

NICHOLAS MAXWELL

Are There Objective Values?

ARE THERE OBJECTIVE VALUES? Is it possible to make sense of the idea that one can be *mistaken* about what is of value, and that one can *learn* about what is of value? Are there, in some sense, value properties, value facts, in virtue of which value statements can be true or false, irrespective of what anyone believes about the matter, analogously to the way in which straightforward factual statements are true or false, depending on what is, objectively, the case? Or, in speaking of what is of value are we merely speaking about what people value, or we value? Are we, in other words, speaking in a somewhat misleading way about personal preferences?

The question concerns not just moral value, but value of any kind; the question arises whenever something is—or is deemed to be—in some way desirable, worthwhile, good, or of value.

Subjectivism has been the dominant view in moral philosophy during much of the twentieth century,¹ and is still a widely held view. In opposition to subjectivism, I have long defended value realism, the doctrine that there are value features of things, as objective and real as perceptual features such as colours and textures.² Until very recently, I thought I was a lone voice crying in the wilderness. In fact, in recent years, a number of others have

¹ Subjectivist views are to be found in A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1936); C.L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1944); R.M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1952); P. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1956); and J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1977).

² See N. Maxwell, *What's Wrong With Science?* (Hayes, UK: Bran's Head Books, 1976) 138–46 and 242–54; and *From Knowledge to Wisdom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) ch. 10.

defended versions of value realism, using arguments which overlap with, but which also differ from, those that I have employed: see, in particular, works by E.J. Bond, John McDowell, and David Brink.³ Discussion of value realism in the philosophical literature has become technical and intricate,⁴ but seems so far to have had little influence outside academic philosophy, where subjectivist and relativist views largely prevail. This is due, in my view, to general acceptance of certain standard objections to value realism, which are widely regarded as lethal. But these objections are at most only lethal against versions of value realism which one should not defend in the first place; they are harmless when directed against viable, but overlooked, versions of value realism.

Subjectivist and relativist views about value, being widely held, have all sorts of harmful consequences for the quality of our lives, in education, the arts, politics, and elsewhere. They may be held partly responsible for a recent general dumbing down of our world. In these circumstances, what is at present most urgently needed, I believe, is not more intricate philosophical discussion, but rather a clear account of why standard objections to value-realism do not apply to a viable version of the doctrine. This is what I set out to provide in this essay.

Moral, Metaphysical, and Epistemological Objections to Objectivism

Objectivism, or value realism—the doctrine that there are objective values—may seem objectionable for a number of reasons. It may seem objectionable morally, metaphysically, and epistemologically.

To begin with, we may hold it to be immoral to proclaim the existence of objective value, and then invoke it in an attempt to influence the conduct of others. The mother tugs the restless child's hand and exclaims "Be good!" when what she really means is: "Do what I want you to do!" The act of telling the child to be good is an act of manipulation and deceit. The same thing happens when the authorities tell the public to "cooperate with the authorities": this

³ E.J. Bond, *Reason and Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983); John McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998) part 2; David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989).

⁴ For an excellent review article see: Margaret Little, "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Books* 35 (1994):145–53 and 225–33.

does not mean “work in partnership (i.e., cooperatively) with the authorities”; it means “Do what the authorities tell you to do.” Moral systems can be regarded as systems of control and exploitation, put about by those in power to induce others to act in the interests of those who hold power. Interpreting such moral systems as “objective” further obscures the manipulation and deceit that is involved; it makes it that much more immoral.

Similarly, it may be argued, those who proclaim the existence of objective values do violence to liberalism in that, instead of questions of value being left to individuals to decide for themselves, such questions are decided by the authorities, the experts, those who are in a position to “know” what is best for the rest of us. Objectivism, it may be argued, is authoritarian, even totalitarian in spirit, a ploy used to indoctrinate and enslave. Objectivism provides a ready justification for imperialists and religious fanatics, for those who know with certainty what is right, and on that basis strive to gain power over others by means of force, persuasion, or terror.

Yet again, it may be argued, at a milder level, objectivism in the field of the arts leads straight to elitism. Those who are in a position to do so proclaim that those arts that they enjoy are objectively of greater aesthetic value than those enjoyed by others, and on that basis ensure that what they enjoy receives much more patronage and state funding.

In addition to the moral objections to objectivism, there are also metaphysical objections. What are these mysterious value facts, in virtue of which value statements are either true or false? What are value properties, and how are they related to physical properties? Do we, with G.E. Moore, think of the Good as an unanalyzable property which cannot be defined?⁵ Or do we, even more radically, with Pirsig, think of Quality as the basic stuff of existence, undefinable, neither objective nor subjective, from which everything else emerges?⁶ Are we to suppose that value is some sort of mysterious invisible fluid, valuable things being soaked in it, valueless things being bereft of it? Might chemists one day distil drops of this precious fluid in a flask? The whole idea is surely preposter-

⁵ G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1903).

⁶ R. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (London: Bodley Head, 1974).

ous. And even if this mysterious value substance or property existed, it would remain a mystery how we can come to know that some things possess it; and even if we could know this, it would be utterly mysterious why we should especially value things that are rich in this mysterious property of value.

If objective value exists, then it ought to be possible to determine, objectively, whether something is or is not of value. It ought to be possible to decide disputes about what is of value by an appeal to the objective value facts, much as factual disputes can be decided in science. But notoriously, disputes about what is of value are endless and seem inherently unresolvable. This, again, seems decisive grounds for rejecting objectivism.

Objections to Relativism

Objectivism is, it seems, untenable, and we are obliged to hold the opposite view, which may be called subjectivism or relativism. There is no such thing as the objectively good, the objectively bad, there are only the diverse preferences of individuals. Different people hold different things to be good and bad, and that is all there is to it; one cannot say that some are correct, and others incorrect in what they judge to be of value. What I hold to be good others may hold to be bad, and vice versa; but I cannot justifiably say that I am right and they are wrong, any more than they can justifiably hold the opposite.

But relativism seems to lead to unacceptable consequences as well. We should ordinarily want to say, surely, that we can make discoveries about what is of value. This is surely strikingly apparent in the field of art. A piece of music, by Mozart perhaps, may, to begin with, strike us as being little more than a pleasant sound; another piece, by Stravinsky possibly, may strike us as being merely a horrible noise. Then, gradually, we discover hidden depths in the music; we discover meaning and passion. And this cannot be reduced to a change, merely, in our preferences; it involves making discoveries about the value of the music construed as a work of art. Much great art, whether music, painting, literature, poetry or drama, does not yield up all its richness, its value, at once; in order to discover what is of value in the work of art we need to explore, to learn, to discover.

Similarly, we do not see what is of value (or disvalue) in people all at once, when we first meet them; we more or less gradually learn about the value of people. A person may strike us

initially to be rather cold and distant; then, gradually, we learn that this reserve, or shyness, conceals such sterling qualities as honesty, integrity, a capacity for deep and sincere, if not always demonstrative, friendship. Or vice versa, we may initially be charmed and delighted with the spontaneity and fun of someone we meet, only gradually to discover, subsequently, that this person is really rather empty headed and boring.

Similar points arise elsewhere, in connection with such things as institutions, customs, laws, societies, cultures, historical periods or movements, political parties, governments. In all these fields, what is of value is not always immediately apparent; we need to discover, to learn.

But if relativism is true, learning about what is of value is impossible, meaningless: there can be no such thing. There can only be a change in preferences. And if a later set of preferences seems preferable to an earlier set (so that there is, in a sense, learning) it will always be the case, of course, that just the opposite holds for some other equally viable preference about preferences. Whether we say someone has learned and made progress, or has gone through precisely the opposite process of unlearning and degenerating, is merely a matter of preference, the first preference being as valid as the second.

Relativism allows change in desires and preferences, but cannot make sense of the idea that we gradually discover or learn what is of value. And as a result, relativism, if taken seriously, is likely to exert a harmful influence on the value of life. For if it is indeed the case that much of what is of value in life is not immediately accessible and apparent but has to be discovered through learning, it is very important that we take seriously the task of learning about what is of value as we live. If we do not, the chances are that our learning about what is of value will suffer; the value of our lives will suffer. Relativism, however, cancels the very possibility of learning about value; thus the more seriously and widely relativism is accepted, so the more will learning about what is of value suffer; and this means that the value of life itself will suffer, as a result. Lack of learning about what is of value will have the consequences that public values will tend to be crude and ill-informed, inherited without much (if any) improvement, from the past. Public decision-making (whether made by those few in power, or by people quite generally by means of voting or the free mar-

ket) will nevertheless be informed by, influenced by, these crude public values (with inevitable adverse effects).

In cancelling the possibility of learning about what is of value, in short, relativism is both wrong, and harmful if taken seriously in practice.

In response to these charges, it may be argued that learning is possible given relativism, for we can of course always learn about ordinary (value-neutral) matters of fact. And such learning, in an entirely straightforward, rational and justifiable way, may well affect what our preferences are. We prefer Hilda to Mary until we learn new facts about Hilda: that she is a liar, or a murderess. We prefer beef to pork until we learn that beef gives us mad cow disease.

But learning about what is of value is not only a matter of learning value-neutral facts. Learning to discern the value in a work of art may not involve merely learning new value-neutral facts about it; it may involve discovering hitherto overlooked or misunderstood aesthetic qualities of the work. Many contemporaries of J.S. Bach regarded his music as dry, intellectual exercises in various musical forms, devoid of real musical worth; those of us who regard Bach as one of the greatest artists ever, do not know more value-neutral facts about his music than his contemporaries did: we hear, we have discovered, musical qualities in the music (its profound compassion, its joyful exuberance, its all-encompassing gentleness, grace and thoughtfulness, its massive integrity, its haunting melancholy, its passionate longing) to which contemporaries were deaf. According to relativism, of course, all this is just acquiring a taste for Bach's music, coming to have pleasurable emotions stirred up in one through listening to the music: it does not involve learning anything objective about the music. But it is just this relativist gloss on what constitutes coming to appreciate the value inherent in Bach's music which seems to belittle, to rubbish, the genuine *learning* that is involved.

And analogous points can, it seems, be made about learning about the value in people, in institutions, and in other such things of value (whether good or bad).

In brief, relativism seems wrong and harmful because it rubbishes the possibility of there being learning about the value-aspect of things: the purely factual learning that relativism permits seems inadequate.

Another objection that may be made to relativism is that it is morally objectionable. Confronted with unspeakable crimes (Hitler's for example, or Stalin's), it seems inadequate and beside the point to declare simply: "I prefer people not to do such things," or "I personally hate such actions." Actions (such as those of Hitler or Stalin in killing millions of people) are objectively unimaginably evil, whatever anyone may think or feel about the matter. Relativism, in reducing morality to personal preference, annihilates morality; or rather, more accurately, it *immorally* implies that morality (as something more than personal preference) does not exist.

Finally, relativism may be objected to because of what seem to be its nihilistic implications. If in reality there exists nothing that is objectively of value, the whole idea of learning, of discovering what is of value being nonsense then, so it may seem, life is a bleak affair indeed. Not surprisingly, the meaning and value of life seem to drain away (since, according to relativism, such things do not exist).

The Dilemma and Its Solution

We have, in short, a fully fledged dilemma on our hands. There are decisive objections to the view that objective values do exist; but equally, there are decisive objections to the opposite view, that objective values do not exist. If both views are equally objectionable, what are we to believe?

The solution to this dilemma is to recognize that a number of different versions of objectivism can be distinguished; most succumb to the above moral, metaphysical or epistemological objections, but one does not.

Reply to Moral Objections to Objectivism

In order to overcome the moral objections to objectivism we need to recognize that there are at least three, and not just two, positions, namely:

1) Dogmatic Objectivism: There are objective values, we know what they are, and anyone who disagrees must be taught better, converted, conquered, or assassinated;

2) (Dogmatic) Relativism: What is wrong with Dogmatic Objectivism is the objectivism. There are no objective values, there is only what people desire, prefer or value; and

3) Conjectural Objectivism: What is wrong with Dogmatic Objectivism is the dogmatism! Precisely because values exist ob-

jectively, our knowledge of what is of value is *conjectural* in character. If two parties disagree about what is of value, the chances are that each has something to learn from the other.

Dogmatic Objectivism is the sort of view upheld (in its milder forms) by the Victorians when confronted by primitive people: Victorians not only believed in the existence of objective values, but “knew,” beyond all doubt, that the correct values were those of Victorian England. Primitive people, with very different systems of values were, in the eyes of Victorian travellers and anthropologists, simply wrong, ignorant and primitive. Today it is, typically, various sorts of religious fundamentalists who uphold versions of Dogmatic Objectivism.

Relativism arises as a result of a reaction against Dogmatic Objectivism. It seems appalling that people should be so convinced of the correctness of their views on what is of value that they feel justified in converting or conquering everyone else so that they too come to live by and believe in these views—even to the extent of feeling justified in eliminating those who refuse. People proselytize their values, their religion and way of life, so aggressively because they believe they have the might of objective value behind them, in the form of gods, God, the Tribe, the Race, the chosen People or Class, the Nation, History, Civilization, or whatever. These are regarded as objectively existing embodiments of value, and it is this, so incipient Relativists believe, which leads to the drive to dominate and convert, to offend basic principles of morality and liberalism. It is the value-objectivism of Dogmatic Objectivism which is the cause of the problem, Relativists argue, and as a result defend value-subjectivism. The whole idea of value existing objectively, of value-judgements being objectively true and false, is a nonsense: there are simply a multiplicity of preferences of people, some embodied in diverse value-systems, no one being better or more correct than any other, in any objective sense. Those who belong to so-called “western civilization” should regard so-called “primitive” people as merely different, not inferior.

But Relativism, despite its good intentions, is hardly an improvement over Dogmatic Objectivism. Given the latter view, it is at least possible to hold that the imperialist actions of the Victorians were objectively wrong. Given Relativism, this becomes impossible; one can only say that these actions are not to one’s own personal taste. Relativism seems to defend liberalism and tolerance against imperialist aggression, but the defence destroys the very

possibility of declaring liberalism and tolerance to be morally good and imperialist aggression to be morally bad. The defects of Relativism defeat its own good intentions. And there are the other adverse consequences to take into account as well, already pointed out: the annihilation of value, the cancellation of the possibility of learning in the realm of value.

It is important to note that Relativism objects to the objectivism of Dogmatic Objectivism, and not to the dogmatism. There is indeed a sense in which the transition from Dogmatic Objectivism to relativism intensifies the dogmatism. A Dogmatic Objectivist is convinced that he is right and those who disagree are wrong; at the same time he holds that this is a significant issue, one worth going to war and dying for, and thus certainly not meaningless. In other words, it is definitely meaningful that he might be wrong about what is of objective value; but he knows he is right. For the Relativist, however, it is meaningless that one can be wrong about one's personal preferences: what higher authority than oneself could there be? There are of course somewhat trivial senses in which one can be wrong: one may be wrong about what one's actual preferences are; or one's actual preferences may be the result, in part, of false purely factual beliefs. Putting these points on one side, it is, according to the Relativist, meaningless to say that one person's preferences are right, another's wrong. In this respect, yet again, Relativism is hardly an improvement over Dogmatic Objectivism.

Relativism is right to object to Dogmatic Objectivism, but wrong to object to the objectivism of the view. It is the dogmatism of Objective Dogmatism that is objectionable, not the objectivism. It is the dogmatism, the absolute conviction in the correctness of one's own position, that makes it possible for one to be convinced that non-believers should be taught better, converted, conquered, or assassinated. Not only does Relativism misallocate what is wrong with Dogmatic Objectivism; it actually has the effect of intensifying what is wrong, as we have seen. Relativists may hope that general acceptance of their view would promote tolerance, but the hope is misplaced. Relativism puts those who seek to convert, conquer or assassinate on a par with those seek to live cooperatively and tolerantly with their fellow human beings. Furthermore, general acceptance of Relativism is as likely as not to sabotage growth of tolerance, since tolerance is, by and large, something that needs to be learned and, as we have seen, Relativism cancels the very idea of learning in the realm of value.

Dogmatic Objectivism and Relativism make the same blunder: both take it for granted that objectivism leads to dogmatism. In fact precisely the opposite is the case: objectivism demands that we recognize that we cannot know for certain what is, and what is not, of value; at best our value judgments must be conjectures. If there really are value features of things that really do exist whether we perceive them or not, it becomes all but inevitable that we will, more or less frequently, get things wrong. Just because the physical world really does exist, we often make mistakes about it; we do not have an infallible access to all that there is. On the contrary, much of the fallible knowledge that we do possess about the physical universe has been won only as a result of centuries of effort by science. What possible justification could there be for supposing that the situation is different as far as value features of things are concerned? If such features really do exist, then surely here too we must acknowledge that we cannot hope to be infallible, that our views about what is of value are all too likely to be more or less wrong, and hence such views need to be held as conjectures. Objectivism, in other words, implies conjecturalism, and demands that one rejects dogmatism.

As long as we believe that only the two views of Dogmatic Objectivism and Relativism are possible, we are forced to choose between them, even though both, as we have seen, have highly undesirable consequences. The important point is that a third view is available, Conjectural Objectivism, which need have none of the moral and intellectual defects of the other two views. Dogmatic Objectivism and Relativism, as we have seen, clash with or undermine liberalism. By contrast, Conjectural Objectivism, far from clashing with liberalism, may be held to be necessary for liberalism. For, granted Conjectural Objectivism, we may conjecture that it is people, and what is of value to people, that is ultimately of value in existence. In other words, the basic tenet of liberalism, which one might state as "It is individual persons that are of supreme value in existence," needs to be formulated as a conjecture about what is objectively of ultimate value, and for this requires Conjectural Objectivism. If Relativism is presupposed, the basic tenet of liberalism disintegrates into nothing more than a personal preference.⁷

⁷ For an earlier discussion of these issues see N. Maxwell, *From Knowledge to Wisdom* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984) 255–58.

Reply to Metaphysical Objections to Objectivism

In order to overcome the metaphysical objections to objectivism it is essential to appreciate that there are at least two very different ways of drawing the distinction between the objective and the subjective, two meanings that can be given to "objective" and "subjective." The first distinction has to do with whether something really exists, or does not exist (but only appears to exist). The second has to do with whether something is utterly impersonal, unrelated to human beings, or whether it is in some way personal, or related to human beings.⁸ The important point is that something may be subjective in the second sense, but objective in first sense. That is, something may be related to human concerns, aims or physiology and yet, at the same time, may really exist out there in the world. Value features are of this type: related to human concerns and aims, but really existing for all that.

Let us call the first meanings of "objective" and "subjective," connected with existence and non-existence, "existential objectivity" and "existential subjectivity." If some object or property is existentially objective, then it really does exist; if it is existentially subjective, then it does not really exist even though it may appear to do so, or may be thought by some to exist. Tables, trees, and stars are existentially objective; ghosts, demons, and spells are existentially subjective.

Let us call the second meanings of "objective" and "subjective," connected with being human-unrelated and human-related, "humanly objective" and "humanly subjective." An object or property is humanly objective if it is wholly impersonal, unrelated to human aims, interests, experiences, or physiology; it is humanly subjective if it is related to human aims, interests, experiences, or physiology. Physical entities and properties, such as stars and atoms, mass and electric charge, may be taken to be humanly objective, in that these objects and properties are entirely unrelated to human interests, aims, or physiology. By contrast, works of art, constitutions, legal systems, and languages are all humanly subjective in that these objects are all quite essentially related to human beings. Furthermore, properties such as *poisonous*, *green*, *delicious*, and *friendly* are humanly subjective in that these properties are all human-related.

⁸ For an earlier formulation of this distinction see N. Maxwell, "Physics and Common Sense," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 16 (1966): 310–11.

The crucial point in all this is that, even though something is humanly subjective this does not mean that it is existentially subjective. On the contrary, it may be existentially objective. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, Britain's constitution, legal system, and language all exist (are existentially objective) even though they are also human-related objects (i.e., humanly subjective). Arsenic really is poisonous, grass really is green, zabaglione really is delicious, and Einstein really was friendly (i.e., all these properties are existentially objective) even though these properties are human-related (i.e., humanly subjective). It is into this category of existential objectivity and human subjectivity that value features fall. Like colours, value features really do exist out there in the world; but also like colours, value features are human-related.

If we hold that there is just one distinction between the objective and the subjective, we thereby make it impossible to declare that colours, and value-features of things, are existentially objective but humanly subjective. Declaring value-features to be objective commits us to declaring them to be human-unrelated, like mass or electric charge, which is absurd; but also, declaring value-features to be subjective commits us to declaring that they do not really exist, which seems equally absurd. The above dilemma, in short, arises as a result of failing to appreciate that there are two quite different distinctions between objective and subjective: the dilemma is readily solved once one appreciates this point, which permits one to say that value-features are objective in one sense (really existing) but subjective in another sense (human-related).

Put another way, once we recognize that there are two distinctions between objective and subjective to be made, then, in declaring values to be objective there are two possibilities. We may mean that values are existentially objective and humanly objective: let us call this view impersonal conjectural objectivism. Or we may mean that values are existentially objective but humanly subjective: let us call this view human-related conjectural objectivism. The above metaphysical objections to objectivism apply devastatingly to impersonal conjectural objectivism: it is indeed absurd to suppose that a value-fluid exists in the universe, which chemists might one day distill in a flask. But these metaphysical objections fail completely when directed against the more modest view of human-related conjectural objectivism. The value-features of things are as familiar, unmythical and non-metaphysical as

colours, sounds and smells. In order to perceive value features we may need to have emotional responses, just as in order to see colour we need appropriate visual responses: but in neither case does this mean that the property is existentially subjective—though it does mean it is humanly subjective.

Typical familiar value-features of people are: *friendly, mean, jolly, stern, witty, courageous, warm-hearted, dull, frivolous, shifty, kind, spontaneous, strong-willed, earnest, gloomy, calculating, mischievous, cold, gushing, loyal, ambitious, argumentative, generous*. These are both descriptive and value-laden, factual and imbued with value. People, like works of art in a somewhat different way, are essentially value-imbued, morality-imbued things: we cannot describe a personality, we cannot state facts about a personality, without employing value-imbued factual terms of the kind just indicated, any more than we can describe a work of art as work of art without employing analogous aesthetic terms, value-imbued factual terms.

Those who wish to maintain the traditional distinction between fact and value will argue that terms such as the above can always be interpreted in two ways, first in a purely factual, non-evaluative way, and second in an evaluative and non-descriptive, non-factual way. We can describe without evaluating, and in adding an evaluation we do not provide additional factual information, we do something quite different, namely evaluate.

In this essay I have not argued for the existence of value-features; I have confined myself to rebutting arguments against the view that value-features really do exist in the world. This, in my view, is the crucial task that needs to be performed. No one, I believe, would take relativism or subjectivism seriously if they were not persuaded that value objectivism is untenable. What needs to be done is not to prove that value features of things really do exist (a hopeless task in any case), but rather to prove that arguments against objectivism are invalid. Continuing in this vein, let us consider what grounds there are for insisting that the above value-laden factual terms must be split into two distinct parts, the factual and the evaluative.

Consider “friendly.” On the face of it, this is doubly evaluative, first because friendliness may be deemed to be a desirable quality in a person, and second because friendliness may be deemed to be such that a genuinely friendly person, at the very least, acts in a moral way towards other people. One cannot be friendly and

mean, friendly and cruel, at one and the same time. What obliges us to split off a purely factual, non-evaluative meaning from the evaluative, moral meaning? Doubtless this can be done. We can, for example, render “friendly” purely factual by specifying some set of values and interpreting “friendly” in terms of this set, there being no presumption that this set embodies what is really of value. But what grounds are there for holding that this must be done, apart from the mistaken idea that value-features of things cannot exist?

In my view, a particularly strong reason for holding that value-features exist, for supporting human-related conjectural objectivism, arises from the following sort of consideration. Think of a friend or relative that you have known personally, neither a saint nor a fiend, who has lived her life, and has died. A number of people have known this person, in different contexts, and to differing degrees. The deceased person will have revealed different aspects of her personality to these lovers, friends, and acquaintances. No one knew all her good qualities; even she, when alive, may not have been aware of them. But we should not conclude that an unnoticed virtue does not exist, or that an undervalued one is not valuable. To do so would have the dreadful consequence that it is only people who are widely taken to have value that really are of value, and that those who have quietly contributed much to the quality of people’s lives, unnoticed and unsung, are worthless, and have done nothing worthwhile.

In the realm of value, to believe that *to be* is *to be perceived*, which is what subjectivism and relativism amount to, is to be a cynic and nihilist of dreadful proportions. Life today suffers horribly from these doctrines. Even fanatical fundamentalism may be seen as a sort of hysterical reaction to the cynicism and nihilism implicit in value subjectivism and relativism, widely upheld because philosophical blunders (indicated above) appear to leave liberalism, and a sane scientific outlook, no alternative.

Reply to Epistemological Objection to Objectivism

The epistemological objection to objectivism, considered above, is that if value features of things really exist then it ought to be possible for people to agree as to what they are. Notoriously, people disagree, and there appears to be no procedure for achieving agreement, as in science or mathematics. Hence objective values do not exist.

The lack of universal values is often taken as a strong argument for relativism, and objectivists often assume that, in order to establish their position they must demonstrate, somehow, that there is some set of values that arise universally in all cultures. But all this is a mistake.

The physical universe exists independently of us; here, unquestionably, there are objective facts. But when it comes to cosmological theories concerning the nature of the universe, we do not find that there is some universal theory, accepted by people in all cultures at all times. On the contrary, we find an incredible diversity of views. But this does not mean that there is no such thing as the true nature of the universe; it just means that this truth is inaccessible, or difficult to get hold of (and hence the need for science).

The same point arises in connection with value-features of things. Long-standing, widespread disagreement about what is of value does not mean that there is no such thing as that which is of value objectively; it just means that it is inaccessible, or more or less difficult to determine or establish. To this it may be objected that there is still a big difference between the two cases. As far as the physical universe is concerned, different societies and cultures may have produced radically different cosmological theories; and different physicists have defended different theories. Nevertheless in this domain we possess the means for resolving debates between conflicting views. In gradually improving knowledge, science sooner or later decides between diverse conflicting hypotheses.

But in the realm of value, nothing of the kind is discernable. Notoriously, different people, different societies and cultures disagree radically about questions of value, and no amount of argument or experience seems capable of resolving these conflicting views. There is no science of value; the very idea seems somehow absurd. Do not these considerations support the view that in the realm of value we are concerned merely with various purely subjective tastes or desires, there being no such thing as an objectively existing value feature?

A number of points can be made in reply to this objection. First, it may be that, even though value features exist, nevertheless questions of value are inherently more difficult to settle than scientific questions of fact. Second, it may be much more difficult and problematic to set up a team of experts to decide value-questions

than it is to set up a team of experts—the scientific community—to decide questions of scientific fact. Third, apart from fundamentalists of various persuasions, our modern world is awash with subjectivism and relativism, doctrines that deny the very possibility of learning about what is of value. In such a cultural climate, it is hardly surprising that people fail to learn about what is of value, and do not know how to resolve conflicting views about what is of value rationally. Finally, the idea that we might one day develop, what we do not have at present, something like a “science” of value is not nearly as absurd as it may at first seem to be. Indeed, elsewhere⁹ I have argued for the urgent need to develop just such a “science” of value.

At present academic inquiry seeks to help promote human welfare by, in the first instance, acquiring factual knowledge. First, knowledge is to be acquired; then, secondly, it can be applied to help solve social problems.

In *From Knowledge to Wisdom* I demonstrate that this official conception of the aims and methods of inquiry is damagingly irrational. I argue that we need to put into practice a new conception of inquiry that gives intellectual priority to tackling problems of living over problems of knowledge. This new conception of inquiry would take, as its basic intellectual aim, the acquisition and promotion of wisdom—“wisdom” being defined as the capacity to realize what is of value in life for oneself and others (thus including knowledge, understanding and technological know-how). This new kind of inquiry would be rationally designed to help us learn about what is of value in life, and to achieve it; and at the same time it would do better justice to the intellectual values inherent in natural science. We urgently need a revolution in the overall aims and methods of inquiry, from knowledge to wisdom, so that we may learn gradually how to create a better world.

If this revolution had occurred we would, no doubt, be rather better at resolving conflicts rationally about what is of value than we are at present.

⁹ See N. Maxwell, *From Knowledge to Wisdom*. See also N. Maxwell, “Science, Reason, Knowledge and Wisdom: A Critique of Specialism,” *Inquiry* 2 (1980): 19–81; “What Kind of Inquiry Can Best Help Us Create a Good World?,” *Science, Technology and Human Values* 17 (1992): 205–27; “Can Humanity Learn to Become Civilized? The Crisis of Science without Civilization,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 17 (2000): 29–44; and other works.

Conclusion

Philosophers are on occasion accused of ignoring urgent issues and problems of real life, of becoming absorbed instead with the study of abstract, trivial, esoteric puzzles, of no significance to anyone but themselves. The question of whether values are objective or subjective is not of this kind. There can be no doubt that relativism and subjectivism about values are widely held, influential views in the world today. As I have indicated above, these views, once accepted, have damaging consequences for the quality of our lives. Relativism and subjectivism imply that it is meaningless to seek to learn about what is of value; hence, if one holds such a view one is hardly encouraged to try to learn. Relativism and subjectivism imply that there can be no such thing as the rational resolution of conflicts about what is of value: hence, if these views are widely held there will be little encouragement to attempt rational resolution of such conflicts. Any hope of public decision-making being based on judgements of value disappears, and one is obliged, it seems, to rely on mechanisms that appeal to popularity, money, and power. Finally, relativism and subjectivism imply that nothing is of value objectively; such a belief can only serve to induce despair, cynicism, the desperate search for distraction, of one kind or another. Relativism and subjectivism have adverse consequences for almost every aspect of life—politics, the arts, education, the media, architecture and planning, commerce and industry, the office, the street, the countryside, and the home.

People take relativism or subjectivism for granted because they take it for granted that the alternative, Dogmatic Objectivism, is very much worse. We live in an age when we have to choose between relativism and fundamentalism. But the choice is a false one. As I have shown in this essay, there is a third option: human-related Conjectural Objectivism. This asserts that there are indeed objectively existing value features of things in the world; it emphasizes that our knowledge of such features is conjectural, and thus emphasizes the urgent need for learning. This largely overlooked third view is free of the moral, metaphysical, and epistemological defects that plague the other two views, Dogmatic Objectivism and Relativism. Everyone would benefit from a more general understanding of the availability of this third view.¹⁰

¹⁰ One important issue I have not discussed in this essay is the question of how objective value can provide reasons for action. For an excellent discussion of this issue see E.J. Bond, *Reason and Value*.