

<p>‘The presence of moral disagreements shows us that morality is completely subjective.’ Discuss. [RI Y6 CT 2023]</p>
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In an increasingly polarised global landscape, it appears that moral disagreements are everywhere — we seem to lack a universal consensus on a whole host of thorny ethical dilemmas, from abortion to gene editing. While relativists might argue that the existence of pervasive moral debate points to the wholly subjective nature of moral judgements, they often fail to consider the limited extent of disagreement, as well as the implicitly universalist conception of morality that fuels moral debate in the first place. Ultimately, the existence of ethical disagreements suggests not that morality is subjective, but rather that it is incomplete — an unfortunate reality necessitated by the extremely high justificatory threshold that moral claims need to meet to constitute moral knowledge.

For the moral relativist, moral disagreements ostensibly point to the inevitable subjectivity that percolates into morality. The first kind of moral disagreement they point to is moral disagreement over time — indeed, it appears that our moral knowledge evolves with the ages, making our systems of morality at different times hopelessly contradictory. For instance, for much of human history, it was considered morally acceptable to marry one’s relatives — incestuous intermarriages were commonplace in European royal families, leading to genetic abnormalities like the Habsburg jaw appearing. However, such incestuous relations would be considered sinful and immoral by modern standards of morality, revealing that moral systems can evolve over time and create disagreements. Similarly, homosexual conduct was considered immoral across much of Western Europe up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but many in those countries today consider it a morally acceptable lifestyle to lead. As such, it appears that we do not have a fixed, unchanging conception of morality — moral codes and standards appear to change depending on the era, making them ostensibly subjective to the specific age of history.

Relativists also highlight the existence of moral disagreement across societies and cultures — indeed, some practices could be regarded as perfectly acceptable in some cultures and deeply immoral in others. Consider the example of honour killings —

while many Western cultures consider the individual's right to life to be a fundamental one, some cultures in the Middle East believe that such a right is overridden by the duty to protect the honour and dignity of one's family, making it morally acceptable or even necessary to kill those who have brought shame and disgrace into their families. As such, our cultural upbringing appears to heavily influence our moral judgements, rendering morality relative to each society and ultimately a subjective concept.

However, such a position perhaps overstates the extent of moral disagreements in society — there are a whole host of issues on which we manage to achieve moral consensus across time and space. For instance, many of the rights articulated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights are affirmed by nearly every culture and society — it would be difficult to find a community where individuals have no right to life or no freedom from torture. Subjectivity and moral disagreements appear to surface only when these principles come into conflict: for instance, the afore-discussed debate over honour killings results from Western Cultures according more weight to the right to life, and Middle Eastern ones according more weight to the right to dignity. We cannot infer, however, that moral principles are totally subjective on this basis: killing is still considered a moral wrong in the Middle East, pointing to the universal rather than relative nature of such moral principles. Similarly, the existence of moral disagreement over what to do with Philippa Foot's Trolley Problem does not render morality hopelessly subjective — one cannot unilaterally decide to abandon all deontological and utilitarian principles and devise a plan to kill all six individuals on the track, and can only subjectively choose between the duty not to kill and the utilitarian calculus of maximising happiness. In light of this, moral disagreements are only present and subjectivity is introduced only when universal ethical principles issue contradictory imperatives and force individuals and cultures to choose between them — morality cannot be said to succumb entirely to subjective whims and fancies.

In fact, the very existence of moral debate belies the fact that we cling to a universalist conception of morality. If moral judgement were merely expressions of subjective preferences, we would not debate over them in the same way that we would not debate over someone's claim that "strawberry is the nicest ice cream flavour" — attempting to change someone's subjective preferences would be a fruitless endeavour. However, the fact that we continue to debate over issues like abortion, physician-assisted suicide and gene editing rather than 'agreeing to disagree'

suggests that we do believe in the existence of moral facts that universally apply to everyone. Similarly, the fact that we see continued advocacy efforts in the West to stop female genital mutilation (FGM) in parts of North Africa suggests that we do not believe morality to be relative to individual cultures — if that were so, feminists in the West would simply accept that in the cultures in which FGM take place, it is a morally acceptable practice. As such, a universalist conception of morality is necessary for debates over moral disagreements to take place at all, making moral disagreements a sign that morality cannot be completely subjective.

Perhaps the greatest flaw with the relativist position lies in its failure to consider an alternative explanation for the presence of moral disagreements — while they would perhaps indicate that morality is subjective, they could also be a sign that our moral knowledge is incomplete. Indeed, it is possible that we disagree over moral issues because we have not found the perfect, all-encompassing moral standard that reconciles the conflicting prescriptions of various moral principles. For instance, it is conceivable that disagreements over the Trolley Problem will disappear when we determine when we should apply deontological considerations and when utilitarian ones should be used, a problem that philosophers like Nagel are currently investigating. Therefore, it would be hasty to make inferences about the ontology of moral facts based on the existence of a few disagreements, when it could simply be the case that we have not learnt everything there is to know about morality.

This is the more likely situation, because the uniquely high justificatory threshold that moral claims have to meet before they are considered ‘knowledge’ limits the amount of moral knowledge we might have. For a moral claim to be justified, it must be mutually corroborated by reason, experience, and intuition — the absence of any one renders the justification insufficient. For example, while utilitarianism might be rationally justifiable and coheres with many societal conceptions of morality, the fact that it delivers some unintuitive verdicts already makes it insufficiently justified — we already have reservations about utilitarianism based on its prescription to kill one hospital visitor and use his organs to save five lives. The reason why moral claims must meet an extraordinarily high justificatory bar to be considered knowledge stems from its special epistemic status — we allow moral knowledge to override all amoral, pragmatic considerations. For instance, while there may be many pragmatic reasons to kill civilians in war, such as to demoralise the enemy or reduce the effectiveness of

conscripted, the singular, countervailing moral fact that these civilians have a right to life triumphs all these practical reasons for doing so. Hence, given that we accord moral knowledge with such unique importance, it is equally necessary that moral knowledge be justified to a uniquely large extent before it can be placed on that epistemic pedestal. With such stringent requirements for the justification of moral knowledge, it is likely that we do not have such moral knowledge at all, making that the more probable explanation for moral disagreements compared to the intractable subjectivity of moral facts.

Ultimately, while it might be initially intuitive to conclude that morality is subjective because of the existence of moral disagreements, this could be a naïve view. The limited scope of moral disagreements, coupled with the very presence of extended moral debate, suggests that we believe in the existence of some universally applicable moral facts. We disagree over moral issues not because we fight over subjective preferences, but rather because we might not know much about what is moral at all — debates are a sign of a society trying to find out what morality truly is.

AO1: 13/15   AO2: 9/10   AO3: 5/5   Total: 27/30

### **Examiner's Comments**

*This is an excellent piece! The argument is well thought through, and takes into account the nature of moral disagreements, nature of morality, and the justificatory standards required for us to consider moral knowledge justified. While the last point is relevant, the delivery and links to the main conclusion can be clearer (especially when referring to moral facts). Doubling back to the introduction to tweak it would make your argument much more coherent as well. You made the argument about how high the justificatory bar is for morality and hence it makes more sense to believe in an objective morality. But the onus is to prove that this justificatory bar is that high — involving reason, experience and intuition. Why can't the subject account for these?*