‘Objectivist’ traits of moral phenomenology and moral discourse do not support moral objectivism

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Moral objectivism – the view that the correctness of a moral claims is independent of who is making or assessing them – seems important for the possibility of a moral science, a successful collective moral inquiry. If objectivism were false, there would either be no correct answers to moral questions, or only answers that are correct for some moral judges but not others, thus undermining the collective acquisition and transmission of moral knowledge.

In this regard, objectivism is an important thesis, and many philosophers also think that it is true. Most who think so think that it is supported by various traits of moral phenomenology and moral discourse. In short, we reason or behave “as if” we took objectivism to be correct: We take people with very different moral views and living in different cultures to be in moral disagreement; we think that disagreement on moral issues implies that if one party is right, the other must be wrong; we take moral claims to be correct or incorrect independently of who is making them; we do not take our moral claims to be relative to our own standards or attitudes; and so forth. Moreover, it seems that the most straightforward way of making sense of this “objectivist” behavior is to assume that objectivism is correct. By comparison, relativist, error-theoretic or non-cognitivist accounts of this behavior are contrived and implausible, failing to take the evidence at face value. The contrast between the straightforward explanation offered by objectivism and the more complex or contrived explanations offered by the alternative views
creates a presumption in favor of objectivism. Call this the “straightforward argument” for objectivism.

There are various ways to try undermining the straightforward argument. Many have argued that accepting objectivism incurs metaphysical, epistemic and semantic costs that outweigh the support for objectivism supplied by the straightforward argument. And some have defended particular relativist or non-cognitivist accounts of seemingly objectivist traits, thus lowering the costs of these alternative views. If the thesis of this paper is correct, however, the straightforward argument doesn’t get off the ground: even if the metaphysical, epistemic and semantic commitments of objectivism are defensible, and even if the alternative explanations of “objectivist” traits of moral phenomenology and moral discourse are contrived, objectivism is itself incapable of making straightforward sense of these traits.

Here is the argument, in a nutshell: According to objectivism about, say, immorality, everyone who is judging whether a certain act is immoral is concerned with the same question, a question having the same correct answer independently of who is making the judgment. But the existence of apparently widespread and deep moral disagreement means that (1) there are no obvious features of our various judgments of immorality in virtue of which they are all concerned with the same question whereas (2) there are obvious features of judgments of immorality which suggest that they are not all be concerned with the same question. This means that if objectivism is nevertheless true about such judgments and nevertheless explains seemingly objectivist traits of moral thought and discourse, the explanation cannot be straightforward in a way that distinguishes it from the kinds of explanations offered by relativists, error-theorists or non-cognitivists.
The argument cannot show that objectivism is false, merely that it cannot be supported in the usual way. But although that is a relatively weak result, it also rests on much weaker premises than standard anti-objectivist arguments from moral disagreement: it is not assumed that there is radical or fundamental moral disagreement, but merely that moral disagreements appear to be deep and widespread; nor is it assumed that objectivism presupposes that “cognitive command” is a priori for moral discourse, or that naturalism is correct, or that objectivism must take the goal of moral judgment to be to get external facts correct rather than conforming to standards constitutive of autonomous volition, say. Moreover, although the upshot of the argument is relatively weak, it nevertheless has important consequences. It means that competing views cannot be dismissed nearly as easily as objectivists have thought, and it means that objectivists need to engage in substantial and detailed explanatory work if they want to account for seemingly objectivist phenomena at least as well as relativists, error-theorists and non-cognitivists. Absent such work, “objectivist” traits cannot support objectivism.

The bulk of this paper is concerned with substantiating the premises of the argument, responding to objections, and discussing alternative ways in which seemingly objectivist traits of moral discourse and phenomenology might create a presumption in favor of objectivism.