



## Must Values Have Subjective Existence?

Kurt Torell

Roger Williams University,  
Bristol, RI (USA)

### Abstract

In this paper, I begin by outlining two assumptions that are routinely taken for granted in ethical discourse, one of which entails that values have subjective existence. I then consider a causal account of valuational activity offered by Bruce Morito which serves to question the truth of that assumption, and the extent to which that account falls short of overturning it. Finally, in light of that short-coming, I sketch what I characterize as a “quasi-objective theory of value” the truth of which depends upon a non-regularist and non-actualist conception of laws of nature.

According to much ethical theory, recent or otherwise, the prevailing tendency is to suppose that moral properties of actions have subjective existence [7, 2, 4, 21, 8, 13]. Indeed, that such a tendency has persisted throughout the history of ethical theory is further underscored by considering Thomas Hobbes’ reduction of moral properties to objects of aversion and desire, as spelled out in *Leviathan* [10], Ch. VI and Ch. XI, David Hume’s reduction of moral properties to feelings of approbation and disapprobation in his *Treatise of Human Nature* [11], Book III, Section II, and Jeremy Bentham’s and John Stuart Mill’s justifications for Utilitarianism, as articulated in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* [1], Ch. I, and *Utilitarianism* [15], Ch IV, respectively. In fact, on some reading, there is also reason to interpret Kantian Ethics, and various species of deontological ethics, as subjectively grounding right and wrong, moral accountability and obligation, in the sense of subjective existence intended herein.

This tendency to reduce moral properties to subjective properties seems due to two assumptions often presupposed by ethical theory that are conceived as nearly tautological. First, much ethical theory proceeds on the assumption that

- (1) actions possess moral properties only if actions possess value.<sup>1</sup>

While this assumption has been routinely taken for granted as a point of departure in ethical discourse, technical as well as ordinary, it is not an assumption that ethicists need to presuppose. Why the assumption is regularly made is by no means clear, but the writings and discourse of some theorists vaguely attach its plausibility to the widely accepted ontological distinction between fact and value, primary and secondary qualities, which is assumed to originate to some degree with Descartes and Locke, and carried forward in the work of Hume, and finally Kant in some sense.<sup>2</sup> Roughly speaking, according to this distinction there are two domains of objects of inquiry: (i) a domain of quantifiable, empirical, and hence “factual” entities (ultimately reducible to

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<sup>1</sup>Indeed, that grounding moral properties in value is prevalent throughout recent ethical theory explains why so much analysis of the nature of value appears in current ethical discussion.

<sup>2</sup>Many ethicists have remarked on this ontological legacy embedded in current ethical discussion. Sometimes referring to it as the view of “scientific naturalism” or the “classical scientific world view”, Baird Callicott characterizes it in the following way: “A fundamental doctrine of modern science remains a formidable obstacle, however, to all the heroic attempts of philosophers to establish the existence, and adequately explain the nature of intrinsic value, the value of something in and of itself. The objective physical world is sharply distinguished from subjective consciousness in the metaphysical posture of modern science as originally formulated by Descartes. Thought, feeling, sensation, and value have ever since been, from the point of view of scientific naturalism, regarded as confined to the subjective realm of consciousness. The objective, physical world is therefore value-free from a scientific point of view” [4, p. 132]. And again, according to Callicott, “From the scientific point of view, nature throughout, from atoms to galaxies, is an orderly, objective, axiologically neutral domain. Value is, as it were, projected onto natural objects or events by the subjective feelings of observers. If all consciousness were annihilated at a stroke, there would be no good and evil, no beauty and ugliness, nor right and wrong; only impassive phenomena would remain” [4, p. 147]; cf. also [20, pp. 127-8; p. 132]; [17, p. 50].

combinations of matter and motion) the existence of which is not dependent on subjective acts of awareness, and (ii) a domain of irreducible, non-quantifiable, nonempirical, and hence nonfactual entities, the existence of which depends upon subjective acts of awareness. It has been taken for granted that whatever values are, they are properly members of the latter domain.<sup>3</sup>

The second assumption that ethical theory typically presupposes is that

- (2) something has value only if some being performs a particular act of consciousness,<sup>4</sup>

where the beings capable of performing such specific acts are typically, but not always, restricted to the class of human beings.

Alternative formulations include further temporal specificity, such as

- (2a) something has value at  $t$  only if some being performs a particular act of consciousness at  $t$ , or  
 (2b) something has value at  $t$  only if some being performs a particular act of consciousness at some time.

Various considerations render (2a) and (2b) more or less plausible, and various consequences follow from each. For example, according to (2a), if no one is performing the relevant act of consciousness at  $t$  with regard to a particular object, call it " $O$ ", then  $O$  has no value at  $t$ . And this seems to be, at first glance, intuitively plausible. For if there is no one around to value  $O$ , it would seem that  $O$  has no value—for example, if all *Homo sapiens* capable of the relevant, value-constituting acts of consciousness were annihilated

<sup>3</sup> Consider Callicott's account and attribution of this position to Hume in [3, pp. 160-161]

<sup>4</sup>As Holmes Rolston, III, suggests, "[...] under prevailing theories, it is widely held that the phrase "unexperienced value" is a contradiction in terms, with "experienced value" a tautology" [20, p. 138; p. 144]. Furthermore, the implications of (2) are nicely summed up by Callicott's remark that "[i]f all consciousness were annihilated at a stroke, there would be no good and evil, no beauty and ugliness, no right and wrong; only impassive phenomena would remain" [4, p. 14].

in a single stroke (cf. Note 2 referenced above). On the other hand, according to (2b),  $O$  may be said to continue to possess value even when no one is valuing  $O$ . And this also may make some sense if one imagines that, for example, money may be said to retain value even if everyone capable of conferring value on money momentarily suspended the appropriate act of consciousness by means of which money is purported to have value.

Rather than address the plausibility of (1), it is the purpose of this paper to consider how (2) may be falsified, and thus, how theories that presuppose (2) may be mistaken. In the following, I intend to explain how.

One way that serves to question (2) has been proposed by Bruce Morito, who argues that the anthropocentric version of (2) is "superficial and leads to false conclusions regarding the relationship of human interest to nature" [17, p. 51]. Mirroring remarks made in an earlier work by Holmes Rolston III, (cf. [20, p. 136; p. 138]), Morito asserts:

"Values do not originate in the human subject, but in interaction between evolutionary processes and the human organism throughout history. As human beings evolved, their constitutions changed, which in turn changed the values they held [...]. So, at minimum, our values originate independent of any preferences we consciously hold because they are causally dependent on the relationship between our particular constitutions and the environment" [18, p. 36] (cf. also [17, pp. 56-78]).

It is novel to suggest the importance of the evolutionary processes in the shaping of values, and not to exaggerate the contributions of human consciousness as singularly, and in isolation, causally responsible for values. But to say that environmental processes and circumstances causally contribute to the shaping of the values conferred on nature does not entail that values would be conferred on nature, and thus would exist, in the absence of human acts of valuing. So, at least in this respect, the anthropocentric version of (2) is not clearly undercut by emphasizing the importance of

these factors. That is, even from Morito's evolutionary axiology, it seems as if human beings and their acts of consciousness may remain the sole avenue by means of which the universe comes to possess value.

A step on the way to establishing the falsity of (2a) or (2b) might begin with the assertion that the possession of value by something, and hence something being "valuable" in some respect, may not depend upon *actual* performances of certain acts of consciousness, be those acts ones which humans or nonhumans are capable of performing. For if something can possess value, even without the *actual* performance of the relevant acts of consciousness performed by human or nonhuman beings, then it would appear that the existence of value is not dependent upon instantiated acts of human consciousness. In this respect, the existence of such value may be said to be both "nonanthropocentric" and "objective", or at least "quasi-objective."<sup>5</sup>

It may help, at this point, to cursorily explain what I have in mind by the expression "actual" performances. *Prima facie*, a particular act of consciousness at a particular moment, call it "*t*", is an "actual" act of consciousness at *t* only if it is instantiated at *t*, that is, only if it actually occurs or is actually performed at *t*. In contradistinction, a particular act of consciousness at *t* is a "potential" act of consciousness at *t* even if it does not occur at *t*, but, in some meaningful sense, "could" occur at *t*; its existence as a potential act of consciousness at *t* does not depend upon its occur-

rence at *t*. And by extension, one may specify a "purely" potential act of consciousness as an act of consciousness that never occurs at any point in time, but, in some sense, "could" occur at some time.

Using this distinction, one may begin to sketch a quasi-objective theory of value. One may first assert that a given something may possess a value, say the characteristic of being beautiful, even though no one ever *actually* finds it beautiful; that is, its possession of the property "beauty" does not depend upon the actual performance of some relevant act of awareness or consciousness. For example, one may propose that it possesses "beauty" at *t* if, subjunctively speaking, some person would find it beautiful were some person to perform the relevant acts of consciousness, which, as a matter of fact, no person will.

What might give such a proposal plausibility? I suggest that the proposal may be rendered plausible by appeal to a coupling of Morito's causal reasoning about the relationship between evolutionary processes and the emergence of certain interests with a particular view of what laws of nature are. The latter view is a non-Humean, "non-regularist" or "non-actualist" one which treats laws of nature as nomological relationships the existence of which are not dependent on the existence of *actual* phenomena, but the existence of which would govern the *actual* behavior of *actual* phenomena, if such phenomena were ever to become actual (cf. [23, 5, 6, 9, 16, 19]). According to this view, a statement such as "All *F*s are *G*" may qualify as a statement of law even when (i) "All *F*s are *G*" is uninstantiated, and (ii) "All *F*s are *G*" is not entailed, even in part, by any instantiated universal statement, where any universal statement, "All *X* are *Y*" is said to be instantiated when there exists at least one member of the class represented by the subject term (*X*).

Conceiving laws of nature as construed in the account above, consider also how Morito defines the relation between the having of interests, the predication of value and the environment:

"[...] our having interests and our ability to confer value is dependent upon environmental processes. They are de-

<sup>5</sup>As it should become apparent below, I make the distinction between "objective" proper and "quasi-objective" for the following reasons. One may begin by defining something as "subjective" because its existence depends upon actual performances of consciousness. However, if the existence of something is not dependent on actual performances of consciousness, but is nevertheless dependent upon nomologically governed "potential" acts of consciousness, then it is not subjective as defined above, nor is it clearly objective in the typical sense of existing "independent of any consciousness, potential or otherwise", as a thing "in-itself". It is for this domain between subjectivity and objectivity classically understood that I reserve the term "quasi-objective". On the "inescapable blending of the subjective and objective" domains, consider [20]. I leave it to the reader to decide to what extent the ontology of values proposed below is quasi-objective.

pendent on the development history of the organism both as a member of a species and as an individual. Insofar as this development is a process of interaction between organism and environment, causally significant influences are involved in the dependency relation. Environmental conditions and processes, then, are preconditions for the existence of interest and value conferring activity in a causally relevant sense" [17, p. 52].

Assume also that Morito imagines that the process of interaction is nomologically governed. Accordingly, one may suppose the existence of laws of nature that govern the shaping of human and nonhuman interests, nonhuman valuing activity, and hence values.

Given our brief account of laws of nature, one may then suppose that there are laws of nature that govern the emergence of interests even if at no moment the *actual* environmental conditions and the existing state of human nature are favorable to the development of such interests. That is, one may suppose the existence of laws of nature that govern the emergence of interests which the *actual* environmental conditions and state of human nature preclude from existing. Indeed, Morito assumes the existence of such uninstantiated possibilities, the instantiations of which are nomologically governed, when he counterfactually asserts that "[...] if the balance of environmental facts had been qualitatively and significantly different, our present interests would be different" [17, p. 52f]; [22, p. 239].

Let us now combine the above account of laws with Morito's counterfactual remarks about uninstantiated, but possible interests. Imagine that there are laws of nature that govern the emergence of dispositions to find an interest in certain phenomena, as well as laws of nature that govern the actualization or manifestation of those dispositions. Could it plausibly be said that had a given agent, at a certain moment, call it "*t*", possessed a disposition to experience something, call it "*S*", as beautiful, then the agent would have experienced *S* as beautiful at *t*? But wait. The mere possession of a disposition to experience something as

beautiful does not seem to be a sufficient condition to experience something as beautiful. For if it were such a sufficient condition, then any agent who possessed such a disposition would always experience beauty as long as it possessed that disposition. Assuming this is counter-intuitive, perhaps it should be admitted that for there to be an experience of something as beautiful, other conditions must be satisfied in addition to the instantiation of the disposition to experience something as beautiful. Now, one might suppose that these additional conditions are additional properties of the agent who experiences beauty. And one might add that whenever the agent possesses these additional properties in conjunction with the disposition to experience something as beautiful, the agent experiences something as beautiful. But if one conceives all the properties necessary for the experience of beauty as agent-dependent, then it is not obvious to what one would appeal to explain why any given agent experiences one thing as beautiful and not another. Indeed, to explain why an agent experiences one thing as beautiful at a given moment, *t*, and not another thing as beautiful at *t*, it would seem that one needs to postulate that the thing experienced as beautiful possesses certain features that serve to pick it out from a range of possible objects to be experienced as beautiful at *t*. Going back to our case above, one might then say that not only is it necessary to suppose that the agent who experiences *S* as beautiful at *t* needs to possess the relevant disposition to experience *S* as beautiful, but it is also necessary to suppose the fulfillment of certain additional conditions, including apparently objective features of *S* that serve to explain why *S* as opposed to something else is experienced as beautiful at *t*. Appealing back to our account of laws of nature, one could then imagine that not only must an agent possess a disposition to experience something as beautiful at a given moment in order for an experience of beauty to exist, but the existence of such an experience also requires that the thing experienced as beautiful by an agent must have certain properties that constitute a disposition to be experienced as beautiful by an agent. Furthermore, one might add that the relationship between the disposition to experience and the disposition

to be experienced stand in a nomologically governed relationship that exists independent of the instantiation of “being experienced” or “experiencing,” and even independent of the instantiation of the “disposition to experience”.<sup>6</sup>

It should be noted that some suggestion of the foregoing has already been made. For example, Homes Rolston’s general view of the modern scientific distinction between what qualifies as objective and what qualifies as subjective foreshadows what is implied here about the ontological seat of value. Consider Rolston’s remarks:

“All natural science is built on the experience of nature, but that does not entail that its descriptions, its “facts”, just are those experiences. All valuing of nature is built on experience too, but that does not entail that its descriptions, its “values”, are just those experiences. Valuing could be a further, nonneutral way of knowing about the world. We might suppose that value is not empirical, since we have no organs and can make no instruments for it. But it could just as well be an advanced kind of experience where a more sophisticated, living instrument is required to register natural properties” [20, p. 139].

Indeed, to further the plausibility of the foregoing ontological account of value, consider an analogy. One might argue that an experience of a thing as red requires that the being having the experience of redness possess the appropriate disposition to experience the thing as red. That is, an agent without the appropriate disposition to experience a thing as red will not experience a thing as red. But presumably, supposing the existence of a

disposition to experience something as red is not sufficient to explain the experience of something as red. What is needed in addition to the presence of the disposition is that the thing so experienced as red must possess some properties or characteristics that serve in part to trigger the experience of redness, to actualize the disposition to experience redness, and these properties or characteristics reside in the things so experienced as red whether or not any being has the corresponding disposition to experience the thing as red. By analogy, in order for something *S* to be experienced as beautiful by some living being, there must not only be a disposition in that living being to experience *S* as beautiful, but also, *S* must possess some properties which in part trigger that living being’s disposition to experience *S* as beautiful. And just as the experience of an object as beautiful cannot occur if the agent who has that experience does not have the appropriate disposition to experience the thing as beautiful, so the object cannot be experienced as beautiful if the object does not possess certain features that, in part, serve to trigger and make manifest the agent’s disposition to experience that object as beautiful. And, just as the ontological possession of the disposition by the agent is not dependent on the object possessing the appropriate features to be experienced as beautiful, the ontological possession of those features by the object so experienced is not dependent upon the existence of the disposition to experience the object as beautiful.<sup>7</sup>

To cause trouble with the foregoing, one might insist that the characteristics of *S* that trigger the experience of *S* as beautiful are not the “beauty” of *S*. Rather, one might point out, those characteristics of *S* are only partial conditions of the experience of beauty, where the other necessary conditions of the experience of beauty reside in the being who experiences *S* as beautiful.<sup>8</sup> And

<sup>6</sup>By “the instantiation of the disposition to experience”, I mean the actual existence of the disposition to experience, not the actualization of the disposition to experience. For as C.B. Martin explains, “[t]he dispositions of a thing can change. Dispositions have duration. A piece of glass can be fragile for an hour and cease to be fragile for an hour [...] The glass need not actually break during the hour that it is fragile.

We must see that dispositions are actual, though their manifestations may not be” [14, p. 1].

<sup>7</sup>As Rolston suggests, “[s]ubjective experience emerges to appreciate what was before unappreciated. But such valuing is a partnership and the free-standing objective partner cannot enjoin value upon the subjective partner if it has nothing to offer” [20, p. 142].

<sup>8</sup>Rolston presents something like this objection in the following: “To say that wood is combustible means that wood will burn if ignited, although it never nears fire. But this is a predicate of objective potential; wood may ignite

one may then add that these other conditions constitute the “real”, ontological, seat of beauty. But if we consider our ordinary discourse about beauty and redness, we might just as easily say that when a thing is called “beautiful” it is so-called because it is imagined to possess some characteristic which triggers the experience of it as beautiful, and thus, that the referent of the term “beautiful” is some characteristic of the thing so-called, and not some feature of the disposition to experience the something as beautiful, nor, for that matter, any other property which resides exclusively in the being who experiences that something as beautiful. Likewise, one may argue that while the experience of redness resides in the observer of redness, the term “red” is meant to refer to the characteristic in the thing experienced as “red” which triggers the experience of redness in the observer, and this is why we call the thing experienced as red “red”, and not some feature of the agent who has the experience of red.

By way of a fictional case, let us now further elaborate our ontological account of value by connecting it more explicitly to the non-Humean account of laws of nature. Suppose a world, call it “*W*”, which contains a nonhuman species, call it “*N*”, no member of which is capable, at a certain time, *t*, of experiencing any given flower of that world as beautiful because no member of *N* possesses the appropriate disposition to experience any given flower as beautiful. Suppose also that evolutionary processes, call them, “*P*”, are such in *W* that were *P* to be interfered with by a certain occurrence, call it “*O*”, at *t*, members of *N* existing posterior to *O* would develop the perceptive capacities necessary to experience some given flower as beautiful. On the basis of these suppositions, could one say that a given flower at *t* possesses a disposition to be experienced as beautiful and that this disposition is constituted by certain, objective, actual properties of that flower at *t*? And could one then say that these objective prop-

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in the spontaneous course of nature. But to say that wood is valuable is a predicate of subjective potential. If a human subject appears in relation to wood, wood can be valued. This sort of dispositional predicate can be realized only in human experience. Some exception can here be made for subhuman experience” [20, p. 141].

erties exist as characteristics of the flower, whether or not the necessary corresponding perceptive capacities ever develop, and thus, whether or not experiences of beauty ever become manifest in *W*?

On the basis of this approach, we may broaden our claims. We may suppose that there exists a myriad of laws of nature linking numerous objective properties of entities with numerous capacities humans and nonhumans could develop were circumstances to become right, but which actually do not develop because circumstances, as a matter of fact, do not become right. And could we say that these laws entail nomological relationships between dispositions to experience certain objective features of things and the presence of those objective features in things, dispositions which will never be actualized in any actual observer, because as a matter of fact, environmental processes have not been and will not be suitable for their development; that is, there will be no appropriate *O*s which would trigger the appropriate environmental processes that would lead to the development of those dispositions. We may then imagine a world with a multitude of objective seats of value, e.g. seats of beauty, etc., which are latent, unmanifested, ready to trigger experiences of beauty, of value, etc., or objectively speaking, to be “noticed” *once* or *if* circumstances become right. And by extension we might argue the same about a myriad of laws of nature which cannot be empirically noticed, because, while operative, were circumstances to become right and they became instantiated, as a matter of fact, circumstances will not become right and the laws of nature will not become instantiated.

The above is merely a preliminary sketch of how an objectivist account of value may be formulated. Naturally, such an account presupposes a certain ontological view of laws of nature. If this view and its application to the nature and relationship of values to acts of valuing have theoretical merit, then there may be a way of providing a plausible alternative to the view that values have only subjective existence.

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