

Moral Objects

Max and Freya think that morality is relative while Orin argues the case for moral realism.

Stephen J Brewer, October 2019

His free ebook “The Origins of Self” can be downloaded at www.originsofself.com

It's a fine early spring day and Max and Freya have abandoned their offices to look for a sunny spot to eat their lunch. They find Orin occupying the last bench in the sun. He waves the New York Times at them. As usual, it is headlining the latest scandals from Washington.

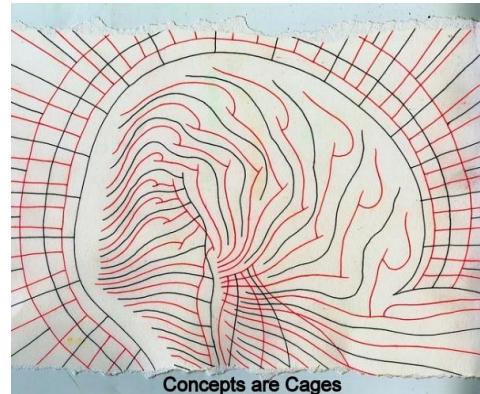
Freya: Oh, it's too late, we've got to sit with him now, I'll sit in the middle and Max, do try not to start an argument, let's just enjoy the good weather!

Orin: Look at this, if the law makers themselves have no moral standards and disobey their own laws, then we can all do the same and live in a state of terror and barbarism.

Max: This is because morality has no real foundation. So, they can make up their own rules then try to tell us what we ought to do to suit their own selfish ends. They may try to indoctrinate me with their rules, but ultimately, it's my decision whether to obey them or not.

Orin: But morality is not a matter of choice. It is based on moral objects that are as real as the objects forming the basis of all your physical theories. If we do not live by them, civilization will collapse, and this country will join the ranks of all the other corrupt and failed states.

Max: How can you even compare these so-called “moral objects” with the real physical objects that have been proved to form the solid foundation of science! All morality is based on commands from a non-existent God used to reinforce taboos and nonsensical tribal customs.



Freya: Yes Orin, Max is right, surely there can't be such things as “moral objects”. To be an object, it would need a physical existence that's independent of our being.

Orin: You mean like the atoms that make up that chair over there.

Freya: Exactly, atoms are physical things with a definite structure and properties. They exist whether we're here or not. In contrast, without human society there would be no morality. So quite obviously there are no observer independent moral objects.

Max: Your so called “moral objects” are also not natural, they're just beliefs indoctrinated into us at a young age by the authorities to keep us under control.

Freya: But Max, we must admit that stable social groups are essential for human survival and so by the process evolution, morality must be encoded in our genes. Wouldn't this make them sort of natural?

Orin: Atoms are forms of energy whose properties are accurately described by mathematical formulae that are referred to as “mathematical objects”. Likewise, our moral intuitions must be specific but highly complex forms of emotional energy produced by our minds. This is what I mean by “moral objects”. If you accept that our minds are natural and part of the fabric of the universe, then so must be our moral intuitions and thoughts.

Max: The fact that philosophers and mathematicians happen to call these abstract forms “objects” does not make them real any more than pink unicorns are real. They are all products of our imagination.

Freya: Well Max, I suppose we must accept that the mathematical objects used in our physical theories must somehow be part of the universe. If not, our physics wouldn't have any basis in reality either.

Orin: So, when we see moral objects in this light, they become as real and natural as your atoms of matter. This now means it is possible to develop moral theories as powerful as our physical ones.

Max: But if this is so, how come each society has its own morality that just happens to satisfy its local religious or political customs and taboos. It shows that morality is formed by the process of indoctrination and has no foundation in reality.



Freya: You say that, but what about the Universal Declaration on Human Rights? It might have taken many horrific wars, rule by murderous tyrants and failed social experiments, but we now have a secular convention attempting to stop the state treating us how it wants. In fact, most of the world's nations have adopted at least some parts of it, even the USA!

Max: Look, these inalienable and natural rights they refer to are not real either, just wishes and fictions. This is proved because Governments can ignore them as and when they wish. But any state wanting to make nuclear weapons can't ignore the theories of nuclear physics. That's because its objects are real and natural, not customs and inventions.

Orin: But you would not get very far if you used Democritus's atomic theory because it held that atoms are indestructible and so atomic bombs cannot exist. This ancient theory was corrected by observing radioactive decay which showed atoms could be destroyed. Similarly, moral sciences use self-examination, social observation and experiments to adjust and correct their theories. These theories are approximations, but with further research into the source of our moral intuitions and social norms they will improve. They do not produce rigid rules telling us what we ought to do but provide flexible guidelines allowing us to make rational moral judgements in the real world.

Freya: I suppose in their own way, both the physical and moral sciences are driven by our yearning to live a good life. They produce theories giving us control over the physical and even more importantly, our social and political world.

Orin: We are all driven by our desire to live a good life. This telos pulls our sciences into new and exciting territories. But, if we are not to destroy ourselves, the powers unleashed by physical sciences must be balanced by developments in the moral sciences.

Max: Arguing that both moral and mathematical objects are real because they are built into the fabric of the universe! I've never heard such nonsense. Orin, I'm afraid your metaphysical arguments are just wishful thinking and you need to get real and move on, just like I'm doing.

With that Max gets up and heads back to his office. Freya and Orin sit in silence enjoying the warm spring sunshine, the good life.

Read also "Money Trust and God" and "Morality Games" www.originsofself.Download.html

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