

"Objective Morality"

Post by "Hiram" of December 26, 2018 at 11:51 AM

This question was presented @ reddit and comes up from time to time. It might be a good exercise to discuss various ways to tackle this.

Q. Must humanists believe in the existence of objective moral values?

renderTimingPixel.png According to some definitions of humanism I have seen, humanists must believe in objective morality, i.e moral realism. Is this correct, to your mind? Or can a person be a humanist and not believe that objective moral values exist?

R. I can't speak for most humanists, I suspect there are various opinions out there, but:

1. I'm an Epicurean moral realist, and YET
2. I think people who search for an "objective" morality are chasing a ghost.

I don't think objectivity needs to be a feature of moral realism. The [third Scholarch of the Epicurean School, Polystratus](#), argued that pleasure and aversion are emergent / relational properties of bodies, and that they are "objective" insofar as they are real and experienced as real, but they are not "objective" in the sense that they are subjective, personal experiences. I believe "objective" is an arbitrary, empty idealism, and that there's no reason whatsoever to suppose that the things that make life worth living have to obey the logic of having to be "objective".

Notice that Polystratus' pleasure-based morality is firmly rooted in the physics, and in the study of nature. Notice the language: "emergent properties of bodies", and he compares this to how a magnet attracts some metals but not others, or how some herbs cure some people but not others, or how peanuts give allergic reactions to some people but not others. These relational properties of matter are REAL, and obey natural processes. And he's saying that the complexities of pleasures and aversions in all our choices and avoidances, and in all our interactions both social and physical, obey similar principles.

There are no absolutes in nature, all things are relational. Absolutes are Platonic, imagined. Time is relative. Space is relative. Motion is relative, and so is gravity or the attraction and movements between the bodies. Why should it be any different in the realm of natural ethics?

So I would say NO, humanists "must" not (or are not obligated) to chase the ghost of "objective" morality (this is the great error we find in people like Sam Harris who have not studied Epicurean ethics), and yet this does not take away from having a fully scientific, useful, pragmatic morality.

Post by "Cassius" of December 26, 2018 at 1:37 PM

Hiram is that response yours? I generally agree with it and think it goes in the right direction. My caveats would be:

(1) I know what Epicurus wrote, but I don't know what "Humanism" means, so I personally don't consider myself a "humanist" any more than I consider myself a "hedonist." So as for me personally I do not write an answer implying that I accept anything about those frameworks. And so the way the question is phrased I would not even hazard a guess as to the right answer because in my view there's no way to define "Humanist" without a specific context and definition. And even if one were asserted, I wouldn't accept it as possibly final, because no one really has the authority to give one.

(2) When we talk objective morality it sounds like (and I bet lots of people read it as) Ayn Rand objectivism. Here's one place I agree with her - in her dislike of "package deals." That's why I can't accept "hedonism" or "humanism" or anything else because there is too much baggage that goes with them. And so when the answer ends "So I would say NO, humanists "must" not (or are not obligated)....." I am not sure whether that is valid or not, since I see no way to tell what "a humanist" really thinks.

(3) I think the same objections apply to "moral realism" -- I don't know what that means either, nor is there anyone authorized to give a single definition for it. We can start talking about "according to the definition of so-and-so, but in most cases I really don't have the time to pursue that kind of thing, which seems to me like rabbit-chasing.

(4) So to get to the point beyond the unacceptable context of the question, I agree with your direction that the real issue is what the word "objective" means. To most people "objective" means one-size-fits-all and "there's only one answer" and everyone who fairly looks at the same question will reach the same answer. I think Epicurean theory rejects that kind of thing - it rejects the idea that there is a single perspective that is valid for all people, and I think most definitions of "objective" imply that.

(5) Does morality exist apart from the humans involved in the relationship? Does morality exist "in the air"? No, of course not - how could it in the absence of gods or ideal forms? Now to be

fair to Ayn Rand, I am not sure that she thought it existed in the air either, even though her followers probably interpret her that way.

(6) I think all these questions find answers in the Epicurean physics which shows that gods and ideal forms do not exist, and also in [PD30-40](#). The only morality worthy of its name is that which succeeds in providing for pleasant / happy living. All relationships among people should be geared to that goal in order to be consistent with nature. As to precisely how those gears are set in any particular case, that is going to be determined under the circumstances of the people involved, always looking toward the goal of pleasant/happy living. Nothing in the field of morality is exempt from that perspective, no matter what words might be used to substitute for "virtue."

Post by "Hiram" of December 26, 2018 at 5:37 PM

There is a short article on Wikipedia on moral realism, and if we wish to engage others in philosophical discourse I do think it's worthwhile to read these kinds of things.

As for humanism, it generally means secular human values as opposed to religious values, and includes many non-supernatural philosophies and ways of seeing the world (ours, the objectivists, the existentialists, etc). I had been a Secular Humanist long before I was Epicurean, and this has always been the community that I've found most open to us as well as atheists.

Same as above, to reach people with an Epicurean message, it's a good idea to speak their language so that they can find something in common and hopefully dig deeper. The alternative is never to engage people, or to do so with obscure language or in a manner that they can't relate to.

Post by "Cassius" of December 26, 2018 at 5:52 PM

Yes I understand the general definitions, and I agree that there are certain contexts in which they have to be engaged. In general my difference in perspective is more that I want to spend more time developing our own path, in the terms of that Nietzsche quote we recently discussed, rather than spending all our time rescuing others from their errors.

Both need to be done to some extent, but I personally think I have a lot more I want to develop before I wade into the more popular existing groups. Certainly even the stoic groups are good hunting grounds as well, but I want to be able to point them to good explanations of the

Epicurean alternative, and I don't think we (at least me) are there quite yet.