissian et al. 2011), "perceptions" (e.g., Goodwin & Darley 2012), "experiences" (e.g., Dancy 1986; Joyce 2010), "seemings" (e.g., Huemer 2005), "appearances" (e.g., Sayre-McCord 2015) and "commitments" (e.g., Enoch 2005; Nichols 2004; Zijlstra forthcoming).

In their standard meaning, some of these terms entail claims about (1) the processes that can lead to the relevant mental attitudes or (2) the level of conscious awareness that is associated with them. For example, that something is an "intuition" suggests that it has resulted from quick, automatic, and effortless processes (e.g. Haidt 2001);⁵ that something is a "perception" suggests that it has been formed on the basis of sense data (e.g., Martin 1998); and "experiences", "seemings" and "appearances" are often thought of as (rather immediate and pre-reflective) attitudes whose content has not been inferred from the content of other attitudes (Lycan 1988) or that involve a special phenomenology; in particular, the feeling that their content is true (e.g. Huemer 2007).

This is an important insight. It suggests that when psychologists and philosophers have made claims about folk attitudes about moral objectivism they may not always have made claims about the *same* attitudes. For example, while some might have targeted more immediate attitudes, others might have targeted more reflective ones. In this book I will use the term "belief" as a generic umbrella term that stands for

all the attitudes by which people can take propositions about moral objectivity to be true or false — that covers what researchers typically understand by “intuitions”, “perceptions”, “seemings”, and all other descriptions that have been used.⁶ The term is hence supposed to be neutral between (1) different processes that can lead to these attitudes and (2) different levels of conscious awareness that are associated with them.

To differentiate between metaethical beliefs that have arisen from different processes I will use the attributes “immediate” and “reflective”. Immediate beliefs, similarly to intuitions, are a product of quick, automatic and effortless cognitive processes (along the lines of System 1). Reflective beliefs, in contrast, are caused by slow, conscious and effortful processes (along the lines of System 2) (Stanovich & West 2000; Sperber 1997). Moreover, I will use the attributes “implicit” and “explicit” to distinguish metaethical beliefs in terms of their levels of associated conscious awareness. Implicit beliefs are beliefs that people are not consciously aware of having, and hence are not able to articulate. Explicit beliefs, in contrast, are such that people are aware of them (Zijlstra forthcoming).

Both distinctions should be thought of as polar rather than as binary. Beliefs can be more or less immediate or reflective and more or less implicit or explicit, without being so fully. In other words, these labels are meant to denote the ends of spectrums. I am aware that even with these explanations the distinctions between immediate and reflective metaethical beliefs and implicit and explicit metaethical beliefs still remain somewhat vague. Yet, they strike me as very helpful and important in discussing folk moral objectivism.

Empirical studies have addressed beliefs at different points on the implicit/explicit and immediate/reflective spectrums [Section 2.2]. Philosophers have sometimes meant their claims to apply to only particular kinds of moral objectivity beliefs as well [Sections 6.2.2, 8.3]. For example, some proponents of the phenomenological approach have only focused on what lay people immediately believe about this matter (e.g., Dancy 1986; McNaughton 1988), while some proponents of the moral practice approach have only focused on implicit beliefs (e.g., Brink 1989; Enoch 2005). It would be misleading to treat these researchers’ hypotheses as being about the same kinds of mental attitudes.

1.3 Outline

In the previous sections I have provided some clarification with regard to the book’s topic, aims and terminology. To repeat, I mainly hope to achieve two things. In the first part I will review the available psychological evidence on folk beliefs about moral objectivism, so as to be able to evaluate hypotheses about the content, correlates, causes and consequences of these beliefs. In the second part I will assess what these hypotheses imply for the metaethical debate about whether objectivism is in fact true (by investigating a number of philosophical arguments that have involved such hypotheses). Let me close this introduction by outlining the book’s content in more detail.

1.3.1 *Empirical Research*

The book's first part will address psychological research on folk moral objectivism. In particular, I will consider four issues: (1) this research's methodology, (2) what it has so far revealed about the content of folk moral objectivity beliefs, (3) what it has revealed about these beliefs' correlates, and (4) what it has revealed about their causes and consequences.

The main challenge in conducting psychological research on folk moral objectivism is to actually measure beliefs about objectivism. In Chapter 2 I will assess various versions of the most common measures of objectivism — disagreement measures, truth-aptness measures, and psychometric scales — as well as some alternative measures. I argue that the construct validity of these measures varies to a large extent and is often rather low. That is, the measures have not succeeded in fully or exclusively measuring moral objectivism. This suggests that in interpreting existing research one must be both cautious (in the sense of not overstating its epistemic weight) and selective (in the sense of giving greater weight to the results of some studies than to those of others).

Accounting for these conclusions, Chapter 3 will investigate the content of lay people's moral objectivity beliefs. These beliefs can take different forms: more immediate or more reflective, more explicit or more implicit. I will argue that across all of these forms the available evidence supports the following three claims: (1) lay people's beliefs vary in the sense that they sometimes consider moral statements to be objective and other times non-objective. (2) Some of this variation is intrapersonal, i.e., one and the same person sometimes has objectivist and other times non-objectivist beliefs. (3) Overall, metaethical beliefs do not favor moral objectivism. They rather tend towards non-objectivism.

In Chapter 4 I will be concerned with what predicts this variation in metaethical beliefs. Several variables have been studied and found to correlate with moral objectivity beliefs. However, in light of previously discussed methodological worries, as well as the fact that many individual variables have only been investigated by a very small number of studies, our confidence in most correlative hypotheses should be low. There are only four exceptions. In particular, there are now good reasons to believe that people are more likely to have objectivist views about a moral statement if (1) they believe the statement is widely accepted in their society, (2) they strongly agree with the statement, (3) they believe in some religion or God, and (4) they are less tolerant towards those who disagree with them about the statement.

Finally, Chapter 5 will explore the causes and consequences of moral objectivity beliefs. I distinguish between proximate and ultimate causes. In light of the issues that were mentioned in the previous paragraph, most hypotheses about the proximate causes of moral objectivity beliefs are very uncertain. The only causal factor that is relatively well established is consensus beliefs. That is, believing that a moral statement is widely accepted in a person's society causes the person to regard this statement as objective. I will also attempt to show that the hypothesis that moral

objectivity beliefs have evolved because they were reproductively advantageous to our ancestors lacks in support. Finally, I will argue that we also do not have much knowledge about the consequences of moral objectivity beliefs.

1.3.2 *Philosophical Implications*

The book's second part will address the potential implications of the above psychological findings for the question of whether morality is in fact objective. I will investigate four types of arguments that have purported to establish such implications: (1) the presumptive argument, (2) the debunking argument, (3) the conceptual argument and (4) some additional, less controversial arguments.

Many moral objectivists claim that since lay people believe in moral objectivity, we have a *prima facie* reason to accept this view, i.e., that there are objective moral properties. In light of findings in the book's first part, Chapter 6 will suggest that this argument is empirically untenable. Lay people do not tend (at least not exclusively or dominantly) towards objectivism. In addition, I will argue that even if the presumptive argument were understood as an argument for a pluralist metaethical position it would still fail. This is because all of its most common variants suffer also from philosophical deficits. Finally, another argument from folk moral objectivism challenges the presumptive argument by suggesting that lay people's metaethical beliefs are unjustified.

This argument, to be addressed in Chapter 7, is the debunking argument. Many of the factors that might cause lay people's beliefs about moral objectivity appear to be independent of the truth about this matter. For example, even if there were broad societal consensus about the truth of some statement, this statement could still be non-objective. This suggests that lay people's metaethical beliefs lack justification — that the available psychological evidence “debunks” them (in the same way in which some philosophers have attempted to debunk some or all first-order moral beliefs). I will suggest that at least indirectly, via casting further doubt on the presumptive argument, this conclusion also decreases philosophers' justification for accepting objectivism.

In Chapter 8 I will then move on to an argument that targets the conceptual presuppositions of objectivism and non-objectivism. According to this argument, the truth of these presuppositions is at least partly determined by the extent to which they conform to lay people's conceptual beliefs. As these beliefs are objectivist, the argument goes, we have reason to believe in objectivism's conceptual presupposition. I will defend this argument's main philosophical premise. However, considering empirical findings of the book's first part, I will suggest that the argument actually supports that the meaning of moral statements varies, is indeterminate or incoherent. That is, while some parts or aspects of moral language purport to represent objective moral facts, others fail to do so.

Finally, in Chapter 9 I will consider three arguments whose assessment strikes me as less controversial than those mentioned before: the methodological argument (which urges metaethicists to be careful about the examples that they use as

intuition-pumps), the abolitionist argument (which claims that morality decreases people's tolerance, and hence ought to be abolished), and the projectivist argument (which claims that people project objective moral properties onto the world, and we are thus unjustified in believing in these properties). I will endorse the methodological argument, provide a cautiously negative assessment of the abolitionist argument and confidently reject the projectivist argument.

1.3.3 Conclusion

In my above outline I have listed a number of different empirical and philosophical findings. What do these findings suggest, taken together? Do they support moral objectivism or non-objectivism?

In the book's concluding chapter I will argue that overall, the reviewed empirical evidence gives us a reason to reject objectivism, i.e., to doubt that actions can be morally right, wrong, good, bad, etc. independently of what anybody thinks about them. This mainly follows from the failure of the presumptive argument as well as from the plausibility of the debunking argument and the methodological argument. The natural implication is that morality must then be non-objective. However, while this claim is supported in some sense, the actual truth of the matter might actually lie beyond objectivism and non-objectivism, as they have been traditionally conceived. In light of the conceptual argument different versions of non-objectivism could be true for different parts or aspects of morality ("non-traditional non-objectivist pluralism").

That said, besides findings about folk moral objectivism, other potential sources of evidence bear on the moral objectivism/non-objectivism debate as well. These sources might tip the balance in favor of some other position. My considerations in this book hence do not rule out that all things considered, we are still most justified to believe in some traditional version of non-objectivism, or perhaps even objectivism.

Notes

- 1 Some philosophers (e.g., Dworkin 1996) have argued that metaethical statements are actually only moral statements in disguise. Here I will assume that this view about the nature of metaethics is mistaken.
- 2 That said, psychology is of course not the only discipline that can contribute to testing hypotheses about folk moral objectivism. Others (e.g., linguistics and anthropology) can do so as well.
- 3 Take, for example, "lay people". There are clear cases of lay people, e.g., my grandmother (who has not received any philosophical training, read any philosophical books, etc.). There are also clear cases of non-lay people, i.e., experts, e.g., me (as somebody who has done research on moral objectivism, has taught courses on it, etc.). But what about, for example, a student who has taken an "Introduction to Metaethics" class? Or a philosopher who is specialized in some very different area, such as symbolic logic or the history of philosophy of science? Do they count as lay people? In this book several important

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clarificatory questions such as these will mostly be left open. I hope that they will be addressed in more detail in future research.

- 4 The authors referenced in the previous paragraph would only accept this definition in some qualified forms. For more details, especially on how to understand non-objectivism, see Section 2.3.
- 5 At least this is how many psychologists understand the term. Philosophers have sometimes assumed different understandings of the term “intuition” (Huemer 2005). On this understanding intuitions are identical with or related to experiences, seemings or appearances.
- 6 “Commitments” would have been a suitable term too. I prefer “beliefs” because it more strongly emphasizes that the target phenomenon is a mental attitude.

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