

Imagination and the Experience of Moral Objectivity

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1. Introduction

What it takes to experience a moral value or a moral obligation *as* objective rather than subjective – for it to *appear* to be objective – depends on what it means for something to *be* objective. We need to be clear about what objectivity is before asking how (and whether) it can be experienced. If being objective means *existing independently of any subject*, then experiencing a moral value as objective requires that it appear to exist independently of any subject. If being objective means *originating in objects or events that are external to us*, then experiencing a moral value as objective requires that it appear to originate in something outside of ourselves. The first of these two options makes moral objectivity (and the experience of moral value as objective) highly implausible, however, while the second makes it rather trivial. After explaining my reasons for putting these two options aside, I offer some more interesting versions of objectivity and of what it takes to experience moral values and moral obligations as objective. As indicated in the title of this paper, these accounts assign a crucial role to the imagination.

2. Morality needs subjects

Kevin DeLapp (2009) defines moral objectivism as “the view that moral values exist in a way that makes no reference to any features of agents whatsoever.”¹ Such a view is incompatible with the assumption that moral values and obligations concern the treatment of people or other sentient beings. (If there are values and obligations regarding non-sentient things, these are not usually considered *moral* values and obligations.) Some moral values and obligations concern feelings like pain and pleasure (an obligation to relieve suffering, for example); others concern attitudes like hope and fear (the value of ensuring safety, for example); and still others concern people’s beliefs and ideals (freedom of religion, for example). Without subjects to have such experiences, there would be nothing for morality to be about.

Moral obligations also require subjects who can act on their obligations (we can’t be obliged to do something we can’t do), and that requires that they be able recognize their obligations. Acting in ways that merely happen to have the right result does not count as acting morally. If unbeknownst to me my arrival at the playground protects my child, it won’t count as a moral act on my part, nor a case of meeting my obligation to protect my child. Similarly, if I have forgotten our appointment but happen to run into you at the agreed-upon time, I have not acted morally and have not met my obligation to keep a promise. (This is different than legal obligations, where doing what is demanded – for whatever reason – can count as meeting one’s legal

¹ DeLapp offers this characterization of moral objectivism by way of distinguishing it from moral realism --“the view that moral values exist independently of any evidential or cognitive contributions of agents.” (p. 4) I agree with DeLapp that objectivism, so understood, is extremely implausible. I offer a different characterization of objectivism – one that is closer to his characterization of moral realism. His characterization of moral realism, however, requires values to be independent of “any evidential or cognitive contributions” of agents – thereby allowing for a subjectivist realism whereby moral values are entirely reducible to an assortment of feelings and impulses. This, too, seems extremely implausible.

obligations.) In this way also, then, the existence of moral values and obligations depends on the existence of sentient beings; it requires beings who can be the agents as well as the recipients of moral action.

For both of these reasons, few people would suppose that moral values and obligations are objective in the sense that an ocean wave or a planet's orbit is objective – existing “in a way that makes no reference to any features of agents whatsoever”. And fewer still would claim to have experiences that support such a view. If we imagine a world without any people in it, how (and where) would moral values appear in it? The implausibility of this option should make us look elsewhere for an account of what it takes to experience moral values and obligations as objective.

3. *Externality and objectivity*

Recently, several philosophers have appealed to Mandelbaum's 1955 descriptions of moral experience in order to investigate the phenomenology of moral objectivity. Central to Mandelbaum's descriptions is the sense that something outside of us is putting pressure on us to act in a particular way – that another person's suffering, for example, is putting pressure on us to help them.² Some philosophers (Glasgow 2012) have drawn on Mandelbaum's descriptions in order to show that we do indeed experience moral obligations as objective obligations, while others (Horgan and Timmons 2008) have insisted that even if his descriptions are accurate they don't show that we experience moral obligations as objective (versus cognitive) obligations.

I want to highlight a couple of distinctions that bear on these discussions. First, there is a distinction between experiencing something external as *prompting an internal pressure* to act versus experiencing something as *exerting an external pressure* to act. Consider what happens when we smell fresh coffee and feel impelled to go get some, or when we hear a catchy tune and are moved to hum along. We certainly experience the coffee and the music as external prompts for our urges, but do we also experience them as exerting pressure on us? I think the latter is possible, but not common. Likewise, the pressure I feel to react to a person's suffering seems to me to be like the pressure I feel to hum along to the music – prompted by an external event but not exerted by that event.³

I suggest, further, that the more one experiences the pressure to do something as an external force, the less one's response will seem like a chosen act. The more I experience another person's

² As illustrated by this example, the relevant sense of “external” includes the mental states of others – states that exist in a location that is literally outside of our own minds and bodies. (It is not clear whether moral obligations to ourselves could also be experienced as exerting an external pressure.)

³ It is also possible that we do experience the pressure as a force reaching from the coffee towards us but we don't usually notice or attend to that. This seems to be the view of Glasgow (2012). Note how the experience of external pressure is more plausible for what Horgan and Timmons (2008) call “experiences of moral obligation that are direct [i.e. about a present versus distant situation] and intuitive [not deliberate or reflective]”. This is a significant restriction; it is not clear whether obligations that concern distant situations, and obligations that are arrived at through reflection, cannot be experienced as objective or can be experienced as objective in some other way.

suffering as forcing a particular response from me – me being merely the vehicle through which an external force brings about a particular behavior, the less I will experience it as *my* action.⁴

The second distinction I want to highlight is the distinction between feeling a *pressure* to act and feeling an *obligation* to act. I feel an urge to sing along to certain music, but I don't feel any obligation to do so. Even if feeling pressured to do something is a necessary part of feeling obligated to do that thing, it is not sufficient. Mandelbaum's account of the phenomenology of obligation addresses this insufficiency by also requiring a sense of "fittingness", a feeling that the act in question is "appropriate to the circumstances". Horgan and Timmons elaborate on this requirement by suggesting that the feeling of obligation is felt as a demand to adjust our preferences in response to the world rather than adjust the world in response to our preferences.⁵ Similarly, I suppose, in the case of singing along to music, I might feel obliged to fit my sounds to the sounds I hear – matching them note for note, or at least singing in the same key. But whereas the notion of 'fit' seems straightforward in the case where I am matching my sounds to the sounds I hear, it seems suspect in the case where my actions seek to alter rather than replicate the situation I encounter. How does my intervention on behalf of a child 'fit' the fact that she is being bullied? When I intervene to protect someone, am I not trying to adjust the world in response to my preferences rather than adjusting my preferences in response to the world?

Keeping these distinctions in mind should make us wary of relying on (these aspects of) Mandelbaum's description to make sense of the experience of moral values as objective. While I agree that experiencing something as external amounts to experiencing it as objective, experiencing something as having its source in something external doesn't suffice for experiencing that very thing (in this case, a value or an obligation) as external. Appealing to an outward-directed 'fit' is equally unhelpful insofar as morality concerns actions that seek to alter rather than imitate the situations they encounter. As stated in the introduction, experiencing moral values as objective would be rather trivial if it required nothing more than experiencing them as originating in something external; and the additional demand that our actions 'fit' the external world is quite empty if fitting the external world means nothing more than being 'appropriate to' the external world.

4. *Objectivity as attitude independence*

A more promising characterization of objectivity maintains that things are objective (objects, properties, events, forces, dispositions, whatever) just in case their existence does not depend on

⁴ Kriegel (2011) distinguishes aliefs and beliefs, with aliefs motivating along the lines of Mandelbaum's analysis (felt pressure). He thinks aliefs are more important to morality, but he denies that they have the "objective character" of beliefs (that can guide more deliberate actions). I am puzzled, though, by what Kriegel means by the objective phenomenology of moral beliefs. He writes that the moral belief that involuntary servitude is wrong "feels just as objectively compelling as believing that water is H₂O (as opposed to merely entertaining it). This is the objectivist phenomenology of moral belief." (p.11) But I don't think I *feel* compelled to believe that water is H₂O, certainly not in the way that I feel compelled to believe that involuntary servitude is wrong. The first involves a deference to authority, the second a kind of empathy.

⁵ They do not think this additional requirement suffices as evidence of objectivity – only as evidence of cognitivism (which leaves room for "cognitive expressivism").

our attitudes towards them – if they would exist even if we failed to notice them or believe in them, affirm or deny them. This does not require the thing in question to be capable of existing in the absence of any subjects (as discussed in section 2, above), only that it can exist without being acknowledged by anyone.⁶ An act of kindness, for example, would be objectively valuable if it were valuable even though no one recognized its value; and my obligation to keep a promise (to a dying parent, say) would be an objective obligation if I were obliged to keep my promise even if no one ever noticed or cared.

Suppose that a child is being bullied and an adult intervenes to protect that child. Suppose, further, that the child and the bully both resent the intervention; and the intervening adult, considering the resulting resentment, regards her intervention as a rather stupid, kneejerk reaction. Suppose, finally, that no one else ever learns anything about this encounter. In this instance, there is no one who actually approves of the adult's intervention. Reflecting on this case, however, many of us would maintain that the intervention was still valuable, perhaps even obligatory. We insist that it doesn't matter that both the actor and the acted upon deny its value, for there are still very real (if unrecognized) benefits for the children, and very real (if unrecognized) obligations of the adult witness.

This broad characterization of objectivity can be spelled out in several different ways – each of which generate somewhat different requirements for the *experience* of values as objective. In this section I simply describe three versions of objectivity as attitude independence. In the next section I explore how each sort of independence can be experienced – thus, how three can be a phenomenology of moral objectivity.

Version I (Weak objectivity): A weak form of objectivity maintains that an act can be valuable or obligatory even if no one present regards it as valuable – as long as it would be regarded as valuable by members of the larger community. It might be that no one currently on the playground approves of a parent intervening to protect a bullied child, but members of the surrounding community would approve of the intervention if it were brought to their attention. That would give its value a weak kind of objectivity. (Or, if the surrounding community would disapprove of the intervention, preferring to let its children fend for themselves, that would give its disvalue a weak kind of objectivity.) Thus:

The moral value (disvalue) of an act is weakly objective just in case the larger community would approve (disapprove) if the act were brought to its attention.

In this case, the moral value of a particular act will be independent of the judgments of any particular person (present or not) but it will not be independent of the judgments of a larger

⁶ Mandelbaum (1955) claims that moral obligations are objective only if they hold independently of our *preferences and interests*, and Horgan and Timmons (2008) claims that objective obligations must be free of *self-interest*. But it is hard to see how moral values and obligations could be independent of all human interests, and hard to see why others' interests could be relevant while one's own are not.

community. It is a fairly weak kind of moral objectivity since it really amounts to a belief in the *intersubjectivity* of moral values and obligations.⁷

This characterization of weak objectivity accommodates different understandings of “the larger community” – leaving it indeterminate as to whether the boundaries of the larger community are determined by geographical location, by a shared language or religion, or by explicit commitments, for example. It also accommodates different understandings of how a community “would” respond – would if they knew all relevant facts, would if they adhered to their stated norms, or would if they were appropriately impartial for example. Regardless of one’s understanding of these matters, though, it should be clear that weak objectivity will come in degrees as greater or smaller groups agree under different conditions and to different degrees.

Reliance on the judgments of a larger community seems appropriate in matters of etiquette. A person’s comment or gesture can be rude even if no one notices its rudeness, but there must be a larger community of people that would consider it rude if it were brought to their attention. And what is rude within one community (slurping soup) may not be rude within another. Likewise, if moral obligations are only objective in this weak sense, then what is morally right within one community may be morally wrong within another.

Version II (Moderate objectivity):

Many of us are unwilling to defer to the moral judgments of our larger community. The fact that my larger community considers torture to be morally valuable under certain circumstances doesn’t make it morally valuable; and the fact that my moral community regards ambitiousness as a moral virtue may be irrelevant to my own view of the matter. Restricting the relevant community to a community of moral experts doesn’t help unless we know who the moral experts are; and if we are unwilling to defer to the moral judgments of our community it is unlikely that we will defer to its designation of moral experts. (Just think of how many times a pope has been morally misguided, or how many times an ethics professor has defended something unethical.)

But what if the determination of moral experts were based on their adherence to an appropriate procedure – just as the determination of scientific experts is based on their adherence to an appropriate procedure? As long as we, individually, had reason to trust the procedure we might be willing to defer to those who adhere to it. This deference could be understood in a couple of different ways. One possibility is that we have direct experience of certain moral values and obligations and we find that a particular procedure reliably predicts those values and obligations; as a result, we come to trust that procedure (even more than we trust a single direct experience) to tell us what is morally valuable or obligatory. This, presumably, is what happens when people put their trust in science (even when it sometimes conflicts with their direct experience). A second possibility is that we equate the rightness of a moral judgment with the rightness of a

⁷ The value (disvalue) is real, but it is constituted by the shared judgments of a community; its ‘reality’ is some sort of social construction.

procedure; whatever the procedure produces is, by necessity, correct. If moral acts are defined as the acts of those whose emotions adhere to the mean, for example, then our deference to these experts reduces to a deference to these procedures. Likewise, if moral obligations are equated with maxims that we can simultaneously will to be a universal law (Kant's Categorical Imperative), then anyone who manages to discover and to follow such maxims is, necessarily, moral.⁸ Either way, we get a moderate form of objectivity:

The moral value (disvalue) of an act is moderately objective just in case people would approve (disapprove) of the act if they followed an appropriate procedure.

There can be disputes, of course, about what an appropriate procedure is; and if we leave the determination of appropriate procedures up to experts, moral values will, once again, depend on the judgments of others. Here the dependence enters a step back, however – at the level of community justifications, rather than community conclusions; and that has the advantage of enabling a community to use its own standards to criticize itself and to explain its own mistakes by reference to deviations from its own norms.⁹

A non-moral counterpart that is widely regarded as having this sort of objectivity is color. We think that everyone in a community could agree that a certain wall is brown yet still be wrong insofar as someone with better eyesight, in better lighting conditions, with less distractions would judge it to be grey. We defer to that person's judgement because it is made under conditions or according to procedures that we recognize as the best way to determine the color of something. Their judgments are authoritative because they are better able to follow appropriate procedures – that is, procedures that are able to predict our own direct experiences (“It will look bluer in artificial light”, “It will look yellower against a purple background”).¹⁰

Version III (Strong objectivity):

A still stronger version of moral objectivity claims that moral values and obligations would be what they are even if we were incapable of knowing what they are – even if we had no reliable

⁸ Horgan and Timmons (2008) regard a procedure-based conception of objectivity to be an alternative to the conception of objectivity as externality. I regard it as a sub-category within a judgment-independence conception of objectivity.

⁹ Note the difference between ‘explaining’ error by reference to a ‘bad upbringing’ or a lack of ‘proper education’ versus explaining error by reference to inattentiveness, or the distractions of a crisis, or self-protective forgetfulness.

¹⁰ Thus McDowell's (1985) defense of value properties as secondary properties. Kriegel (2011) calls this an intermediate position (between moral realism and moral anti-realism), where moral facts, like color facts, are external but not mind-independent. DeLapp (2009) calls it “dispositional realism”.

procedure for discovering what is morally valuable or obligatory.¹¹ I might believe that giving preferential treatment to family members is morally valuable, even obligatory – without, however, having any idea of how to justify or test or challenge this belief. Further, I might believe that others’ attempts at justifying or testing or challenging their moral convictions are pointless (and presumptuous) since we are all ‘in the dark’ when it comes to deciding moral issues. Nevertheless I could insist that there is a fact of the matter (however unknowable that fact may be) as to whether we should give preferential treatment to family members. Hence:

The moral value (or disvalue) of an act is strongly objective just in case it is valuable (or disvaluable) even if no one is capable of knowing its value.

Belief in the strong objectivity of moral values might be accompanied by the claim that “only God knows”, or it might arise from the sense that the world and our place in it are fundamentally mysterious. It is a view that tends to be discounted by philosophers, but is not uncommon. When someone trusts faith rather than reason to provide moral guidance, they may trust the pronouncements of a sacred book, or they may await responses to their prayers – in which case they do have a method for justifying their moral beliefs. Many people, however, think and act as though they have no idea how to justify their own moral convictions and they have no confidence in anyone else’s attempts to do so. While some of these people consider morality to be purely subjective, plenty of others allude instead to the ultimate unknowability of moral truths. They are not aware of any method for determining what is morally valuable, yet they are convinced that there is a fact of the matter. At best, they hope that some power beyond their understanding will guide them on the right moral path.

Aesthetic merit is sometimes thought of as objective in this strong sense. In the face of widespread disagreement about good versus bad art, we may become simple subjectivists (“it’s all in the eyes of the beholder”) or we may think that there are mysterious forces that work through some artists to enable them to create good art – even though we have no way of knowing what really is good.

5. *Experiencing independence*

I have described three versions of moral objectivity according to which the objectivity of a moral value or obligation consists in some sort of independence from our moral judgments. But how is

¹¹ In the words of the poet Nelly Sachs (recounted in Paul Celan’s poem “Zurich, Hotel Zum Storchen”), “We just don’t know what counts”. DeLapp (2007): “In general a theory about what is real is not necessarily impugned by an inability to describe how we might come to know that reality: belief in there being a truth of the matter with respect to some area of inquiry is compatible with also believing that we do not (or cannot ever) know that truth. On the other hand, ethics is typically conceived as a practical discipline, providing some degree of guidance about what we should do, how we should live, and what we should value. A metaethical theory that leaves us completely in the dark about these questions should be a last philosophical resort.” (p. 44)

it possible to *experience* (versus *believe in*) any such independence? How can a value's *independence* from our experience appear *within* our experience?¹²

Typically, we experience the independence of one thing from another when we observe the one without the other. We experience a sound as independent of a clock if we notice that the sound continues in the absence of the clock. We can't notice that a sound continues in the absence of any experience of it, however, and we can't notice that an obligation continues in the absence of any recognition of it. There is another option, though. We can notice the independence of something from our experience of it by noticing how that thing persists despite variations in the way it appears to us – how any given appearance of the thing can disappear without that thing itself disappearing. In the case of stable physical objects such as clocks and rocks, variations in their appearance can be explained by variations in the location of the observer or variations in the conditions that support observation. We look at the clock from the front versus the back, we look at it in the light versus in the dark, and so on. The recognition of invariants across these appearances, together with our implicit understanding of why there are variations (our folk physics, as it were), go hand in hand to give us the experience of the thing's objectivity. In the case of sound, it is quite possible (and quite common) to register the continuation of a sound despite variations in our experience of it – hearing it first close up and then far away, hearing it clearly and then muffled, hearing it first as steady and then as more uneven. When this happens, we can experience the sound as something that persists independently of how it appears to us – as something objective rather than subjective.

If this is right, it suggests that we will experience an act as objectively valuable insofar as we experience approval of the act as invariant across a variety of perspectives on that act. (And we will experience an act as objectively disvaluable insofar as we experience disapproval of the act as invariant across a variety of perspectives on that act.) *Believing* that approval is common to a variety of perspectives may support a belief in the objectivity of the act's value, but believing in the objectivity of a value is neither necessary nor sufficient for *experiencing* a value as objective.¹³ To experience an act as objectively valuable, the invariance across perspectives must itself be experienced.

¹² I remain neutral as to whether experiencing something thing *as* objective -- its *apparent* objectivity – requires a certain sort of object or a certain way of experiencing. My account, which relies on imagining, could be understood in either way – as requiring the creation of certain images, or as requiring imaginative ways of processing information. I am also neutral with regard to disjunctive accounts according to which the content of veridical experiences is different than the content of nonveridical experiences.

¹³ People can *experience* moral facts *as* objective facts even though they believe that moral facts are merely subjective. This is the case with many philosophy students who come to believe that morality is a social construct while still experiencing moral obligations as something independent of anyone's beliefs or desires. (Their situation is analogous to those who think color is all 'in the mind' but continue to experience it as 'out there'.) Conversely, people can believe that moral facts are objective facts without experiencing them as such. This is what happens with many religious disciples who believe the claims of their leaders without actually experiencing the validity of those claims for themselves. (Their situation is analogous to those who believe the chef who says that the oil is rancid but are unable to taste that for themselves.)

For the weak version of objectivity described above, it is invariance across community members' perspectives that is relevant. There are several ways that such invariance can appear within my own experience. First, I can observe the behavior of others actually witnessing the act in question, and notice their shared approval or disapproval. I might observe various onlookers frowning, crying out, or actually blocking the beating of a child, for example – noting the disapproval that is invariant across their various responses. Likewise, I might observe them nodding, cheering, or joining in with my intervention on behalf of the child – making their shared approval of my intervention apparent to me. (Whether or not one agrees that their disapproval is *perceived*, one can agree that it is *apparent* in their behavior.¹⁴) Second, and more commonly, I *imagine* how various others (family, friends, neighbors, colleagues) *would* appear if they were to witness the act in question. Such imagining may be based on memories, or on implicit beliefs, or on complex theories. (I discuss the sources and the reliability of imagining in section 5, below.) Regardless of its accuracy, though, the behavior that I expect from others becomes apparent when I imagine what it would look like; it becomes a part of the phenomenology of my experience. While recreative imagining is usually less reliable than direct observation of others' responses, it extends to many more situations (when relevant others are not present, for example, or when the act has not yet occurred). There is considerable empirical evidence that people, especially children, experience the force of moral judgments in this way.¹⁵ They imagine what others, especially their parents, would do or say; those imagined responses function as motivators but also, to the extent that they converge, they create the sense that there is an objective fact of the matter. Again, this impression of intersubjective agreement – of weak objectivity -- can arise regardless of whether one's imagining is accurate, and regardless of whether one actually believes that there is intersubjective agreement.

A third way that intersubjective agreement can appear within our experience is through our recreative imagining of the inner states (rather than the outward behavior) or others in response to a particular act. I might imagine my family's pleasure and pride in response to my action, I might imagine the sympathy of observant neighbors, or I might imagine colleagues' relief that order has been restored. Within each group there is a shared sentiment, and across these groups there is a shared approval. When I imagine community responses converging in this way, I experience the value of that act as objective (in the weak sense of objectivity, specified above).

Recreative imagining of the likely mental states of others may be more difficult than recreatively imagining the likely behavior of others (which one has observed in the past). It may involve more theorizing (however unconscious) about the sources of observed behavior, and it may require us to empathize with feelings that are very different than our own. While I can simply

¹⁴ How things *appear* will be heavily influenced by what one believes, what one cares about, what one attends to. When we watch children's interactions on a playground their bullying becomes apparent. And when we imagine the face of a parent were they to witness the scene, their likely disapproval becomes apparent. In Church (2013), I defend a broad view of perception according to which such things are literally perceivable. But nothing here turns on this defense – as long as one acknowledges an appropriately thick notion of appearing.

¹⁵ Tomasello (2020) offers a useful overview of some of these findings. There is also a strong psychoanalytic tradition that associates the moral superego with the imagined voice of a parent figure. See Church (1991).

remember certain expressions on my neighbors' faces, I might have to guess at what they were actually feeling; and even if I guess correctly, it might be difficult for me to imagine those feelings – to recreate or imitate them within my own experience. It can be more difficult, furthermore, to simultaneously imagine a variety of inner states than it is to simultaneously imagine a variety of behaviors; which means an invariance across mental states can be more difficult to experience than an invariance across behaviors. It is easier to imagine many different faces at once than to imagine many different minds at once. Yet we do sometimes manage to empathize with different states of mind at the same time – when we try to navigate a family conflict, for example, or when we direct a class discussion. Insofar as the imagined states of mind appear to converge in their approval of a particular act, the value of that act will appear to be (weakly) objective.

The strength of intersubjective convergence one experiences will depend on whose perspectives are imagined, and in what detail. When I imagine others' view of my intervention to protect a child, do I imagine the views of my religious community, my neighbors, the child's parents, other children? Some of these views may converge more than others, and imagining the outlook of some groups may give a stronger sense of objectivity than imagining the outlook of some other groups.¹⁶ Imagining the responses of others in greater detail can also affect our sense of a value's objectivity. Imagining the responses of different people in greater detail (like perceiving the responses of different people in greater detail) can prevent us from noticing what is invariant across their responses; or it can allow us to discover more instances of invariance across more people. On the one hand, detailed imagining of deep frowns, set jaws, raised shoulders, and flat voices can get in the way of noticing what they have in common; on the other hand, such imagining can help to reveal otherwise unnoticed commonalities (a controlled sort of disapproval). Experiences of moral values as weakly objective come in different varieties and strengths, but all involve the appearance of agreement across a variety of community responses.

For the moderate version of objectivity, it is again the case that experiencing an act as objectively valuable depends on experiencing it as valuable from a variety of perspectives. But unlike the case of experiencing weak objectivity, these perspectives will not be the perspectives of different people; instead, they will be perspectives that arise from different methods or modes of discovery. The distinction can be found in many domains: discovering that others agree in viewing a particular situation as funny, or dangerous, or fair is different than discovering that there is agreement across different ways of determining what is funny, what is dangerous, or what is fair. (It is often the case that different methods are adopted by different people, in which case entertaining different methods might be similar to entertaining the perspectives of different people. Imagining my father's view of certain behavior is closely tied to imagining what he

¹⁶ Weak objectivity allows for different specifications of the relevant community. When someone disagrees with everyone else in a community, we might regard them as members of a different community. Just as often, however, we regard the view of a lone dissenter as a rare exception to an otherwise reliable generalization. Reasons for the exception are not required; and it is possible to discount a person's views without discounting the person. Intersubjective condemnation of a murder, for example, gives its wrongness a weak form of objectivity, whether or not the murderer agrees and whether or not we condemn the person as well as the act.

focused on, how much he relied on feelings versus reasoning, how he understood the command to ‘love one’s neighbor’, and so on. We can recognize a person’s perspective without recognizing their method, however, and we can recognize a method without recognizing anyone who follows that method.) To *experience* the value of an act as objective in the moderate sense of objectivity, then, I must experience different methods for evaluating a situation resulting in approval (disapproval) of a particular act. It is not enough to be told that the same conclusion can be reached through different methods; the methods themselves must be apparent to me – which means that I myself must entertain different methods or modes of discovery.

In the case of moral valuation, different methods or modes of discovery will include alternate ways reasoning and feeling. Whether implicitly or explicitly, most of us are familiar with a variety of consequentialist modes of reasoning: seeking to maximizing happiness across the maximum number of people, minimizing damage to the worst off, maximizing one’s one long term pleasure, and so on. And whether or not we’ve ever heard of Kant, we are aware of several Kantian modes of reasoning: treating others as we would have them treat us, treating others as ends rather than means, respecting people’s autonomy, and so on. We are also familiar with methods that rely on ways of feeling rather than ways of reasoning: using feelings of balance or stability, feelings of empathy, or feelings of generosity, for example, to determine our moral judgments. The claim, then, is this: insofar as we can see how various of these methods lead to the same valuation of a particular act, we will experience that act as moderately objective.

Consider what this means in the case of our earlier example of intervening on behalf of a bullied child. I will experience that act as objectively valuable (in the moderate sense of objectivity) insofar as I imagine different ways of thinking or feeling about that act and I see how they converge in approving of it. I can reason that the overall happiness of humans benefits from protecting children, I can reason that reducing the suffering of a single child is more important than increasing the pleasure of his many tormenters, I can reason that the tormenters are treating the child merely as a means to their pleasure, I can reason that bullying infringes on another person’s autonomy, and so on – where each of these modes of reasoning amounts to a different way of arriving at the conclusion that my intervention is morally valuable. Likewise, I can feel how the bullying of a child is destabilizing, I can empathize with the child’s distress and their desire for relief, I can feel the generosity behind an intervention, and so on – each of these modes of feeling now amounting to a different way of arriving at the conclusion that my intervention is morally valuable. While normally I may rely on just one of these methods to guide me in my actions, my realization that various other methods will arrive at the same valuation makes that value appear to be objective (in the moderate sense of objectivity).

When the results of different methods diverge, we might discount certain of them as irrelevant, or we might lose our confidence in moderate objectivity. This is analogous to the case of diverging responses, within a given group, or we lose our confidence in weak objectivity. There is no way to decide between these two options in advance. The influence goes in both directions – from what people or what methods are considered relevant to what values are considered objective, and from what values are considered objective to what people or methods are

considered relevant. What I experience does not always conform to what I believe, however, and to the extent that I continue to imagine dissenting people or dissenting methods my experience of values as either weakly or moderately objective will be undermined.

For the strong version of objectivity, where it is beyond our ability to know what is morally valuable, I would have to experience an intervention on behalf of a child as a kind of shot in the dark – an act of faith in the guiding power (and, perhaps, the promise of forgiveness) of a greater being or a larger world. Knowledge might come at the ‘pearly gates’, or with the verdict of history, but it is not something we can acquire by our own efforts. (As noted earlier, it is hard to see how this outlook could include moral obligations, as opposed to moral values, since being obliged to do something depends on knowing what it is that one is obliged to do. Feelings of moral obligation would have to be discounted as completely unreliable.)

What could it mean to *experience* moral values as inaccessible in this way? What is the phenomenological counterpart to this strong version of objectivity? To put the challenge somewhat paradoxically: how could the inaccessibility of moral facts appear within our experience? Whereas both weak and moderate objectivity become apparent when we notice a convergence of moral judgments, it seems that strong objectivity could only become evident through our noticing a *lack* of convergence in moral judgments. But isn’t the apparent lack of such convergence precisely what *prevents* us from experiencing a value as objective?

It is possible, of course, to *believe that* – or, indeed, to imagine *that* -- values are strongly objective without being able to *experience* them *as* such. Noticing the apparent unresolvability of moral disagreements, some people will be inclined to *think* that values are ‘out there’ but unknowable by us. How ironic that moral disagreement, usually invoked in support of moral subjectivism, can also be used to defend a strong version of objectivism! If these are the two options, subjectivism may be more defensible insofar as it can explain irresolvable disagreements by reference to irresolvable psychological or sociological conflicts. Strong objectivism, in contrast, must gesture towards a realm of facts that can’t be known; rather than offering an explanation, it forecloses it. This oversimplifies the situation, however: it overlooks the strong influence of people’s religious beliefs – according to which a god governs us and judges us in ways that are largely opaque to us, or according to which the universe is designed in such a way that good will be rewarded and bad punished in ways that exceed our understanding. (Given the comfort provided by such beliefs, it is not surprising that a lack of convergence in moral judgments will cause many to prefer mystical objectivism to subjective relativism.) The temptation to *think* that moral values are objective rather than subjective is also encouraged by the fact that moral inquiry and decision-making tend to focus on external rather than internal facts – facts about the situations we find ourselves in, not facts about our own preferences and inclinations. It is normal to feel that ‘there must be something out there that can tell us what to do’; and when no compelling guidance is forthcoming, rather than switch the direction of one’s attention inward, we suppose that the truth of things must be hidden from us.

Such beliefs, thoughts, and suppositions infuse our experiences of moral valuation. Rather than puzzling over the value of a particular act, we start to experience our uncertainty about its value as an encounter with something mysterious; the mystery of value becomes a mysterious value. We have the sensation of unreachable depths, or we imagine a ‘veil of ignorance’ standing between us and the truth about value. (These options are more common perhaps when it comes to our experience of other people: we find them unknowable and have the sensation of receding depths; or we imagine their minds as hidden behind a wall that stands between us.) In this way, I suggest, there can be a phenomenology of strong objectivity. While it is fair to say that we can’t have experiences *of value* as strongly objective – since strong objectivity precludes the experience of value as anything, we can experience morality as strongly objective.

6. *Phenomenology and metaphysics*

If experiencing values as objective depends on convergences across imagined perspectives, then the evidential status of a phenomenology of objectivity will depend on the evidential status of the relevant imaginings.¹⁷ There continues to be considerable controversy over (a) when and whether the verdicts of our imagining can be trusted enough to treat them as evidence, and (b) when and whether the verdicts of our imaginings can add anything to the verdicts of our perceptions, our memories, and our preexisting beliefs.

With regard to the reliability of our imagining, it is important to make a distinction between imagining in the service of our desires (or our happiness) and imagining in the service of our beliefs (or our knowledge).¹⁸ Usually, when we are imagining, we recognize the difference: I can imagine how I want an encounter to go, and I can imagine how I expect an encounter to go, without confusing the two; the first aims at happiness, the second at truth. Sometimes our truth-seeking imaginings, like our truth-seeking beliefs, are distorted by our desires – causing us to believe what we want to believe rather than what the evidence supports. But this doesn’t make our truth-seeking imagining any less reliable than our truth-seeking beliefs; both use past perceptions, memories, and various background beliefs as evidence for what is likely to be true.¹⁹

Even if truth-seeking imaginings are just as reliable as truth-seeking beliefs, one might wonder whether they have any epistemic *advantages* over mere beliefs. Is my knowledge increased by imagining the approval of others, or by imagining a good outcome, rather than simply believing

¹⁷ There may be practical (and indirectly epistemic) advantages to experiencing certain facts as objective even if they are not in fact objective. Experiencing moral values as objective might make us more likely to act morally – because values and obligations seem less a matter of choice. Also, experiencing values as objective might help motivate us to investigate more thoroughly – because values and obligations seem less arbitrary. (These effects are certainly not guaranteed. Some of us, in some circumstances, may become less compliant and less diligent if moral values seem to be dictated by things out of our control.) These potential advantages of a phenomenology of objectivity do not add to its evidential weight.

¹⁸ Currie & Ravenscroft (2002) call this the distinction between creative and recreative imagining. Neither one requires the imagining to be deliberate or, indeed, to be attended to. See Church (2013) and Church (2008).

¹⁹ It should go without saying that *projections* from past experience, from other’s reports, and from best theories can be very reliable.

that others would approve, or believing that there will be a good outcome? The answer to this question will turn on what we think the difference is between believing and imagining, and how we think the one influences the other. This is a large and contested topic, reaching far beyond the scope of this paper; I will simply explain how a plausible understanding of what is involved in imagining suggests at least one way in which imagining makes a distinctive epistemic contribution.

A plausible understanding of the relevant sort of imagination requires the imaginer of x to recreate or imitate a direct experience of x .²⁰ To imagine a particular teacher's disapproval, for example, one must produce an experience which is very like a perceptual experience of her disapproval – hearing her voice, or seeing her frown, or feeling her anger. This is in contrast with merely thinking that (and in that sense imagining that) the teacher would disapprove – a thought that may involve nothing more than an endorsement of what others have reported. Likewise, to imagine the consequences of a given action, one must produce an experience that is very like the experience of perceiving those consequences; and to imagine another person's state of mind, one must go some ways towards imitating that person's direct experience of their own mind.

One epistemic advantage of replicating direct experiences in this way is that it brings more details into view – details that might otherwise be overlooked. When we go beyond merely remembering that a parent disapproved of bullying to actually recreating the details of their disapproval we may realize the strength of their outrage and the depth of their concern. When we go beyond simply believing that a child is being bullied to actively imagining the child's experience, we may discover an array of feelings that accompanies their helplessness: feelings of smallness, feelings of hatred, feelings of abandonment, feelings of shame. These details are often morally significant, yet it is doubtful that they would come to our attention without such imagining.

A related contribution of such imagining is that it can expose certain tensions in our beliefs. If I imagine the way that a parent condemned bullying I may discover that she was something of a bully herself – a fact that may cast doubt on the significance of her disapproval. If I imagine myself in the position of the bullied child I may discover that hating someone serves as a counterweight to feeling shamed by someone – a fact that may alter my sense of how best to intervene.²¹

If this is right, then (truth-directed) imagining can have evidential import. And insofar as the phenomenology of moral objectivity depends on (truth-directed) imagining, it brings the

²⁰ Just what counts as a direct, perceptual experience is, of course, open to debate. My own views can be found in Church (2013). For present purposes, however, it is enough to recognize the contrast that exists between perception-like experiences and belief-like experiences. The sort of imagination that is relevant to the phenomenology of moral experience is the sort that falls on the perception-like side of this divide.

²¹ A parallel point can be made with respect to spatial representations of mathematical facts: inconsistency is evident in a way that propositional inconsistency is not. See Church (2013), Chapter IV discussion of Descartes.

epistemic contributions of such imagining with it – the contributions of highlighting otherwise overlooked details, and otherwise overlooked errors.

7. *Conclusion*

Different notions of objectivity support different notions of what it takes to experience a moral value or obligation as objective. If, as I suggest, the objectivity of a fact (moral or otherwise) requires that it can exist even when we fail to recognize its existence, then *experiencing* the objectivity of a fact (moral or otherwise) will require us to imagine it appearing in some way that is not presently available to us. Explaining what that imagining involves has been the central task of this paper. Defending the epistemic value of such imagining has been a secondary aim.

Moral values and obligations are not always experienced as objective, and they are not always experienced as objective in the same way. What I offer is a template for making sense of different cases, and for recognizing the significance of such experiences when they do occur.

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