WHY SHOULD I BE MORAL? THE IMPACT OF OBJECTIVISM OR NON-OBJECTIVISM ON OUR COMMONSENSICAL UNDERSTANDING OF NORMATIVE REASONS FOR ACTION[1]

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this paper is to see what kind of implications would an objectivist or a non-objectivist response to the research of a foundation for moral normativity have on our commonsensical usage of moral terms and on our ability to justify our moral action trough normative reasons (1.). In order to see the implications of objectivists and non-objectivists perspectives, I will focus on how normative reasons ground and justify moral actions from a first-person perspective (2.).
From an objectivist viewpoint, reasons can be conceived of as referring to what objectively ought to be done. From a non-objectivist viewpoint, on the other hand, if we claim that there are no grounds to justify our moral beliefs that something is right or wrong, then either we believe the normative level is a beneficial illusion that will survive scepticism at the metaethical level, or we take this scepticism to debunk morality entirely (3.).

KEYWORDS
Normativity, reasons for action, objectivism, non-objectivism, folk morality.

1. NORMATIVE MORAL CLAIMS

When we refer to moral concepts we take them to be *normative* and to make *claims* on us (Korsgaard 1996, p. 8). It is basically for this reason that our

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[1] This paper is an attempt to systematize some points made to a previous version of Gabriele De Anna's paper in this volume.

moral disputes are so harsh – much more than our disputes about etiquette or taste. When we encounter someone we disagree with on moral grounds, we usually do not rest content with the idea that it is a matter of different perspectives, we argue in favour of our position trying to convince that other person that there are *good reasons* for endorsing our perspective. For instance, if we disagree on whether death penalty is right or wrong, we usually do not accept that it is a matter of taste or of different cultural perspectives, on the contrary, we believe that one of us is right and there is actually something that *ought* to be done.

If one recognizes these features of our ordinary moral discourse – and some relativists or expressivists may not –, then the question has to be: where does this normativity come from? We need to understand why moral claims exercise such a power over us and why we believe there is something that actually ought to be done.

> in ethics, the question can become urgent, for the day will come, for most of us, when what morality commands, obliges, or recommends is *hard*: that we share decisions with people whose intelligence or integrity don't inspire our confidence; that we assume grave responsibilities to which we feel inadequate; that we sacrifice our lives, or voluntarily relinquish what makes them sweet. And then the question - *why?* - will press, and rightly so. Why should I be moral? (Korsgaard 1996, p. 9).

Many moral theories have tried to answer this question – that is, to provide a foundation for normativity in ethics. The aim of this paper will not be to provide a decisive argument for any of the possible solutions, but rather to group them into two types – objectivists responses and non-objectivists one – and to try and see the implications they might have on our ordinary usage of moral concepts. I will focus only on the implications for acting upon what we believe are moral standards from a first-person perspective.

2. ACTION AND REASONS

Our commonsensical usage of moral concepts refers basically to two main domains: on the one hand, we use moral concepts to judge something to be morally good or bad, just or unjust; and, on the other, we can act morally or not.

Obviously, moral judgments and moral actions bear reciprocal influences and their relation is far more complicated than I can depict here. However, for this paper it will suffice to focus on the role two kinds of foundation of the

normativity we seem to trace down in the moral discourse have on the way we experience morality from a first-person perspective.

I will try here to take seriously Korsgaard's question – why should I be moral? – and to see what consequences an objectivist or a non-objectivist account of the foundation of normativity might have for moral agents.

Action differ from mere bodily movements because of their explicit intentionality (for an analysis of the concept of "intention" see Anscombe 1957; De Anna 2012a). There is a difference between grabbing a cup of coffee and involuntary moving my head or moving my body because I was pushed. The literature on how to define an action is extensive (for a review, see Wilson, Shpall 2012), but here it will suffice to underline a few intuitive difference. When I act, as opposed to when I simply move my body, I intend to do something, to bring about a consequence or to reach a goal. Probably when I grab a cup of coffee, I intend to drink it with the goal of benefitting from its stimulant effects. I know that I want to bring about something and I have a certain amount of control over what I am doing. Whereas, when someone pushes me and my body is moved, all these activities, this active engagement, are not present. I do not intend anything, nor I have a previous knowledge or a cognitive control over what I am doing – I may have a minimal motor control, so that I can stop my movement before I fall to the ground, but it is a control of a different sort. Similarly, when I involuntary move my head, I am not aware of what is going on, at least not in the "full-blooded" sense in which I am aware when I decide to do something.

Even if one is convinced by this reading of what an action actually is, problems may arise when we try to define a specific subset of actions, that is moral ones. The question may, thus, be: what is the feature of a moral action that makes it different from other kinds of actions?

A possible and tempting way to answer this question is to say that moral actions are those that have consequences to others. I ought to help others in distress and I ought not to use them as means to my own ends. These are certainly clear cases of moral actions affecting others that I ought or ought not to do and yet the issue is not so easily settled. Firstly, not all moral actions or omissions have consequences for, or regard others: there might be self-regarding duties that need to be taken into account. Secondly, there are cultural differences, what might seem amoral from a specific perspective, might be considered moral from another. Greeting someone by kissing his or her cheeks in public might be an issue of etiquette deprived of any moral significance in some cultures, while in others it might be not only revolting, but immoral (Edmonds 2014, p. 109). For these reasons, it is hard to draw the

line between amoral actions and morally relevant ones, since it is hard to find a criterion or a threshold to distinguish them, apart from very clear cases. The difference between grabbing a cup of coffee and harming a stranger for no reason is a clear case were we distinguish between a moral content and its absence. But things are not always so simple.

A more promising attempt to define the subset we are interested in – that is, moral action – is by means of the concept of "reasons". When I help someone in despair I do it for a reason, that is, there is something that justifies or explains my action. A reason for acting, in Scanlon's terms, is "a consideration that counts in favor of it" (Scanlon 1998, p. 17). Although it might seem very similar to the concept of "intention", the concept of "reasons" bears a heavier burden. It is not only that I want something to happen – as for intentions that can be amoral and particularistic –, when I claim to have a reason for acting that way, I am appealing to rationality, or at least to reasonableness. I claim that my considerations for doing X are not idiosyncratic, but on the contrary can be at least understood by others, if not even shared and endorsed by them.

These reasons seem to *motivate* our actions and seem to have that *normative* force that makes claims on us. They might be the kind of entities that hold that special feature for which Korsgaard wants to find a foundation.

> If we do speak in this way, of motivating and normative reasons, this should not be taken to suggest that there are two sorts of reason, the sort that motivate and the sort that are good. There are not. There are just two questions that we use the single notion of a reason to answer. When I call a reason "motivating", all that I am doing is issuing a reminder that the focus of our attention is on matters of motivation, for the moment. When I call it "normative", again all that I am doing is stressing that we are currently thinking about whether it is a good reason, one that favours acting in the way proposed (Dancy 2000, pp. 2–3).

As Dancy pointed out, it is not that there are two distinct sets of reasons – i.e. motivating ones and normative ones –, they are one and the same. The difference lies in the aspect we want to underline.

At this point a working definition of what an action of the relevant type seems to be can be provided.

X is A's action (of the relevant kind) if and only if:

(1) X is the exercise of a causal role;

(2) A holds that causal role;

(3) A is responsible for the realization of X;

(4) A intends X or X is the means for A's goal;

(5) A has control over X;

(6) A is determined to do X by means of reasons;

(7) Reasons for X are accessible to A before performing X;

(8) X has a moral content (its reasons refer to moral norms).

Obviously, condition 8) is yet too vague. We do have a sort of intuitive understanding of what it means for an action to have a moral content and yet we cannot rest content with such a definition because of its underdetermination in unclear cases. If certain practices appear amoral in one place and, on the contrary, seem to have a moral content in another, who is right? How do we know for sure that certain things pertain to the moral domain while others do not? Unfortunately, I cannot deepen these questions or try to provide answers to them. They will remain open.

Normative and motivating reasons are crucial to understand human moral action and in particular to try and answer Korsgaard's question about the foundation of this normative force we experience from a first-person perspective.

In quoting Dancy's account of normative and motivating reasons not as two different sets of things but rather as two ways of posing questions, I have assumed a specific version of reasons internalism, that is not universally accepted.

A common and plausible view is that to be an agent's motivating reason for acting, a consideration has to be something which that agent takes to be a normative reason for acting (Dancy 2000; see Setiya 2007 for objections). At the very least, it seems that it must be possible for an agent to be motivated by her normative reasons (Nagel 1970). This possibility is in tension with the commonly drawn distinction between motivating reasons as psychological states and normative reasons as facts or propositions (Smith 1994), which places these types of reasons in different ontological categories (Finlay, Schroeder 2015).

I will not get into details about the debate on reasons internalism as opposed to reasons externalism even though it is an extremely relevant one (for a review of the literature, see Finlay, Schroeder 2015). What I will be considering in the next section is the ontological status of reasons. I will deal with the consequences for our commonsensical understanding of morality from a first-person perspective of believing that there is something objective to which reasons refer, as opposed to believing that there is not.

3. OBJECTIVISM ABOUT REASONS VS. NON-OBJECTIVISM ABOUT REASONS

Until relatively recently, the distinction between different kinds of reasons was assumed, whether explicitly or not, to imply that these reasons were things of different kinds. Normative reasons were conceived of as facts, and so were regarded as mind-independent: the facts are what they are independently of whether anyone knows them or thinks about them. By contrast, motivating and explanatory reasons were conceived of as mental states of agents and, as such, as entities which depend on someone's thinking or believing certain things (Audi 2001 and Mele 2003 are representative examples—but see also Mele 2013). In recent years, however, this assumption has been challenged, giving rise to a number of disputes about the ontology of reasons—that is, disputes about what kind of thing or things reasons are (Alvarez 2016).

Focusing on normative reasons, one may wonder what kind of things can reasons be. A common claim, both among moral philosophers and in our commonsensical understanding of morality, is that they are facts (Alvarez 2016; Raz 1975; Scanlon 1998), that there is something in the world to which normative reasons refer. This account is obviously debated and is complicated by the subsequent question about what kind of facts they can actually be. Moral facts can be conceived of as facts pertaining to a real ontological set of things, as properties of empirical facts that supervene onto them, as facts in a constructivist sense, or as reducible to empirical facts. Obviously, different ontological accounts follow from these alternative views.

Without entering the minefield of these ontological accounts and without committing to any of these alternatives – whether one is a realist about moral facts or moral properties or a constructivist, for instance –, what some versions of these perspectives can share is the belief that reasons refer to facts and that the latter are objective.

According to this account, there is something objective to which our reasons for acting refer to and that makes them normative. When we act upon reasons, thus, we refer – or try to refer – to what *objectively ought to be done*.

There are various ways in which we can fail to refer to properly normative reasons. We might fail to recognize the relevant features of a given situation, or we can misrepresent what we ought to do in certain contexts. For this reason, by providing reasons for our behaviour we only try to refer to what objectively ought to be done. However, these failures to refer to what ought to be done are not – from this perspective – due to the inexistence of something objective about morality, but rather to our epistemic limitations in accessing it.

The fact that we are sometimes wrong about what the right is, or about the reasons justifying it, is not an objection to the objectivists, in as much as they can ascribe those failures to human limitations.

As a guide for action from a first-person perspective – that is, as an answer to Korsgaard's question – objectivist accounts provide a pretty straightforward answer. The foundation of the normativity we perceive in morality is objective; reasons for action refer to it. As already mentioned, accounts can differ in as much as what ought to be done can be conceived of as a set of real entities – like physical one –, as properties of things, or as the result of a construction. However, besides ontological differences, what all these alternative views share is the kind of answer to the foundation of our normative reasons for acting from a first-person perspective.

This objectivist view is usually implied in our commonsensical understanding of moral normativity.

There is obviously another possibility: one can be a sceptic about moral objectivity. A recent development of this position can be found in *Evolutionary Metaethical Scepticism* (EMES; for a discussion, see De Anna 2012b; Joyce 2006; Ruse 2006). Joyce (2006) and Ruse's (2006) metaethical positions are deeply influenced by Mackie's *error theory* (Mackie 1977). According to Mackie, our moral language is construed as if there were objective moral entities, as if there were truth-makers for moral terms, but there is actually nothing like them. All moral statements are, according to Mackie, false, even thought they might be a useful illusion. To reach this conclusion, Mackie used two well-known arguments: the *argument from relativity* and the *argument from queerness* (Mackie 1977, pp. 36–42).

Joyce takes on Mackie's metaethics. According to his view, recent developments in evolutionary theory should be taken as showing that moral capacities have been selected because they increase fitness regardless of their truth dependency (De Anna 2012b, p. 212). He claims that there is a striking difference between moral beliefs and doxastic ones: the former can be beneficial to fitness even though they are not truth-dependent, whereas the latter cannot. A similar claim can be found also in Ruse, who maintains that "morality is a collective illusion foisted upon us by our genes" (Ruse 1986, p. 253).

In order to show that morality is subject to illusions, Joyce provides a few empirical examples. He mentions, for instance, Kahnemann and Tversky's *framing effect* on the *Asian disease* (Kahnemann, Tversky 1979). People are usually deceived by how a certain scenario is depicted – specifically, when deciding about the life and death of 600 people, subjects tend to respond differently when the choice is described as "saving 200 people" or as "letting 400 people die". The problem with this kind of data is twofold. Firstly, the fact that we can actually be subject to illusions does not prove *per se* that morality

is an overall illusion. It might be, also from an objectivist perspective, that we sometimes get things wrong without this meaning that we can never get them right. Relying on this evidence to debunk our confidence in our moral capacities is like relying on visual illusions to claim that we should never trust what we see. There are obviously cases in which we make mistakes, but that is no guarantee that we never get things right. Secondly, cases like the one Joyce mentions are precisely cases where people cannot provide reasons for their choices. They "feel" the right choice is one or the other, but they cannot justify why they made such a differential choice. If our minimal criterion for assessing whether an action is morally justified is that the agent can provide good reasons for it – reasons that are understandable and sharable by others, and that count as normative and motivating reasons –, then data from occurrences in which subjects are not able to provide reasons cannot be considered relevant to discredit morality by claiming it is an illusion. In order to achieve such aim, one needs to show that, even when we believe we have very good reasons – that are not only sharable and understandable by others, but are actually shared and understood by them –, we do not in fact.

Leaving for now these difficulties aside, let me focus on the thesis Joyce wants to defend. As De Anna nicely puts it:

> The upshot is that our moral capacities are not a reliable process for the formation of true moral beliefs. Therefore, we have no way to know whether any and, in case, which of our moral beliefs are true: we have to suspend our judgement about each of them. This is scepticism in the old, classical sense: "no moral judgements are epistemically justified" (Joyce 2006, 224). It is worth noting that Joyce's view is ultimately slightly different from Mackie's. According to Mackie, our moral statements are systematically false. According to EMES, i.e. Joyce, we cannot have any justification for the truth of moral claims. They could be true, but there is no way to find out whether they are true or false (Joyce 2006, 223) (De Anna 2012b, p. 213).

Now the question would be: how does this sceptical perspective influence our everyday use of moral concepts? Is there a way to maintain that no moral judgment is epistemically justified and yet that we have to keep relying on moral judgments as we usually do?

According to Mackie, we can still use the moral jargon even though all moral statements are false:

> what I am discussing is a second order view, a view about the status of moral values and the nature of moral valuing, about where and how they fit in the world. These first and second order views are not merely distinct but completely independent: one could be a second order moral sceptic without being a first order one, or again the other way around (Mackie 1977, p. 16).

Similarly, Ruse claims that:

> once we recognize [that there is no justification for morality], we see the sentiments as illusory – although, because we objectify, it is very difficult to recognize this fact. That is why I am fairly confident that my having told you of this fact will not now mean that you will go off and rape and pillage, because you now know that there is no objective morality (Ruse 2006, p. 23).

So, according to these views, moral behaviour could still be possible even if one holds metaethical scepticism. But is it really so?

If what makes an action a moral one is the possibility for the agent of justifying it through normative reasons and if those reasons do not refer to anything that can be conceived of as objective, then what should ground our moral behaviour? Why should I be moral if I do not know whether what I believe ought to be done is true or false? I rather suspend all judgments on what I ought to do since I cannot tell whether they are grounded or not. If morality is an illusion beneficial for fitness and if I do not know in any given case whether my actions would enhance fitness or not, it simply seems to be no ground to grant moral behaviour.

Joyce seems to make a similar point:

> if your thinking on some matter presents itself as a faithful representation of the world but in fact there are no grounds for supposing that it is, then, by epistemic standards, its being undermined is a *good* thing (Joyce 2006, p. 222).

If Joyce is right, claiming that no moral judgment is justified leads to debunking morality entirely. Scepticism runs, thus, from the metaethical level to the normative one.

From the agent's perspective, there would be no grounds to believe that his or her reasons for acting are good. One may claim that in very clear cases – like murdering an innocent without gaining by this action any other positive consequence – individuals would recognize what is beneficial for fitness and so will actually be able to behave in a moral way even without objectivism. But firstly, we have very little understanding of what fitness might require: is it so clear that killing an innocent would be detrimental for fitness in any given context? Secondly, even if, for the sake of the argument, we accept that this explanation might work in clear cases, morality concerns rarely only such easy cases.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to see what kind of implication would an objectivist or a non-objectivist response to Korsgaard's research of a foundation to moral normativity have on our commonsensical usage of moral terms and on our ability to justify our moral action trough normative reasons.

I have limited the discussion to a few general claims from both sides. In particular, as far as non-objectivists perspectives are concerned, many other accounts could be considered, but I have chosen to discuss EMES for its relevance in the current literature.

In order to see the implications of objectivist and non-objectivist perspectives, I have focused on how normative reasons ground and justify moral actions from a first-person perspective.

From an objectivist viewpoint, reasons can be conceived of as referring to what objectively ought to be done. This is usually how our commonsensical understanding of morality accounts for what we do when we act or judge morally: we refer to what actually ought to be done.

Certainly agents can fail to understand what they actually ought to do in certain contexts, but that is no evidence in favour of the inexistence of something objective in morality. It is rather proof that we have some epistemic limitations in accessing what ought to be done.

From a non-objectivist viewpoint, on the other hand, if we claim that there are no grounds to justify our moral beliefs that something is right or wrong – that is, if we are metaethical sceptics –, then either we believe the normative level is a beneficial illusion that will survive scepticism on the metaethical level (Mackie, Ruse), or we take this scepticism to debunk morality entirely (Joyce).

In either case it seems difficult to understand where an agent should find grounds to act morally. If our normative reasons do not refer to anything objective, then inaction seems to be the most likely consequence (provided we know there are no ground for our moral beliefs). In case ordinary individuals would not know that there are no grounds for justifying their moral beliefs, then they might go on considering them objective even if they are not. This possibility resembles elitist utilitarianism: moral practice would, thus, be detached from moral knowledge of our basis for justifying it.

In conclusion, moral objectivism seems to be the easiest way to account for ordinary moral practice, whereas moral non-objectivism would either lead to the necessity to keep the true basis of moral beliefs a secret or to the inability to act morally from a first-person perspective.

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