

## DISCUSSION

### ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM AGAIN

R. L. Simpson has rushed too quickly into print. I do not say, as he claims in his very first sentence, that there is no philosophical problem concerning the subjectivity of ethical subjectivism. Indeed in reflecting on it, we are faced with a doubly perplexing problem: 1) what are ethical subjectivists actually claiming and 2) is it the case that we should accept the most perspicuous formulation of ethical subjectivism as the best sustained claim about the foundations of morality such that we should believe that efforts such as Rawls' or Gert's to achieve an Archimedean point in morality are fundamentally misguided? I make it plain in the essay Simpson criticizes, as I have elsewhere, that such a subjectivist challenge is very much with us.<sup>1</sup> A reading of the last paragraph and particularly the last two sentences of my essay makes this as clear as can be and it is to me an utter puzzle how Simpson could have overlooked it.

While making it quite clear that there is indeed a challenging philosophical problem about ethical subjectivism, and without trying, à la Bernard Williams, to defuse subjectivism, I was concerned to show that subjectivism had not been given a philosophically significant form which is unproblematic, i.e., has a clear sense such that we know what would establish its truth or probable truth or falsity or probable falsity or what would show that it was the correct claim to make in this domain.<sup>2</sup> Simpson does nothing to gainsay this and he does not himself articulate ethical subjectivism in some perspicuous form such that we could resolve our perplexities about ethical subjectivism. But to argue about the problematic nature of ethical subjectivism in the way I have is neither to assert nor to give to understand that there is no philosophical problem concerning the subjectivity of ethical judgments.

However, even assuming, contrary to fact, that I was trying to

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1. Kai Nielsen, "Varieties of Ethical Subjectivism," *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy*, (1972) and "On Locating the Challenge of Relativism," *Second Order*, (July, 1972).

2. Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, New York: Harper & Row, 1972. D. H. Monro in an incisive critical notice makes it apparent that Williams' defusing of subjectivism is hardly successful. D. H. Monro, "Critical Notice of *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. III, No. 2 (March, 1974), pp. 469-473.

defuse subjectivism, Simpson's two key arguments are still mistaken. A subjectivist may indeed claim that his account is the only coherent account of moral judgments, but in order to show that his own position is a coherent one, he still needs in some way to establish a non-vacuous contrast between his claim, 'All moral claims are subjective,' and its denial, just as a person must be able to establish such a contrast if he claims, 'All actions are selfishly motivated,' or, 'All mail-boxes in Canada are red.' The subjectivist must do this to establish that his claim is a substantive one or to show that 'subjective' qualifies 'moral judgment' or 'moral claim,' so that 'Moral judgments are subjective' is not pleonastic.

In effect Simpson accepts such an argument when he moves to his second criticism of my account. His nonvacuous contrast shows itself in his claim that for ethical judgments to be objective they must be objective in the way factual judgments are and, if they are not, they fail as a class to attain objectivity. Simpson says I am mistaken in questioning whether we can properly so compare entire activities. If factual judgments are objective, then, he claims, rational argument is the proper way to deal with them. If we cannot so handle them, they are subjective. But, as my argument was in part designed to show, such vague talk will not get us out of the bog. Rational argument in morals seems to proceed in a somewhat different way than it does in factual disputes. In factual disputes there is a role for looking and seeing, for confirmation and disconfirmation, that seems at least to have no exact or even helpfully inexact counterpart in morals. If, in taking this to heart, we then say, without some other tight arguments about the scope and nature of rational argument, that the whole class of fundamental moral judgments is therefore subjective, we have done little more than say, in a misleading way, that fundamental moral judgments are not factual judgments.

I tried to show that these and some other moves in the defense of ethical subjectivism were mistaken. But I also showed that problems linger about subjectivism which show that we have not given it its quietus.

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