

## Moore'un Ahlaki Nesnellik Argümanı Ahlaki Göreceliğe Karşı Yeterli Mi?

Arş. Gör. Burhan Başarslan | ORCID:0000-0001-9459-373X | [burhan.basarslan@selcuk.edu.tr](mailto:burhan.basarslan@selcuk.edu.tr)

Selçuk Üniversitesi, İlahiyat Fakültesi, Felsefe Tarihi, Konya, Türkiye

ROR ID: <https://ror.org/045hgzm75>

### Öz

Bu makale Moore'un ahlaki görecelik ve öznelciliğe karşı ahlaki nesnelci argümanının zayıf olarak değerlendirilebilecek bazı yönlerini ele almaktadır. Bununla beraber çalışma, ahlaki nesnelci bir argümanın, ahlaki göreceliğe karşı ahlaki çeşitliliği açıklaması gerektiğini öne sürmektedir. Ahlaki görecelik metaetik alanındaki en kritik tartışmalardan biridir. Ahlaki görecelik; ahlaki gerçekçi ve ahlaki karşı-gerçekçi olarak iki farklı şekilde anlaşılabilir. Ahlaki gerçekçilik, ahlaki nesnelciliğe indirgenildiğinde, ahlaki görecelik ve öznelcilik, ahlaki gerçekçiliğin dışında kalır. Çalışmada, bu yorum daraltılmış ahlaki gerçekçilik olarak adlandırılmıştır. Ancak ahlaki gerçekçilik ahlaki öznelcilik ve görecelik gibi kapsayıcı bir yolla genişletilebilir. Buna da genişletilmiş ahlaki gerçekçilik adı verilmiştir. Çalışmanın odağı sebebiyle giriş kısmında her ikisi de tanıtılacaktır. Ardından G. E. Moore'un daraltılmış ahlaki gerçekçiliği ele alınacaktır. Onun argümanları, ahlaki kodların çeşitliliğini açıklamadaki başarısızlığı yönüyle kritik edilecektir. Son olarak, ahlaki öznelcilik ve ahlaki göreceliğin genişletilmiş ahlaki gerçekçilik olarak ele alınabileceği öne sürülmektedir. Bu nedenle, Moore'un iddialarına rağmen ahlaki görecelik ve ahlaki öznelciliğin ahlaki gerçekçi iddialar olacağı savunulmaktadır. Ayrıca iki ana iddia da ahlaki gerçekçilik açısından değerlendirilmektedir: 1) Ahlaki öznelcilik, ahlaki gerçekliğin bireyin zihinsel durumu tarafından inşa edildiğini iddia eder. 2) Ahlaki görecelik, sosyal kodların tamamen ahlaki gerçekliği belirlediğini savunur. Birinci bölümde ahlaki görecelik, nesnel ahlakın temelinde apaçık ve tanımlanamaz gerçekler olduğunu savunan Moore'cu bir perspektiften tartışılmaktadır. İkinci bölüm, Moore'un haklı olması durumunda, farklı kültürlerin neden farklı ahlaki kodları kabul ettiğini açıklaması gerektiğini iddia etmektedir. Üçüncü bölüm ise Moore'un buna yönelik herhangi bir açıklama sunmadığını ileri sürmektedir. Sonuç kısmında ahlaki görecelik ve ahlaki öznelciliğin Moore'un argümanlarının başarısızlığından yola çıkarak ahlaki gerçekçi teoriler olarak görülebileceği iddia edilmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Felsefe Tarihi, G. E. Moore, Ahlaki Gerçekçilik, Ahlaki Görecelik, Ahlaki Nesnelcilik, Ahlaki Öznelcilik.

**Atf Bilgisi:** Başarslan, Burhan. "Moore'un Ahlaki Nesnellik Argümanı Ahlaki Göreceliğe Karşı Yeterli Mi?". *Marifetname* 11/1 (Haziran 2024), 287-304.

<https://doi.org/10.47425/marifetname.vi.1468172>

Geliş Tarihi	14.04.2024
Kabul Tarihi	11.06.2024
Yayın Tarihi	30.06.2024
Değerlendirme	İki Dış Hakem / Çift Taraflı Körleme
Etik Beyan	Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur. (Burhan Başarslan).
Benzerlik Taraması	Yapıldı – iThenticate
Etik Bildirim	<a href="mailto:marifetmanetikbildirim@gmail.com">marifetmanetikbildirim@gmail.com</a>
Çıkar Çatışması	Çıkar çatışması beyan edilmemiştir.
Finansman	Bu araştırmayı desteklemek için dış fon kullanılmamıştır.
Telif Hakkı & Lisans	Yazarlar dergide yayınlanan çalışmalarının telif hakkına sahiptirler ve çalışmalarını <b>CC BY-NC 4.0</b> lisansı altında yayımlanmaktadır.

## Is Moore's Moral Objectivist Argument Sufficient Against Moral Relativism?

Res. Asst. Burhan Başarslan | ORCID:0000-0001-9459-373X | [burhan.basarslan@selcuk.edu.tr](mailto:burhan.basarslan@selcuk.edu.tr)

Selçuk University, Faculty of Theology, History of Philosophy, Konya, Türkiye

ROR ID: <https://ror.org/045hgzm75>

### Abstract

This study aims to expose certain weaknesses in Moore's moral objectivist argument against moral relativism and subjectivism. It suggests that a moral objectivist argument has to explain moral diversity against moral relativism. Moral relativism is one of the most critical debates in metaethics, and it can be interpreted in two different ways: one as moral realism and the other as moral anti-realism. Moral realism, when reduced to moral objectivism, excludes moral relativism and subjectivism beyond moral realism. I will refer to this interpretation as narrowed moral realism. But moral realism can be extended in an inclusive way such as moral subjectivism and relativism. I will refer to this as extended moral realism. Due to the focus of the study, I will introduce both extended moral realism and narrowed moral realism in the introduction section. Then, I will address G. E. Moore's narrowed moral realism. I will criticize his arguments for their failure to explain the diversity of moral codes. Finally, I suggest that moral subjectivism and moral relativism can be appropriately addressed within extended moral realism. Contrary to Moore's claims, I contend that moral relativism and moral subjectivism would be claims within moral realism. I also evaluate the two main claims from a moral realist perspective. Moral subjectivism claims that moral reality is constructed by an individual's mental state. Moral relativism argues that social codes of human conduct completely determine moral reality. In the first section of the study, I discussed moral relativism from a Moorean perspective, which asserts that there are self-evident and indefinable truths at the foundation of objective morality. The second section contends that if Moore is correct, however, it necessitates an explanation for why different cultures accept different moral codes. The third section argues the fact that Moore fails to provide any explanation for this. In the conclusion part, I claim that moral relativism and moral subjectivism can be viewed as moral realist theories based on the failure of Moore's arguments.

**Keywords:** History of Philosophy, G. E. Moore, Moral Realism, Moral Relativism, Moral Objectivism, Moral Subjectivism.

**Citation:** Başarslan, Burhan. "Is Moore's Moral Objectivist Argument Sufficient Against Moral Relativism?". *Marifetname* 11/1 (June 2024), 287-304.

<https://doi.org/10.47425/marifetname.vi.1468172>

Date of Submission	14.04.2024
Date of Acceptance	11.06.2024
Date of Publication	30.06.2024
Peer-Review	Double anonymized - Two External
Ethical Statement	It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited. (Burhan Başarslan).
Plagiarism Checks	Yes - iThenticate
Conflicts of Interest	The author(s) has no conflict of interest to declare.
Complaints	<a href="mailto:marifetmanetikbildirim@gmail.com">marifetmanetikbildirim@gmail.com</a>
Grant Support	The author(s) acknowledge that they received no external funding in support of this research.
Copyright & License	Authors publishing with the journal retain the copyright to their work licensed under the <b>CC BY-NC 4.0</b> .

## Introduction: Two Understandings of Moral Realism

The title of this chapter implies that the concept of moral realism can be understood in different ways. Moral realism fundamentally asserts that concepts used in moral language represent existing entities. However, the debate extends to what these entities actually are. Are they subjective or objective things or properties? Objectivists roughly argue that these entities exist and are independent of human beings. Subjectivists, in contrast, defend that these entities or properties are dependent on the human mind. Moral subjectivism is unacceptable from the objectivist perspective. Therefore, some moral objectivists do not accept that moral subjectivism constitutes a moral realist claim. However, moral subjectivists hold that moral values subjectively exist and are real. For this reason, moral subjectivists often identify themselves as moral realists.

This debate hinges on two different understandings of moral reality. Thus, disagreement centres on moral subjectivism and other mind-dependent moral theories, whether realist or anti-realist.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, there is a subline of the debate called constructivism. Constructivism argues that moral truths exist, they are not determined by moral facts independent of the human mind.<sup>2</sup> Constructivism is not the focus of this paper, but I acknowledge that certain forms of constructivism should be considered within moral realism.

The debate between moral objectivists and moral subjectivists hinges on the different interpretations or understandings of moral reality. As mentioned earlier, narrowed realism is a view of moral realism that only allows for objective values that do not depend existentially on the human mind. Basically, narrowed realism argues that moral subjectivism and relativism, by their definition of moral reality, cannot be considered moral realist theories. Although moral relativism and moral subjectivism are sometimes identified as forms of moral nihilism, some philosophers defend moral realism by arguing for moral subjectivism or moral relativism.

David O. Brink offers a similar explanation of moral reality which I want to address in this study. He argues that moral realism rests on two central claims: “(1) There are moral facts or truths, and (2) these facts or truths are independent of the evidence for them.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Carla Bagnoli, “Constructivism in Metaethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Accessed March 28, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Bagnoli, “Constructivism in Metaethics.”

<sup>3</sup> David Owen Brink, *Moral Realism And The Foundations of Ethics* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 17.

Accordingly, moral constructivists, especially moral subjectivists, and moral relativists do not satisfy the second condition of “independent evidence for them”. Despite the second condition they put: “(2) these facts or truths are constituted by the evidence for them”<sup>4</sup>

Brink delves into the domain of moral reality by examining two distinct types of objectivity. His aim, similar to mine, is to determine a form of narrowed moral realism that excludes mind-dependent value claims. However, Brink revises moral realism by changing the second condition of moral realism.<sup>5</sup> Brink also identifies certain views of moral realism that are directly related to the objectivity of values and anti-realism that are directly related to the subjectivity of moral values.<sup>6</sup> But my concern is how moral realism relates to both objectivism and subjectivism. While there are some similarities between Brink's perspective and mine, I want to redefine moral realism based on the success of the moral relativist argument against the narrow version of moral realism. Therefore, I must demonstrate that the moral realist domain is relative. Although I use the argument for moral relativism, I am not claiming that moral relativism is true. Instead, I propose that a broader moral realism framework, which incorporates moral subjectivity, offers a more compelling explanation than the limited view of moral realism.

Moral realism rests on two core theses: a cognitivist thesis and an ontological thesis. The cognitivist thesis asserts that there is a truth-capable or verifiable moral discourse. In other words, cognitivism claims that our moral judgments can be true or false. The ontological thesis should be implicitly included in the cognitive thesis. We can summarize the ontological thesis as moral reality exists. Similarly, moral realism argues at a basic level that: “...there is a moral reality that people are trying to represent when they issue judgments about what is right and wrong.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the main tensions in ethics is related to the contradictory claims of moral realism and anti-realism. This debate hinges on two opposing views: the realist claim that objective moral facts exist, and the anti-realist claim that they do not. Moral nihilism is undoubtedly a moral anti-realist theory. But what types of moral theories qualify as moral realist theories? This question can yield different answers. One interpretation is that only objective moral values constitute moral reality, in other words, there are no subjective and relative moral values. Thus, some philosophers categorise moral relativism and moral

---

<sup>4</sup> Brink, *Moral Realism And The Foundations of Ethics*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Brink, *Moral Realism And The Foundations of Ethics*, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Brink, *Moral Realism And The Foundations of Ethics*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Russ-Shafer Landau, *Moral Realism* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13.

subjectivism among anti-realist moral theories. However, there are different identifications of moral relativism. For instance, Gilbert Harman argues that moral relativism is a form of moral realism.<sup>8</sup> Thus, we can consider moral relativism among moral realist theories. Similarly, Shafer-Landau posits that:

“Constructivists endorse the reality of a domain, but explain this by invoking a constructive function out of which the reality is created. This function has moral reality as its output. What distinguishes constructivist theories from one another are the different views about the proper input. Subjectivists claim that individual tastes and opinions are the things out of which moral reality is constructed. Relativists cite various conventions or social agreements.”<sup>9</sup>

In this passage, Shafer-Landau categorizes moral subjectivism and relativism as moral realist theories. However, he differentiates them based on their constructive functions. Therefore, he makes a claim against narrowed moral realism, asserting that moral relativism and moral subjectivism fall within the moral reality domain. Mackie offers analogous explanations. Mackie begins his seminal book with the statement, “There are no objective values.”<sup>10</sup> However, he does not entirely reject moral values. As Berker argues, Mackie's critique of objective values shouldn't be interpreted as a denial of subjective values. Mackie's moral subjectivism and moral skepticism should not be confused with moral value nihilism and epistemological skepticism. Mackie has never endorsed the primary thesis of moral nihilism, which is the assertion that there are no moral values.<sup>11</sup>

Harman defines moral absolutism:

“I will take moral absolutism to be a view about the moral reasons people have to do things and to want or hope for things. I will understand a belief about absolute values to be a belief that there are things that everyone has a reason to hope or wish for. To say that there is a moral law that ‘applies to everyone’ is, I hereby stipulate, to say that everyone has sufficient reasons to follow that law.”<sup>12</sup>

Harman's view of absolute moral values is related to the reasons of moral agents. In this respect, Harman appears to have circumvented the criticism from moral philosophers such as Anscombe and Stocker that moral psychology

---

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert Harman, “Moral Relativism Is Moral Realism,” *Philosophical Studies* 172 (2015), 858.

<sup>9</sup> Landau, *Moral Realism*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> John L. Mackie, *Ethics Inventing Right And Wrong* (England: Penguin Books, 1990), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Selim Berker, “Mackie Was Not an Error Theorist,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 33 (2019), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert Harman, “Is There a Single True Morality?,” *Explaining Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 84.

and agents are ignored in modern moral philosophy.<sup>13</sup> This is because Harman's view of value is founded on the premise that there are no objective values independent of the subject itself, to which, the subject can appeal to perform an act.<sup>14</sup> According to Harman, if there is no objective moral ontology, then either skepticism, non-cognitivism, or relativism should be preferred. Notably, Harman's view on objective moral values aligns with Mackie's explanations. Mackie, likewise, contends that there is no external reality independent of us that compels us to believe in the realm of objective moral values.<sup>15</sup>

The other understanding of moral realism is more narrowed. This type of moral realism rejects human-dependent values or approvals as the moral domain. Once moral realism is identified as being independent from human or social approvals, then it should be argued that there is an objectively existing moral reality. Thus, I call this definition narrowed moral realism, which can also be referred to as moral objectivism. From the perspective of this identification of moral realism, there are three fundamental anti-realist theories; moral nihilism, moral relativism, and moral subjectivism. There is no distinction between moral nihilism and the others.

### **1. Moral Subjectivism, Moral Relativism, and Moore's Moral Objectivism**

Moral subjectivism asserts that moral judgments are grounded in individual subjectivity or personally dependent approvals. It argues that moral statements express personal opinions, attitudes, or preferences rather than objective truths. Moral subjectivism makes a specific claim about the nature of moral reality that moral value is dependent on our minds or mental capabilities and states.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, moral relativism defends that there are just culturally dependent approvals instead of unchangeable and objective moral truths. Additionally, moral relativism also accepts the changeability of truth: "Moral relativism claims that there is no such thing as objectively absolute good, absolute right, or absolute justice; there is only what is good, right, or just in relation to this or that moral framework."<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *The Journal of Philosophy* 73/14 (1976), 459; G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33/124 (1958), 1-19.

<sup>14</sup> Harman, "Is There a Single True Morality?," 83.

<sup>15</sup> John L. Mackie, "A Refutation of Morals," *Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy* 24/1-2 (1946), 81; Mackie, *Ethics Inventing Right And Wrong*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Brink, *Moral Realism And The Foundations of Ethics*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert Harman - Judith Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 17.

Moral relativism encompasses various facets. Fundamentally, all versions of moral relativism hold that moral things are not absolutely or certainly true or false, but rather relative to particular standpoints. Mostly, moral relativism is understood as dependent on contradictory moral claims in different cultures. Moral relativism rejects the notion of a single, universal moral code. Historically, moral relativism can be traced back to *the Sophists* in Ancient Greece, who were opposed by Socrates and his eminent student Plato.<sup>18</sup> The Sophists claimed that there is no single moral truth; however, Socrates and Plato contended that there is a universal single moral truth. Thus, they have been appreciated as pioneers in defending moral universalism and realism. Although the details of the debate have evolved, the primary conflict has persisted from Ancient Greece to the current century. The earliest recorded instance of this debate was between the Sophists and Socrates.

Moral relativism is simply formulated in various argumentative forms. One of them is that:

“An action A, performed by a member of C, is wrong if and only if (and because), according to the basic moral norms of C, A is prohibited.

An action A, performed by a member of C, is optional if and only if (and because), according to the moral norms of C, A is neither required nor prohibited.”<sup>19</sup>

The problem of relativism can be summarized as the “truthfulness of actions determined by socially prohibited codes”. This definition emphasizes that moral valuation depends on social prohibits. Social norms or codes can vary from culture to culture. We can find numerous examples of diverse prohibited actions. For instance, among the Eskimos, a man can share his wife with guests for the night as a sign of hospitality.<sup>20</sup> An Eskimo's assessment of this behaviour as "correct" stems from the approval of such behavior within the Eskimo moral code. Otherwise, he would be regarded as someone lacking the virtue of hospitality. On the other hand, partner loyalty is one of the most important virtues in many other societies or religions in the world. For this reason, different cultures have different merits or moral codes and there is no objective moral truth or merit.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Emrys Westacott, “Moral Relativism,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Accessed March 26, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory An Introduction* (UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 44.

<sup>20</sup> James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Stuart Rachels (USA: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 18.

According to Mackie, moral norms, values, and codes represent people's forms of living.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, we cannot consider moral codes as an objective reality. In addition to this, Harman identified different types of moral relativism.

In response to moral relativism, various moral objectivist arguments have been put forth. Various moral objectivist arguments have been put forward in response to moral relativism. The moral objectivist arguments of G. E. Moore, who has had a great influence on analytic moral philosophy, attempt to justify arguments against moral relativism. To show whether Moore's arguments are sufficient against moral relativism, we will first introduce moral realism and then focus on whether Moore's arguments refute the theses of moral relativism.

George Edward Moore (1958) is one of the pioneer defenders of moral realism in the twentieth century. According to him, naturalistic ethical theories fail to define the concept of good in terms of natural properties like pleasure, happiness, utility, and passion. Moore contended that defining "good" is ultimately unsuccessful because it is a non-natural, simple, and undefinable concept. Seeking to establish an epistemology of morality based on intuition, Moore argues that the "good" is fundamentally a non-natural quality of natural objects and is also undefinable in itself.<sup>23</sup>

His theory of knowledge, which forms the basis of his argument, asserts the existence of basic knowledge grounded in common sense which is certainly true.<sup>24</sup> In this respect, G. E. Moore argues that the good is recognized through intuition<sup>25</sup> and it is fundamental, simple, but indefinable and universal. The good is indefinable because it cannot be accessed through mere reasoning. Therefore, addressing the failure of attempts to define the good, Moore tries to demonstrate that a certain kind of knowledge of the good that is "indefinable" but "recognized" is necessary. This is a form of foundationalism in its simplest form. However, relying solely on common-sense knowledge of "good" can lead to complex and even incoherent moral beliefs. Moore saw the concept of "good" as an axiom upon which the science of ethics could be built. Moore states that the good is a directly apprehended and recognized real quality that can serve as the basis for rational processes. In this respect, Moore's moral realism suggests that the good is unchangeable because it is not a natural quality or definable concept. If the good is defined as pleasure, one can argue the good is relative and changes

---

<sup>22</sup> Mackie, *Ethics Inventing Right And Wrong*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 61.

<sup>24</sup> George Edward Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense," *Philosophical Papers* (USA: Routledge, 2013), 32.

<sup>25</sup> I suppose that Moore sees a relationship between intuition and common sense.



according to cultural or personal prohibitions. However, the good has a meaning independent of our mentality or nature.

Moore's moral realism can be illuminated by examining his own words:

“(1) if it is true at any one time that a particular voluntary action is right, it must always be true of that particular action that it was right: or, in other words, that an action cannot change from right to wrong, or from wrong to right; that it cannot possibly be true of the very same action that it is right at one time and wrong at another. And it implied also (2) that the same action cannot possibly at the same time be both right and wrong.”<sup>26</sup>

Moore's moral realism stands in stark contrast to moral relativism. He argues that the moral value of an action remains constant, independent of individual or cultural perspectives. According to Moore's first argument against moral relativism, if moral judgments about moral reality are based on subjectivity, then it must be accepted that moral judgments are inherently incompatible. Let us consider a relativistic case from the Moorean perspective to illustrate this. If one person approves of a particular action, they are expressing their own opinion or feeling, and if another person disapproves of the same action, they are likewise merely expressing their own opinion or feeling. However, different expressions of emotion by different people about the same action are not compatible in terms of truth value of emotional judgment. Thus, Moore wants to illustrate that objective moral judgments differ from ordinary emotional judgments about certain action.<sup>27</sup> Following that, he argues that if the case is true, then these people cannot contradict each other at any time. However, the reality is different. We see people defending themselves and their own opinions against the counter-opinion.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, Moore rejects the subjectivist approach to moral realism. Moore, in this passage, evaluates the meaning of moral terms such as 'right' or 'wrong'. He wants to show that if the meaning of these terms is subjective, then it should not be possible to contradict different individuals' views. Although not all subjectivist arguments reduce ethical terms to emotional meanings, this argument seems to argue that all subjectivist ethical theories reduce the meaning of ethical terms to emotional meanings. But humans do not only use moral terms emotionally in subjective ways, there are also different meanings of ethical terms that could be relatively meaningful and could refer to moral reality. For example, we have justifications, beliefs, intuitions, and experiences just as we have emotions and we can also use these terms to refer to moral reality. In this case, Moore's argument should

---

<sup>26</sup> George Edward Moore, *Ethics* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2005), 39.

<sup>27</sup> Moore, *Ethics*, 50–51.

<sup>28</sup> Moore, *Ethics*, 51.

explain why people use moral terms differently in various moral justifications. One might have strong reasons for performing a specific action, while another may have strong reasons for not doing the same action. Take for example a bioethical case. Two people who know that anencephalic infant will die shortly may make different decisions based on different ethical principles. One parent might want to donate the baby's organs before it dies based on the principle of beneficence, while the other might refuse based on the principle of dignity. Therefore, people can conclude with different reasoning that the same action might be considered right or wrong based on different ethical principles. This is an example that supports the main argument for moral subjectivism, and Moore cannot explain this case of reality. Speculatively, he focuses on moral disagreements and he assumes that these disagreements are based on objective moral reality. While people's emotions may not be compatible, the reasons or justifications for moral actions can be compatible and subjective. Consequently, Moore cannot provide a response against moral subjectivism and the argument for relativism.

The second argument of Moore is directly related to moral relativity. According to Moore, if we are judging moral claims in terms of our society's feelings or thoughts, we cannot contradict our society and we cannot reject their moral judgments that are based on their feelings or thoughts. However, the reality contradicts this notion.<sup>29</sup> Moore is correct in pointing out this inconsistency. However, Moore again overlooks the fact that moral justification can be based on different reasoning and that we can have different reasons for a specific action that differ from those of our society. Additionally, Moore fails to explain why we can have different reasons from what our society teaches us. When the argument involves the moral thinking or reasoning of different people, Moore relates moral relativism with subjectivity of emotions.<sup>30</sup> But in fact, there are various cases that involve different feelings and thinking, and Moore does not offer a precise solution regarding how we can evaluate the moral codes of different cultures as an objective moral realist.

Moore explicitly rejects moral subjectivism and constructivism. He dismisses the main thesis of constructivism: "We must, therefore, admit that, in no case whatever, when we believe a given thing, can the given thing in question be merely that we ourselves (or somebody else) believe the very same given thing."<sup>31</sup> In line with this, Moore, in the quote, defends the objectivity of moral

---

<sup>29</sup> Moore, *Ethics*, 56.

<sup>30</sup> Moore, *Ethics*, 61.

<sup>31</sup> Moore, *Ethics*, 62.

reality against the constructivist theses. Thus, he explicitly endorses narrowed moral realism by denying moral constructivism.

That is to say, it may be held, that we always only believe or think that an action is right or wrong, and never really know which it is; that, when, therefore, we assert one to be so, we are always merely expressing an opinion or belief, never expressing knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

If we deeply examine Moore's moral epistemology, we understand what he means by moral realism and moral knowledge. He claims that a certain action should be objective and either right or wrong. Because of this idea he defends, morality is based on non-natural properties that do not depend on subjects. We can see this moral idea reflected in Moore's general realist ontological argument against idealism:

- 1) If object and subject are not distinct, idealism is true.
- 2) For example, subject and object are connected through sensation in the case of the sensation of yellow.
- 3) Thus, the sensation of yellow is distinct from yellow and the subject who perceives it.<sup>33</sup>
- 4) Therefore, the object and subject are distinct.
- 5) Thus, Idealism is not true. (modus tollens, from 1 and 4)

He refutes idealism by relying on an intuition about the distinction between object, subject, and subject's perception of an object. Thus, he believes that all aspects of any certain moral action should be determined by the object, rather than the subject. However, there are different cases where we don't know all the aspects of a certain action. For example, consider a scenario similar to Schrödinger's cat, but with a moral dilemma involving a drowning man. Let us suppose a drowning man who also has a gun and threatens to shoot at the same time and he also says "I will kill you". Supposing that I have all the ability to save this man, but I am unsure whether he is actually drowning and whether he is serious about his threat. In this situation, there are two options: I may not be morally obligated to save him because I have reasons not to, or I may be morally obligated to save him based on an intuition about helping those in need, as Singer suggests: "We ought to be preventing as much suffering as we can without sacrificing something else of comparable moral importance."<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Moore, *Ethics*, 63.

<sup>33</sup> George Edward Moore, "The Refutation of Idealism," *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 32.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 804.

The statement could be contested by suggesting that this example involves comparable moral importance between value of his life and my life. But I believe these two situations are not morally comparable because he will definitely die, while I might survive even if he is saved. If I enhance this example to reject Moore's view I can say that there are two justified beliefs in this example: one justified by intuition and the other by feelings such as fear. Consequently, the action can be determined by both intuition and feeling. Thus, intuitions and feelings are compatible in this case because they lead to the same certain action. Moore seeks to prioritize intuitions over feelings and beliefs. As a result, Moore has to suggest that good is a non-natural property of natural objects and a rational test for diagnosing it.<sup>35</sup> Although he wants to appeal to intuition as a distinct faculty for perceiving this non-natural property of natural objects, he simultaneously argues for a reasoning test to determine what is good. This creates a contradiction between Moore's two claims, similar to the argument he constructed against moral relativism.<sup>36</sup>

The third argument that is constructed by Moore opposes moral subjectivism. The argument posits that we sometimes disapprove of what we enjoy.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, there are certain crucial differences between what we approve and what we enjoy. This non-natural and unanalyzable aspect of good constitutes a fundamental and essential distinction that is vital for ethics.<sup>38</sup> Moore aims to demonstrate that there are non-natural moral properties of natural objects that are apprehended through intuition, and intuition serves as the foundation of our objective moral approvals or judgments. Moore concentrates on the different meanings of "it is true", "it should be true", and "I believe that it is true".<sup>39</sup> "It is true" differs from the others and has a further moral ontological assertion. According to Moore, this statement is certainly true and implies an objective, real domain. However, the other expressions seem to him like mental attachments of individuals.

This section, in summary, briefly discussed the relationship Moore established between moral philosophy and epistemology and aimed to demonstrate how Moore criticized the extended claim of realism demanded by relativism and subjectivism in moral philosophy. On this topic, Moore primarily

---

<sup>35</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 93.

<sup>36</sup> Previously I mentioned from Ethics in 26. footnote "When the argument comes into the moral thinking or reasoning of different people Moore associates the argument with similarity of emotive moral subjectivity." Unlike the contadictive position between intuition and rational test Moore uses the same position for feeling and thinking in the argument.

<sup>37</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 112.

<sup>38</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 112.

<sup>39</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 181.

focused on the problem of the criterion of moral knowledge. According to him, neither naturalists, deontologists, nor constructivists have been able to provide a satisfactory answer. However, the idea that constructivists could theoretically hold the realist claim impressed Moore so much that he dedicated more attention to this debate in his *Ethics*. The two constructivist theories about moral realism pose a threat to Moore's theory. Moore attempts to refute these two constructivist views by reducing them to deontologism, emotivism, or hedonism. In *Principia Ethica*, he primarily reduces them to deontologism, while in *Ethics*, he associates them with other naturalists and emotivists. However, since Moore is obsessed with the objectivity of the criterion of verification and thinks of the moral domain of existence in a manner similar to the physical domain of existence, he infers the criterion of truth from the fact that the good is a quality that can be directly apprehended. Moreover, this quality is an unnatural quality of natural objects. Ultimately, Moore directly rejects extended moral realism and accepts narrowed or objective moral realism due to his criterion. With this general framework in mind, we can now examine Moore's arguments in his *Ethics*.

## 2. Moral Objectivism Should Explain Different Moral Codes

If there are objective truths, why do we observe different societies prohibiting different, even contradicting moral codes? In my opinion, this question should be answered by moral objectivism. One of the places where G. E. Moore examines objectivity or subjectivity of morality is in the chapter titled "The Objectivity of Moral Judgements". Before interpreting this chapter, we should discuss the relationship between Moore's main ideas and subjectivity. Moore, as a moral objectivist, argues that there are objectively good things that are self-evident. There are different kinds of goods such as utility, happiness, and friendship, but Moore distinguishes between goods and the good, which he views as a simple and foundational concept. The good possesses the property of being good. However, the good cannot be reduced to one of the goods: "For I do not deny that good is a property of certain natural objects, certain of them, I think, are good, and yet I have said that "good" itself is not a natural property"<sup>40</sup>

According to the sentence, we can argue that there are different goods, but the good is a common non-natural property of them. Concerning this idea, Moore says in "The Objectivity of Moral Judgements" that:

All that our arguments, taken together, do strictly prove, is that, when a man asserts an action to be right or wrong, he is not merely making an assertion

---

<sup>40</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 93.

either about his own feelings or yet about those of the society in which he lives, or yet merely that some man or other has some feeling towards it.<sup>41</sup>

Based on the statement, Moore's argument against social approves and personal feelings differs from the rightness of moral judgment. Moore derives out the rightness of action from the good, which is grasped through intuition. Moreover, he contends that while different societies may approve different codes, this does not imply that there is subjective truth or rightness. If social approval was the measure of the rightness of an action, we would never encounter two men who have two contradictive positions about one issue, however, the reality is quite the opposite:

Neither this view, therefore, nor the view that we are merely asserting that some man or other has a particular feeling towards the action in question involves the absurdity that no two men can ever differ in opinion as to whether an action is right or wrong.<sup>42</sup>

Moore argues that if two men within the same society hold different opinions about a certain action, then relativism is absurd. On the other hand, before this explanation, Moore says that different societies would have different rightness if and only if members of each of the two societies conciliate around an opinion that differs from the other society's opinion.

I argue that Moore's argument does not successfully eliminate moral relativism. In my opinion, Moore explains the possibility of different, even contradictory evaluations. But this does not mean that different societies or different individuals would necessarily hold different morally true opinions. Moore, as an externalist, argues that moral judgment is determined by moral reality. However, from an internalist perspective, different judgments are possible. Consequently, Moore's argument against relativism is insufficient to eliminate relativism because he does not explain moral diversity but rather explains the possibility of different moral codes.

The strongest formulations of moral relativism are based on the cultural observation that different societies exhibit different moral codes. This observation also illustrates how the object of the human sciences differs from the object of the natural sciences. Beliefs, morality, art, lifestyle, culture, and social institutions are established through the subjective ties of all beings that constitute the object of human sciences. It is a significant claim to say that subjective ties point out to a reality or real qualities transcending our subjectivity. Regardless of the divergence in evaluations, there is a consistent aspect that links the challenge of detailed measurement of objects with the challenge of measuring

---

<sup>41</sup> Moore, *Ethics*, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Moore, *Ethics*, 55.

the associations between subjects and objects in terms of value. This consistent aspect lies in the fact that the act of evaluation is concentrated on a personal basis. The root of this similarity lies in the fact that the act of evaluation is concentrated on a personal basis. When we consider the ontology of evaluation, we see that a personal basis is inevitably determined not only in terms of structural values -like moral, social, and epistemological values- but also in terms of aesthetic value. However, subjectivity should never be perceived as an opposition to reality. The evaluation of someone who can appreciate the value of the Mona Lisa painting will certainly differ from that of a mathematician's view. The development of evaluation may entail using a perception of value appropriate to development. Diversification of information, as seen in the perception of different kinds, may even lead to increasingly complex access and a rapidly emerging evaluation process, possibly distinguished by phronesis as an Aristotelian concept. The objectivity of the claim that human beings have freedom in the evaluation process is actually a fact-positive claim based on a subjective evaluation process. In fact, it requires to be enlightened that there is no individual and relative moral reality. Because there is no real doubt about the subjective knowledge of values or value in the observable world. This is obvious even in the simplest evaluation.<sup>43</sup>

### 3. What the Features of an Objectivist Argument Are?

In this section, I will discuss why Moore's argument is insufficient against relativism and how moral relativism relies on factual observation, which places it in a stronger position than Moore's argument.

Bruce Russell points out a key weakness in moral objectivist arguments: they are incapable of demonstrating the failure of moral relativism.<sup>44</sup> I agree with Russell's assessment. Moreover, I argue that moral objectivist arguments should explain or provide reasons for the existence of differing moral codes that appear contradictory. I have attempted to suggest that Moore's moral objectivist arguments fail to offer any explanation.

Initially, we can address why a realist argument should explain the existence of different moral codes. The diversity of moral codes is not adequately explained by Moore's argument. While he acknowledges the possibility of different codes, I believe that this actually supports relativism. Different codes or norms in action or behavior can be based on the same ethical or moral

---

<sup>43</sup> See a detailed theory of evaluation: İoanna Kuçuradi, *İnsan ve Değerleri* (İstanbul: Yankı Yayınları, 1971).

<sup>44</sup> Bruce Russell, "Moral Relativism and Moral Realism," *The Monist* 67/3 (1984), 447.

principle. Moore's explanation of moral diversity, as quoted, reveals a significant weakness. A counter-argument against moral relativism must address why different societies have distinct codes. Let me examine relativistic argument and figure out the features of a counter-argument.

Firstly, the relativistic argument is grounded in real observation or phenomena. The most plausible counter-argument should not disregard this fact but instead interpret it alongside other facts. Moore attempts to do this but fails. He provides an example of differences or conflicts between the perspectives of individuals A and B. Both A and B view the other's position as incorrect. However, where do we determine "which is true"? I believe there are no inherently different or contradictory positions. One can perceive the other as being in contradiction to their own moral code. Moore's counter-argument against relativism does not address this rejection based on factual observation.

Secondly, the most plausible counter-argument against moral relativism should link these opposing positions to the same moral principle. For example, one could suggest that different moral codes ultimately stem from the demand for hospitality or the requirement of sympathy. Returning to our relativistic example, an Eskimo may share his wife with guests as a sign of hospitality, while European culture disapproves of this behavior and instead offers a different form of hospitality, such as a gift or another act of generosity to the guests. Both actions serve the same purpose of satisfying the guests' needs and ensuring their comfort, reflecting a shared underlying moral principle of hospitality and consideration for others.

Lastly, the most plausible counter-argument should address fact-based observations with additional evidence, such as the historical development of morals being different across societies. Moral codes or prohibited behaviors might vary from one society to another, but they are often based on the same underlying principles expressed in different ways. For example, consider the practice of sharing a wife with a guest. One might argue that this practice undermines the rights of women and objectifies them. However, this objection can be countered by explaining that the society in question has a less developed moral principle regarding gender equality. It does not fully encompass gender equality, but it does emphasize equality between men. Although this might seem problematic, it is important to recognize that this counter-example highlights not only conflicting moral codes but also early forms of equality that apply specifically to the relationship between the house owner and the guest in the context of hospitality. Thus, we can argue that moral values develop and improve over time, and this is why we observe different moral codes across different cultures.



## Conclusion

As a result of the narrowing of the sphere of moral reality with objectivity, moral relativism and moral subjectivity, which actually have an ontological claim to moral value, are excluded from moral realism. This narrowing process is a view that metaethicists, who argue that there is an objective and human-independent moral reality, often resort to. As a representative of this, Moore's view of moral reality is narrowed by the claim of objectivity. According to Moore, there is no difference in the moral value of a certain action when it is considered for persons A and B at the same time. In other words, a certain action has the same moral value for both person A and person B at the same time. Harman's conception of moral reality, on the other hand, consists of subjective values that vary in relation to the relative states of moral agents A and B. Objectivist moral arguments based on a narrowed moral ontology have weaknesses expressed in the criticisms of moral relativism and moral diversity mentioned in the previous sections. Its weakness stems from the fact that instead of explaining the cause of moral diversity and relativism, this argument merely states that opposite practices that are morally right and wrong can exist in different societies. In this case, even if Moore affirms the existence of different moral codes, he would recognize that only one of them is consistent with moral reality. This raises the difficult question, "Who decides which moral code is consistent with moral reality?". From the perspective of moral relativism and moral subjectivism, this question can be answered very easily. Therefore, in conclusion, the moral domain extended to include moral subjectivism and moral relativism is more functional in explaining sociological facts. There seems to be no theoretical obstacle to accepting that some moral codes are relative and subjective, while others are shared by many and are on their way to becoming increasingly universal.

## References

- Anscombe, G. E. M. "Modern Moral Philosophy." *Philosophy* 33/124 (1958), 1–19.
- Bagnoli, Carla. "Constructivism in Metaethics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. ed. Edward N. Zalta. Accessed March 28, 2024. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/constructivism-metaethics/>
- Berker, Selim. "Mackie Was Not an Error Theorist." *Philosophical Perspectives* 33 (2019), 5–25.
- Brink, David Owen. *Moral Realism And The Foundations of Ethics*. USA: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Harman, Gilbert. "Is There a Single True Morality?" *Explaining Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Harman, Gilbert. "Moral Relativism Is Moral Realism." *Philosophical Studies* 172 (2015), 855–863.
- Harman, Gilbert - Thomson, Judith. *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Kuçuradi, İoanna. *İnsan ve Değerleri*. İstanbul: Yankı Yayınları, 1971.
- Landau, Russ-Shafer. *Moral Realism*. USA: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Mackie, John L. "A Refutation of Morals." *Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy* 24/1–2 (1946), 77–90.
- Mackie, John L. *Ethics Inventing Right And Wrong*. England: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Moore, George Edward. "A Defence of Common Sense." *Philosophical Papers*. USA: Routledge, 2013.
- Moore, George Edward. *Ethics*. USA: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Moore, George Edward. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Moore, George Edward. "The Refutation of Idealism." *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings*. ed. Thomas Baldwin. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Rachels, James. *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. ed. Stuart Rachels. USA: McGraw-Hill, 7th Ed., 2012.
- Russell, Bruce. "Moral Relativism and Moral Realism." *The Monist* 67/3 (1984), 435–451.
- Singer, Peter. "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Stocker, Michael. "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories." *The Journal of Philosophy* 73/14 (1976), 453–466.
- Timmons, Mark. *Moral Theory An Introduction*. UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2nd Ed., 2013.
- Westacott, Emrys. "Moral Relativism." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed March 26, 2024. <https://iep.utm.edu/moral-re/>