

Moral Objects

Orin argues that morals are opinion based teleological objects that like physical objects, exert real power over people's lives.

Stephen J Brewer, Feb 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. It is, as usual, 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!

Orin: Look at this, if the law makers themselves have no moral standards and disobey their own laws, then why shouldn't everyone else do the same. Then we can all live in a state of terror and barbarism.

Max: Because morality is based on opinions not facts, 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 impose their rules on me, but it's my decision whether to obey them or not.

Orin: Really? and so bringing the end of civilization and making us live under the rule of terror. But in fact morality is objective and if they go against what is right, this country will join the ranks of all the other corrupt and failed states.

Freya: Objective morality? I'm not even quite sure what a moral object would look like!

Max: To be an object, it would need a physical existence that's independent of our being.

Orin: You mean like that chair over there.

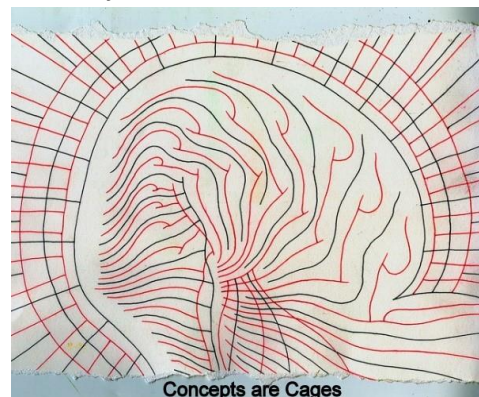
Max: Exactly, it has a definite structure exists whether I am here or not and after everyone is has gone home, it still exists. In contrast, without humans telling us what we ought to do, there would be no morality. So quite obviously there are no observer independent moral objects and without such objects, morality cannot be objective. QED

Freya: But look over there, that person is using a chair as a table, and over there it's a coat rack. I can use a whole range of objects as chairs; tables, rocks, piles of sand, trees and so on. Surely something only becomes a chair when I choose an object I believe can serve that purpose. If I want a chair in the middle of a forest, I will look around until I find a suitable rock or a tree stump. Its my belief that something will serve the purpose of a chair that makes the chair object. Not only that, physical objects can have all sorts of meanings to us. Look, on my figure is my mother's ring, it's precious to me because of the emotions and memories I have of her.

Max: Now you will be saying your gold ring has magical powers!

Freya: You know very well I'm not saying that, but many objects exert a power over us because of the history and memories they carry. And some objects embody the power of our collective social spirit. That US flag over there has a meaning to all of us, its power is tangible, full of history and promise so that people are prepared to give up their lives to defend it.

Max: But the powers you give to these objects are emotional and subjective. To be objective your personal feelings must be eliminated, and the world observed in a detached way with all emotion and



purpose eliminated.

Orin: Obviously if as Max would have us do, you strip moral objects bare of their emotional values and social purposes they do indeed become meaningless. However, the objects of the moral sciences have power because we believe they will lead to a peaceful and just society. When we no longer believe this civilization collapses and chaos rules. Our moral values are in fact a class of what are called teleological objects that are the type of objects studied by the social sciences.

Max: What on the earth do these “teleological objects” look like?

Orin: These objects – from the Greek telos or purpose or ends- are objects defined in terms of the opinions people hold about them. So moral objects are caused by our belief that it is possible to be good person with a fulfilled and meaningful life.

Max: So, you admit they are not real objects, just beliefs.

Freya: I see, our problem is we think that to be real, moral objects must have the same properties as physical ones. But being intangible and belief based they are in an entirely different category than the physical objects we scientists work with. And because society is founded on them, they hold enormous power over people’s actions, just like physical objects have, but now acting through social forces.



Max: But these so-called objects are constantly changing along with our beliefs. Each society is in competition and making up its own rules based on its religious or political opinions about what a good life means. This makes it impossible for a universally accepted moral belief to exist.

Freya: Max, what about the [Universal Declaration on Human Rights](#) then? It might have taken many horrific wars, rule by murderous tyrants and failed social experiments, but we now have a secular convention based on our desire to live peaceful and fulfilled lives. In fact, most of the world’s nations have adopted at least some parts of it, even the USA!

Max: But it’s not a real object is it! Look, the government ignores its own laws and especially these human rights all the time. These “objects” do not have the same power as physical laws; even presidents and dictators can’t choose to ignore the law of gravity.

Orin: There you go again, treating the objects of social and moral sciences as if they are the same as those off the physical sciences and in so doing eliminate all human values and turn us into machines. In contrast, social science is based on the undeniable fact that we do have beliefs, opinions and goals. Like any science it categorizes and uses them to form ethical, economic and political theories that might, perhaps improve our lives. Therefore, since morality is based on real objects of belief, it must be objective. QED!

Max: I’ve never heard such nonsense and if this is so, then social science has no claim to be called a real science at all.

Getting up from his seat Max mutters to Freya: I told you not to start an argument.

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

* Licensed for distribution under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).