The Objectivity of Values: Invariance without Explanation

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“We cannot use a nonnormative criterion of objectivity, for if values are objective…[t]hey have to be objective values, not objective anything else.

—Thomas Nagel

When philosophers address the perennial question, Are there objective values?, they are not always careful to identify and defend their favored conception of what an objective value is or would be like. Nagel’s insight is that this is potentially a significant mistake. We cannot uncritically assume, for example, that objective values must be like physical objects, or the general subject matter of empirical science, or some (perhaps irreducible) metaphysical analogue of physical or empirical facts, relations, or properties. For suppose it could be shown that values are, or are not, objective in the assumed sense. This would not entitle us to conclude anything about the objectivity of values. All that matters, ultimately, is whether values meet or fail their own requirements for objectivity—whether, that is, they comport with our most plausible independent ideas about what an objective value is or would be like.

Yet Nagel’s conclusion that “we cannot use a nonnormative criterion of objectivity” is premature. The reasoning just considered assumes we have independent ideas about what objectivity in the case of values entails. If we don’t, we are presumably within our rights to rely
on what may seem the clearer ideas of objectivity in other domains. We can let the objectivity of values stand or fall according to a “nonnormative criterion of objectivity,” by default. So the prior question is: can we say anything, considering the case of values on its own terms, about what it is for a value to be objective, rather than not?

My aim is to show that we can, by describing and motivating a “minimalist” conception of objectivity. It is illustrated in the following sort of case. At a party, I encounter one of the usual suspects, who is thoughtlessly bragging, and not without significant exaggeration. Annoyed, it seems to me a good idea to inject a cutting remark—until I judge, for reasons of prudence, courtesy, and respect, that I really should hold my tongue. Supposing it is indeed true that I have good and sufficient reason to hold my tongue, it is natural to suppose the truth of this judgment is invariant with respect to possible differences in my own and others’ attitudes. The judgment would still be true, even if I didn’t believe it, even if I were instead strongly inclined to let my tongue go, and even if I had planned all along to unleash. If the judgment is true, it would still be true even if the bragging exaggerator himself believed he deserves no better; even if others at the party would welcome his humiliation; and even if our culture, or perhaps even all of civilization, found this acceptable and appropriate. I or we might simply be mistaken. The thesis of minimalism about objectivity, as I will call it, is this: the objectivity of values is no more, and no less, than such invariance with respect to possible differences in attitudes. (For short, objectivity is no more, and no less, than invariance with respect to attitudes, or the invariance of values).

Why accept minimalism? My basic answer will be this. Suppose we came to know that a value judgment (“I ought to hold my tongue”) is in fact true regardless of possible differences in attitudes. Suppose, moreover, that we have little idea why this relation of invariance should
hold. (Perhaps we even know that there is no explanation.) We could nevertheless conclude that judgments of the sort in question are objectively true, simply on the grounds that their truth is indeed invariant with respect to attitudes. We might wish to explain the fact of invariance, for any number of reasons. But so long as it is indeed a fact, no explanation would be needed simply for values to count as fully objective. The objectivity of values is just is the invariance of values, and nothing more.

My argument for minimalism will be that it is hard to deny, as a claim about our very idea of an objective value: it is hard to produce a reason why anything more than the fact of the invariance of values should be required simply for values to count as fully objective. If all goes well, this will show that minimalism is something everyone will or should accept. It is not, however, trivial. Minimalism requires us to reject both of two tendencies we find in debates over the objectivity of values.

The first tendency is to deny that there is any special question of objectivity to consider. Peter Railton suggests that, “with moral objectivity…there is no one ‘real issue’.” Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton write (although perhaps only for reasons of expositional ease): “we use the term ‘objective’ as an abbreviation for ‘of a kind consistent with a respectable resolution of a range of issues—epistemological, metaphysical, semantic—that in philosophical common sense are characteristically bundled together in the idea of objectivity’.” Gideon Rosen, in discussing objectivity more generally, says: “So far as I can see, it adds nothing to the claim that a certain state of affairs obtains to say that it obtains objectively…When every attempt to say just what the issue [of objectivity] is has come up empty, we have no real choice but to conclude that…there is ultimately nothing in the neighborhood to discuss.”
If minimalism is correct, however, there is a real or special issue of objectivity distinct from other epistemological, metaphysical, or semantic concerns. The issue is whether values can be said to display the appropriate sort of invariance with respect to attitudes. So, for example, minimalism would have us reject the following more reductive characterization of objectivity (roughly, that suggested by Rosen): objectivity requires no more and no less than truth. This does not clearly capture what is at issue in certain debates about objectivity. The cultural moral relativist, for example, admits that there are moral truths, but claims that the moral truth would change given certain possible changes of attitude within the agent’s culture or “way of life.” Similarly, the subjectivist about reasons for action admits there are truths about what reasons people have, but insists that such truths always vary with possible differences in a given agent’s desires, or dispositions to have desires. Insofar as these views deny objectivity, the natural explanation why is not, in the first instance, that they mischaracterize truth (although this could be argued). It is that they allow the truth to vary with attitudes where invariance with attitudes is required—just the kind of explanation given by minimalism.

The second, longer-standing tendency minimalism requires us to reject is the tendency to assume that objective values must be metaphysical. Plato, Clarke, and Moore are often read as making such an assumption. J. L. Mackie explicitly defends it, albeit as a route to error theory. As Mackie puts it, from the point of view of moral commonsense, “Plato’s Forms give a dramatic picture of what objective values would have to be.” But this is just wrong if minimalism is correct. To say that the objectivity of values is nothing more than the invariance of values is just to say that the invariance of values does not require any particular kind of explanation, or, indeed, any explanation at all. Positing metaphysically real values is at most a
way of explaining how values get objectivity, not part of our very commonsense idea of “what objective values would have to be.”

To be sure, for all this says one might argue that positing metaphysically real values is the only possible way to explain how values get objectivity, or the only explanation that would vindicate belief in objective values. The crucial, methodological point is that this argument must be made, on its own terms. As I’ll explain, this requirement refutes Mackie’s argument for error theory. It also bears indirectly on arguments by Harman and Williams, by clarifying their nature and enabling objections. In sum, although minimalism doesn’t settle the “big question” whether values are objective, it does change how that larger debate should be conducted. It means the issue of objectivity must be addressed on its own terms, yet in a way that gives no special credence to realist conceptions of value.

I. WHAT IS MINIMALISM?

Talk of “objectivity” can be applied to ethical judgment in at least two ways—to the act or process of making a judgment, and to its propositional content. In the former case, we may say someone is being objective, meaning that his or her reasoning is unbiased, careful, impartial, or fair-minded. In the latter case, we may say the judgment itself is an objective matter, that is, that its propositional content is objectively true, or objectively false.

One way to explicate the objectivity of values is to explain the latter of these two ideas by appeal to the former: to be an objectively true judgment is to be a judgment we would make when we are reasoning objectively. For Nagel, for example, ethical truth is determined, or at least constrained, by a certain idea of what it is to be objective in practical reasoning, namely, that one is to reason impersonally about one’s inclinations and action. As Nagel puts the
thought, “Ethical thought is the process of bringing objectivity to bear on the will, and the only thing I can think of to say about ethical truth in general is that it must be the possible result of this process, correctly carried out.”¹³

I am sympathetic to this last claim, understood as a kind of constructivism. But even if, as I believe, constructivism does explain how values have objectivity, it does not clearly characterize what an objective value is. Roughly, according to constructivism, ethical truth is a function or “construction” of the conclusions we would reach in following the norms of practical reasoning, in favorable conditions for practical reflection.¹⁴ For all this says, it remains a further question: What is required for a value or reason judgment to be true “independently of us,” in the sense required for values to have objectivity? We ordinarily take value judgments such as “one has reason to take care of one’s health,” “one has reason to make friends,” “one has reason to respect others,” to be not simply true, but true independently of us.¹⁵ What this independence consist in needs to be explained. Is it the independence of physical objects, existing in our environment, in some sense apart from us? If so, constructivism does not capture objectivity. The constructivist can deny this interpretation of “independence from us,” but it must then provide a plausible alternative conception of what the appropriate sort of independence is.

As I understand it, the issue here concerns objectivity, not truth. So I will provisionally assume what is sometimes called “minimal realism” about truth.¹⁶ Our question is what more than minimal truth, if anything, is required for a value or reason judgment to be true “independently of us,” in the sense required for values to have objectivity. If minimal realism about truth turns out to be mistaken, say, because truth demands correspondence with a metaphysical reality, then objectivity will require metaphysical values, just because objective truth requires truth. Still, it is another matter whether the independence from us needed for
objective truth requires correspondence with a metaphysical reality, when we make no
assumption that truth as such requires it. By assuming minimalism about truth, we isolate this
independently interesting and important issue.

Truth independent of us is, at minimum, truth that is invariant with respect to attitudes.
We ordinarily take it to be true that we have reason to take care of our health, to make friends,
and to respect others. To say these practical judgments are true “independently of us” is at least
to say that their truth (or truth-value) would not change given various possible changes in our
beliefs, preferences, goals, and other attitudes. It is also presumably to say that such invariance
with respect to attitudes is itself a kind of fact, independent of whether anyone believes it. Call
that fact the fact of invariance. According to minimalism, the invariance of values—the fact of
invariance—is sufficient for “truth independent of us,” in the sense required for values to count
as fully objective. Once we characterize the invariance of values, there is no further issue of
what “independence” from us must come to.

To characterize the invariance of values is to say exactly which attitudes the truth about
values must be invariant with respect to. I will explain below how minimalists can accept the
most demanding possible characterization: objective truth requires invariance with respect to all
attitudes. For present purposes, however, the essential point is that the question of which
attitudes matter is quite distinct from the question of what explains the fact of invariance. If the
invariance of values is indeed a fact—if truth is in fact invariant with respect to attitudes (all
attitudes, or some subset of them)—nothing follows for whether or how the fact of invariance
must be explained. All that follows is that the truth-value of the judgments in question would not
differ in two possible scenarios. Compare a world $W$, at which one has an attitude $A$, with a
world $W^*$ that is different from $W$ only in that one lacks $A$. When the truth-value of a judgment $J$
is invariant with respect to possible differences in $A$, this simply means: $J$ has the same truth-value at both $W$ and $W^*$. It is entirely open why a judgment has the same truth value in the two possible scenarios.

It may nevertheless seem there must be some particular explanation why values are invariant with respect to attitudes, if values are to count as fully objective. Minimalism denies this, but this denial can take a stronger or weaker form. According to ultra-minimalism, the objectivity of values just is the invariance of values, even if there is no explanation at all why the fact of invariance holds. A second form of minimalism is permissive minimalism: some explanation or other of the invariance of values is necessary, but no explanation of any kind in particular. Whatever suffices to explain the invariance of values suffices to explain the objectivity of values. So, for example, a metaphysical explanation is not necessary. For all the idea of an objective value itself requires, the invariance of values could equally be explained in some other way, for instance, as a construction of practical reasoning.\(^{17}\)

Both minimalisms allow for independent explanatory demands, motivated for reasons other than objectivity. It might even be, as some moral realists have assumed, that values (or value facts, relations, or properties) must have causal/explanatory roles in the events of the natural and/or social world.\(^{18}\) The minimalist claim is that no such explanation is required by our very idea of an objective value. If some particular sort of explanation is necessary, it is required by something else, such as one’s general standards of evidence, knowledge, or metaphysical acceptability. It is required in order to show how values do indeed have objectivity, not in order to characterize what an objective value is.

If this is correct, the issue of objectivity is not, in the first instance, whether the invariance of values has some favored kind of explanation, such as the explanation that values
are metaphysically real. According to ultra-minimalism, the invariance of values may have no explanation at all. It may argued, for example, that the invariance of values follows from the manifest truth of certain first-order practical judgments, plus explication of their attitude-invariant content, with no further “external” account of what explains the fact of invariance.\textsuperscript{19} Permissive minimalism blocks this position, by requiring that the invariance of values be explained, if values are to count as fully objective. But this is still not to say any particular explanation is required. Even if values are not metaphysically real, everything still depends on whether other kinds of explanations are available (e.g. whether a constructivist explanation succeeds).

Is permissive minimalism is a properly “minimalist” position? Because it makes an explanatory demand, it may seem to collapse into a metaphysical conception of objectivity, at least given certain assumptions about what explanations will do. Suppose it is a deep philosophical or metaphysical truth that anything but Platonism would fail to capture the invariance of values. If so, there is a sense in which Platonism would be necessary for, and perhaps even “constitute,” the objectivity of values. To be sure, minimalism in either form can still deny that Platonism is required by our very idea of an objective value. For ultra-minimalism, which makes no explanatory demand, this is to say that, if Platonism turns out to be true, it need not have been so for values to count as fully objective. But permissive minimalism admits the need for explanation. If, by hypothesis, Platonism is the only explanation available, why isn’t that enough to make it part of “our very idea of an objective value”?

I would not grant the stipulated premise that Platonism is necessary to capture the fact of invariance (I think constructivism will do). More important for present purposes, it does not follow, in general, that if our very idea of A requires X, and X requires Y, then our very idea of
A requires Y. Most obviously, understanding X might be a requirement for possession of the 
concept of A, while requirements Y are non-conceptual; the fact that X requires Y might be a 
physical or metaphysical or philosophical or otherwise deep truth that those minimally 
competent with the concept of A might fail to grasp.

The notion of “our very idea of an objective value” need not be limited to the 
understandings required for minimal competence with the concept of an objective value. The relevant “understanding” of our very idea of an objective values can also include: a range of (non-paradigmatic) value judgments; other things generally understood to be “commonsense” about values; the deep (perhaps often unappreciated) roles of value discourse or judgment in regulating other reactions or practices (e.g. in guiding action, or regulating attitudes such as fear or resentment); and so on. What is crucial is that such understandings can be distinguished from any further putative philosophical or metaphysical requirements. In that case, our very idea of an objective value, even in this broader sense, would not itself make the putative demands, even if they are justified for other metaphysical or philosophical reasons. In these terms, the permissive minimalist’s claim is this: fully understanding our very idea of an objective value (in the broader sense) requires understanding the invariance of values, but not that the invariance of values should have some particular form of explanation—even one which is, for other reasons, ultimately required.

This is itself a significant position. As I will explain momentarily, it refutes Mackie’s 
ascription of Platonism to commonsense moral discourse. It is also of larger dialectical 
significance for certain realism/irrealism debates. Like ultra-minimalism, permissive 
minimalism immunizes any non-metaphysical irrealism (such as constructivism) against the 
option that values are not rendered fully objective, simply because they are not metaphysically
real. We cannot assume, what was simply stipulated above, that Platonism is necessary to explain the invariance of values; whether it is necessary depends on whether some other explanation might do. So suppose, for example, that a form of constructivism fully explains the invariance of values, without assigning values any metaphysical status beyond being the verdicts of constructive reasoning. One might doubt whether the constructivist explanation can ultimately be brought off, or reject it as unsatisfactory on general grounds other than objectivity. But given minimalism (in either form), it could not be objected that constructivism fails to deliver fully objective values, simply because values are constructed and in no sense metaphysically real.

II. WHY DENY MINIMALISM?

So much for what minimalism is. What can we say in its favor? One thing we can say is that it can be difficult to find any reason to deny it. As I’ll now explain, claims that can look at first like non-minimalist claims about our idea of an objective value often reflect independent standards of evidence or acceptability, but not the denial of minimalism, in one or another of its forms. This would be trivial if standard arguments about the status of values carried the argumentative burden minimalism imposes. But, as will become clear, some prominent arguments do not clearly do so.

One reason to deny minimalism might seem to be this. Surely, objectivity in the case of values must have something in common with objectivity in other domains. Judgments about physical objects are usually thought to be true or false regardless of what we believe, wish, or hope for. But the objectivity of physical objects consists partly in the fact that these relations of
invariance can be explained by the real existence of objects. Shouldn’t the invariance of values be explained in a similar way, if values are to count as objective?

I grant there must be some common factor across domains: in general, objective truth is truth which does not vary with possible differences in certain attitudes. Yet for all this says, domains can differ from one another in either of two ways: (i) in which attitudes the truth of the relevant judgments can vary with, and (ii) in what, if anything, explains why the appropriate invariance relations hold. So, even if objectively true physical object judgments do require the real existence of objects, this may show only that such judgments differ from value judgments along dimension (ii). For the permissive minimalist, the difference is that the invariance of physical judgments must be explained in a particular way. For the ultra-minimalist, the difference is that the invariance of physical judgments needs some explanation. For either minimalist, physical objectivity is different, because our ideas about the nature of the physical are different from our ideas about the nature of values.

An argument that our very idea of an objective value requires values to be metaphysically real would have to take a particularly strong form. One would have to be willing to grant that some non-metaphysical account (e.g. some constructivism) could explain the invariance of values in principle, and yet argue that any such explanation would be of the wrong kind, simply because it did not cite metaphysically real values. Few philosophers have ever offered a sustained argument of this kind. The closest we come, in recent times, is Mackie’s argument that all moral claims are in error, because Platonism is implausible. The crucial premise of Mackie’s argument is the one quoted above, that, according to our ordinary assumptions, “Plato’s Forms give a dramatic picture of what objective values would have to be.”
Why does Mackie take ordinary people to assume Platonism about objectivity? Surprisingly, he does not claim that ordinary moral language ever itself makes any problematic ontological claims. In a revealing passage he asks,

Is [the argument from queerness] equally forceful if applied to the terms in which everyday moral judgments are more likely to be expressed—though still…with a claim to objectivity—‘you must do this’, ‘you can’t do that’, ‘obligation’, ‘unjust’, ‘rotten’, ‘disgraceful’, ‘mean’, or talk about good reasons for or against possible actions?

Mackie’s answer is:

Admittedly not; but that is because the objective prescriptivity…is not yet isolated in these forms of speech, but is presented along with relations to desires and feelings, reasoning about means to desired ends, interpersonal demands…There is nothing queer about any of these, and under cover of them the claim for moral authority may pass unnoticed.  

This poses the question of what would “isolate” the troublesome “objective prescriptivity” of normative claims. To separate out this element, Mackie repeatedly points out that we take our reasons to be invariant with respect to our desires and inclinations. In a representative passage, he writes,

[the ordinary user of moral language] wants to say…something that involves a call for action…that is absolute, not contingent upon any desire or preference or policy or choice, his own or anyone else’s.  

As we saw above, this invariance characteristic by itself does not have any ontological implications. But Mackie provides no further reason for his conclusion that only the existence of Platonic values could give normative claims the objectivity we ordinarily take them to have. He
moves without argument from an observation of the fact that we presuppose that certain relations of invariance hold to the claim that thoughts about objectivity presuppose the existence of Platonic values. Thus Mackie simply ignores the possibility the ultra-minimalist insists on—that positing the existence of platonic values is merely one way of explaining how values get objectivity, where objectivity itself is being invariant with respect to the appropriate attitudes, and nothing more. He also ignores the possibility of permissive minimalism. Even if he is right that some explanation of the invariance of values is necessary, he gives no reason why ordinary people believe it should be a Platonist explanation in particular.

Can Mackie simply concede minimalism, in either of its forms? Not without wrecking his argument. If he grants that our commonsense idea of an objective value does not require Platonic values, or something near enough like them, there is no easy route to his conclusion that commonsense rests on a false presupposition. At best, he can claim that one possible explanation of our commonsense commitment to the invariance of values is implausible. That is not to say that that commitment cannot be fully vindicated in some other way, such as by a constructivist explanation. But Mackie never argues against alternative explanations (feeling assured they are precluded by commonsense itself). So his argument is at best incomplete. To be sure, one might feel bewildered at first look about what other than radically mind-independent, metaphysical values could explain commonsense commitment to the invariance of values. But what is needed here is an argument that there is no other option; Mackie needs to give reasons why other explanations will not succeed if he is to have any right to draw his skeptical conclusion.

Consider, for example, the constructivist explanation. According to constructivism, the truth of an ethical judgment depends only on the verdicts of idealized practical reasoning (and on
actual individual or collective attitudes only insofar as they inform the substance of constructive reasoning, as relevant considerations). Thus the truth of all ethical judgments is invariant with respect to any possible difference in our actual attitudes; changing our ethical minds never changes the ethical truth. Now, constructivism might well be unsustainable, or fail to fully capture our commonsense commitment to the invariance of values. But this would need to be argued; the failure of this or other possible explanations cannot be taken for granted. Mackie’s argument is no more forceful than the reasons we have to think that this or other explanations do not succeed.

If minimalism refutes Mackie’s influential argument, this establishes its importance for the debate over whether values are objective. Minimalism is also significant for other skeptical arguments, although in an indirect way. I’ll consider two prominent examples, arguments by Gilbert Harman and Bernard Williams.

Harman argues that we have little evidence in favor of moral facts, since the best explanation of why we make the moral judgments we do is not responsiveness to such facts, but our perception of non-evaluative features of the world and our moral sensibility. Harman means to apply a general standard of what we should believe, not, like Mackie, a conception of what is required for the objectivity of values. So he can happily grant that objectivity does not, by its very nature, assume that independent moral facts are the best explanation of why we make the moral judgments we do. He can grant minimalism, in either form.

Here the significance of minimalism is primarily clarificatory: it makes clear that the force of Harman’s argument turns on a general conception of evidence, not on a conception of objectivity. But that may weaken Harman’s argument, by freeing us to ask questions we might not otherwise see clear to entertain. If questions about why we make the moral or value
judgments we make do not really concern what it would be for values to count as objective, the issue is merely one of justified belief. But should we really give up belief in objective values, simply because a certain conception of evidence requires this? Are we not more certain that values are objective, and so that any conception of evidence which says otherwise must be wrong, or misapplied, or too broad?  

Bernard Williams’s appeal to the “absolute conception of the world” in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* can initially look more like Mackie’s argument than Harman’s; it can seem to turn specifically on a conception of the objectivity of values. Given the lacuna in Mackie’s argument, we should see if Williams offers reasons to abandon minimalism. As I will now explain, Williams’s argument, like Harman’s, provides no reason to think minimalism is mistaken. But minimalism remains of indirect significance. It prevents Williams from earning undeserved mileage from ideas of objectivity, and it invites the sort of objection just mooted against Harman. 

Williams argues that ethical claims are not fully objective, because ethical judgments cannot plausibly be said to “represent the world in a way to the maximum degree independent of our perspective and its peculiarities”—because, that is, they are no part of what he calls the “absolute conception of the world.” Supposing for the moment that this is a requirement for objectivity, what sort of requirement might it be? 

One plausible answer is this: it is not enough for objectivity if the truth of ethical judgments could vary with possible differences in any particular individual’s or community’s contingent “perspective” on the world. If such variance is allowed, we (the relevant individual or community) could change the ethical truth simply by changing our ethical minds. What were once wrongful acts of genocide could become unobjectionable, so long we became convinced the
acts were justified. So insofar as this compromises objectivity, objective ethical claims must
have what we might call perspective-invariance.

Williams might not seem to reject minimalism (in either form) in so far as he does not
explain the “absolute conception of the world” independently of the idea of perspective-
invariance. If the absolute conception is a view of “how things anyway are,” then this simply is
the notion of perspective-invariance—just what is true “anyway,” even if our perspective were
quite different than they are. This is compatible even with ultra-minimalism; perspective-
invariance needs no explanation at all, simply in order for ethical claims to count as objectively
ture.

If we look at how Williams uses the idea of an absolute conception, however, he can
easily seem to mean more than perspective-invariance. Facts cited in the absolute conception of
the world are supposed to be something that would explain possible future convergence in
science, but not possible future convergence in ethics. If there is future convergence in ethics, it
will be best explained in some other way. Moreover, Williams acts as though this should give us
pause, in part because he rejects what he regards as the main alternative explanations, Kantian
and Aristotelian views. This suggests permissive minimalism: we are supposed to take pause,
because, contrary to ultra-minimalism, the absence of any explanation of perspective-invariance
would show that values are not objective. Williams probably does not accept a conception
stronger than permissive minimalism, or at least he never argues for it. To do that, one would
have to grant for the sake of argument that both Kantian and Aristotelian views are adequate,
and even plausible, as explanations, but claim that they fail to deliver objective values simply
because they are explanations of the wrong kind. Like Mackie, Williams never provides such an
argument.
Nor, however, does Williams provide an argument for permissive minimalism as against ultra-minimalism. His demand that perspective-invariance be explained seems primarily motivated as an epistemological requirement, not by ideas about objectivity as such. Much as for Harman, it is significant that facts cited in the absolute conception of the world are something that would explain possible future convergence in science, but not possible future convergence in ethics, because this calls into question whether we have, or could ever have, ethical knowledge. Williams grants that unreflective users of thick ethical concepts can have ethical knowledge of a parochial kind. But those of us who reflect on their lack of grounding in the absolute conception of the world come to lack any knowledge we might have had. Thus Williams says, “in ethics, reflection can destroy knowledge.” But, as with Harman, to insist on explanation as an epistemological requirement is not to give any reason to deny ultra-minimalism: it is not to say why explanation of any sort is required simply for values to count as fully objective.

Is ultra-minimalism trivial if it allows one to go on and defend an explanatory requirement on grounds other than what is needed for values to count as objective? It does not refute Williams’s argument, as it does Mackie’s. Yet it leads us to ask questions we might not otherwise see clear to entertain, as with Harman’s argument: if the issue is not one of what would count as objective values, after all, are we not more certain that values have objectivity than that some conception of knowledge is mistaken, or too general, or misapplied?

I do not mean to press this challenge here, beyond pointing out that minimalism encourages it. It illustrates my more general contentions: (i) that minimalism is not trivial, and yet (ii) that some standard arguments ultimately concerned with objectivity do not supply any reason to deny it. This poses the question to which I now turn: if we’ve seen little reason to deny minimalism, why not accept it?
It seems clear enough that objective values must be invariant with respect to attitudes. Suppose we discovered by incontrovertible methods that we can change the ethical truth simply by collectively changing our ethical minds. We discover that what were once wrongful acts of genocide, killing, or betraying could become unobjectionable, so long as we became convinced that the acts were justified; or that the value of friendship or health or enjoyable dining has no value whatsoever aside from whether we or anyone actually cares about it, or takes it to be of value. This would be tantamount to discovering that values are not objective. So any argument for the objectivity of values must at least establish the invariance of values. But why shouldn’t this be sufficient to make the case? Although we might favor a particular kind of explanation of the invariance of values, an explanation that could even be required by independent standards of evidence, knowledge, or metaphysical respectability, why should we suppose our idea of an objective value itself requires this, short of insisting, flat out, that it does?

To see how an answer to this question is hard to come by, consider first permissive minimalism. Even if some explanation of the invariance of values is needed, why won’t any suffice for objectivity, so long as it is sufficient as an explanation? That is, if we have two equally sufficient explanations of the invariance of values, why suppose our idea of an objective value favors one over the other? For example, take, on the one hand, a metaphysical explanation of one’s preferred kind—an explanation which, so we might say, appeals to facts of THE WORLD. Values do not vary with our attitudes because THE WORLD does not vary with our attitudes. On the other hand, consider a constructivist account. On this account, we distinguish between our actual perspectives (even if they in fact converge) and our perspective as it would be in certain ideal conditions for ethical thought (say, conditions of excellent practical reasoning, as according to some form of constructivism). THE WORLD does not explain ethical truth; truth is
simply a function of our ideally well-reasoned judgments. Nor does THE WORLD explain the invariance of values; truth is invariant with respect to our actual attitudes, because our ideally well-reasoned judgments are themselves invariant with respect to those attitudes. Now we can ask: why should it matter, given only our idea of what an objective value is, which of these explanations turns out to be correct? Why not suppose these are merely competing explanations of how values get objectivity, where objectivity itself is neutral between them?

Since we are asking why our idea of an objective value should prefer one sufficient explanation over another, we can grant that both render values invariant with respect to our attitudes. The fact of invariance is not in question. On either explanation, we cannot change the ethical truth simply by collectively changing our ethical minds; what were once wrongful acts of genocide, killing, or betraying would not become unobjectionable, so long as we became convinced that the acts were justified; the value of friendship or health or enjoyable dining would remain of value, quite aside from whether we or anyone actually cares about it, or takes it to be of value.

If there’s no difference in the fact of invariance, however, why should there be any difference in objectivity, simply because of what explains that fact? Suppose, for example, that we discovered by incontrovertible methods that the correct explanation of the invariance of values is not THEWORLD, but well-reasoned judgment, as just explained. Would this show, suddenly, that values are not objective after all? It does not seem so, so long as the invariance of values is indeed a fact. The discovery, rather, would simply be about how values get the objectivity they would in any case have.

Platonism probably gives as much in the way of objectivity as anyone would want. But suppose we discover tomorrow that Platonism is false, although values are still, for some other
reason, invariant with respect to attitudes. Would this really threaten the objectivity of values? It would not seem to if, as we are assuming, the fact of invariance really does hold. Values previously seen as objective would not suddenly fail to be objective after all. So long as the fact of invariance holds, it does not seem to matter what its explanation turns out to be; everything essential for fully objective values would remain in place.

An argument against permissive minimalism to the effect that our idea of an objective value itself requires Platonism would have to be of a particularly strong form. It would not, for example, be sufficient to refute the constructivist explanation, which I have used for purposes of illustration. One must argue that any other explanations, not of one’s favored kind, would compromise objectivity as well. One would have to be willing to grant, if only for the sake of argument, that there are indeed possible explanations, E, which fully explain the invariance of values, but which are incompatible with one’s favored explanation. Supposing we discovered the truth of some explanation E by incontrovertible methods, one would have to argue that this is tantamount to discovering that there are no objective values, despite the fact that values would be no more and no less invariant with respect to our attitudes than on the favored explanation. But it is hard to see why this should be the case.

There is, however, one reason to deny permissive minimalism: it is not minimalist enough. For reasons similar to those just canvassed, it is hard to deny ultra-minimalism, the stronger thesis that the objectivity of values is no more and no less than then invariance of values, even if the fact of invariance has no explanation at all.

Ultra-minimalism is not the view that values could be objective even if values were not invariant with respect to attitudes. The invariance of values must itself be a fact. In order for values to be objective, it would have to be a fact that we cannot change the ethical truth simply
by individually or collectively changing our ethical minds. It would have to be a fact that what were once wrongful acts of genocide, killing, or betraying would not become unobjectionable, even if we became convinced that the acts were justified. However, if these are the facts, everything essential is in place for fully objective values, whether or not the fact of invariance has any explanation at all.

Again, ultra-minimalism does not entail that there are no independent standards of evidence, knowledge, or metaphysical acceptability. Such requirements might well specify what it would take for us to find objective values credible, known, or metaphysically acceptable, although what it would take simply for values to be objective is nothing more and nothing less than the fact of invariance. In order to deny ultra-minimalism, one would have to grant, for the sake of argument, that the fact of invariance might indeed have no explanation and yet insist that lacking explanation would itself undercut the objectivity of values. In other words, we have to grant the fact of invariance, whether or not we can explain it. We then suppose, as above, that we discover the invariance of values to have no further explanation. This would have to be tantamount to discovering that values are not objective, although, by stipulation, the fact of invariance would remain no more and no less a fact than if it could be explained. But why should it make a difference whether this fact is explained or free-standing? The fact of invariance seems sufficient for objective values, either way.

III. SENSITIVITY TO ATTITUDES

What I have argued hardly proves ultra-minimalism, although I am not sure what a more conclusive argument would look like. I have at least shown how ultra-minimalism can be sustained. This is itself significant. It means that, from now on, philosophers who suppose
objectivity involves something more than invariance bear the burden of minimalism: they should explicitly formulate the proposed non-minimalist conception of objectivity and defend it as a plausible claim about the objectivity of values, not, as Nagel puts it, as a claim about the objectivity of “anything else.”

There is, however, one further question which any minimalism must address, the question of scope: with respect to which attitudes must the truth of a value judgment be invariant, in order to count as objectively true? I’ve already suggested that minimalism is compatible with any answer to this question, since the fact of invariance itself has no implications for why that fact holds. But if minimalism is to seem plausible, as a claim about our very idea of an objective values, it must also be clear that it can take our intuitions about “independence from us” seriously. I’ll now explain how the minimalist can adopt the most demanding possible answer to the question of scope: the view that values must be invariant with respect to all attitudes.

Simon Blackburn, Allan Gibbard, and Ronald Dworkin suggest that we take reasons of taste to be subjective, because a change in our preferences can change our reasons for action. We take moral judgments to be objective, by contrast, insofar as they are not subjective in this sense. That is, if a moral judgment is objectively true, its truth would not change even if attitudes such as our preferences were otherwise. This proposal is significant because it suggests we can account for intuitions about how values must be “independent from us” purely in terms of the issue of scope. I have much the same aim, but I believe the proposal should take a different form.

Consider several examples of sensitivity to attitudes:

(i) During dinner out, I have reason to have coffee and ice cream, because this is what I prefer or would enjoy. This reason is “sensitive” to my attitudes, in the
sense that I would *not* have had reason to choose coffee and ice cream had I preferred or would have enjoyed a fine port instead.

(ii) Moral reasons of respect display sensitivity of much the same kind. In visiting your home, I have moral reason to respect your wishes concerning whether guests are to remove their shoes. When you prefer shoe removal, I have reason to remove mine. But I would not have this reason if you were indifferent on the matter.

(iii) Broadly moral reasons such as reasons of conscience can be sensitive to the agent’s attitudes in much the same way. If Albert believes one should never to destroy life, then Albert has reason not to kill any living thing, including, say, insects. This reason is sensitive to Albert’s beliefs: were he to change his mind, and come to believe that one may destroy certain living things (say, any non-sentient life), he would no longer have this reason not to kill insects.34

In these cases, the sensitivity to attitudes involved is quite compatible with attitude-invariant truth. In case (i), we assume it is a general practical truth that

(1) During dinner out, one will have some reason to choose whatever dessert one prefers or would enjoy.

If this is true, it follows that I, in particular, have reason to choose coffee and ice cream when I prefer it, but also that I have reason to choose port when I instead prefer it. What does such sensitivity to attitudes show? Does it show that the *truth-value* of (1) varies with a possible difference in attitudes? No, it does not. (1) remains true, even when my preferences are
otherwise; the imagined difference in attitudes only changes how (1) applies. Similarly in case (ii). The operative practical judgment, expressed in general form, is that

(2) When one visits someone’s home, one has reason to respect his or her wishes concerning the wearing of shoes, whatever his or her wishes are.

If (2) is true, I have reason to take off my shoes in visiting your home if you prefer this. But (2) is not rendered false when we imagine that you are indifferent on the matter; it simply has no application in the imagined case. Likewise in case (iii). The general operative judgment is that

(3) Each individual has (some) reason to act according to his or her conscience, whatever it requires.

If true, Albert would indeed have no reason of conscience not to kill insects had he come to believe that killing non-sentient life is permissible. But, again, (3) is not rendered false by this change Albert’s reasons; it simply no longer applies, or applies in a different way.

In more general terms, we can distinguish between reason judgments of two kinds: applied judgments, about a particular agent’s reasons, and general judgments, about what one would have reason to do in the relevant agent’s situation. What I’ve just suggested is that, once we make explicit which general judgments are operative in cases (i)-(iii), it is clear that they take attitudes as part of their content or conditions of application.35 For this reason, changes in attitudes do not change the truth-value of the relevant general judgment, but simply the way it applies to the particular agent’s situation.

Now notice the crucial point: this explanation of sensitivity to attitudes is compatible with supposing that objective truth is invariant with respect to all possible differences in attitudes. For the mere fact that reasons are sensitive to attitudes is no reason to think the general operative judgment in a given case fails this demanding condition. We can regard the
general operative judgments as true or false regardless of any possible difference in attitudes, so long as the sensitivity to attitudes involved in the case flows from the fact that the general judgments take attitudes as part of their content or conditions of application.

To be sure, sensitivity to attitudes does create an appearance of “subjective truth.” It does so because applied truths, about a particular agent’s reasons, can indeed vary with attitudes. When Albert’s convictions do change, for example, it may no longer be true that he has good reason not to kill insects. But the explanation for this is simply that the more general operative judgment now applies to Albert’s situation in a different way, and we should not say that a reason judgment is in any interesting sense rendered “subjectively true,” simply because of how it applies. Consider why by analogy. Suppose Albert has moral reason not to deceive others. This judgment would have been false had Albert been a compulsive liar and incapable of telling the truth. But that counterfactual truth hardly means that Albert, in fact a fully capable agent, has only a “subjective” reason not to deceive others. The imagined change in Albert’s capacities changes whether an objective moral truth applies to him, but it does not render a true moral judgment “subjectively true.”

So the sensitivity to attitudes involved in reasons of taste and moral reasons is compatible with a particularly radical standard of objectivity: objective truth is invariant with respect to any possible difference in attitudes. Though I have not said why we must accept this radical standard, it is available to minimalists. It takes seriously intuitions about how values are “independent from us,” yet because it does so purely in terms of the issue of scope, minimalists can happily accept it. One can account for the “independence” we take values to have from us, in terms of the invariance of values, without supposing the invariance of values must have any particular kind of explanation, or any explanation at all.
One might object here that, in fact, the position just described on the issue of scope compromises the minimalist’s denial of any need for explanation. One may ask: What other than Platonism could explain the invariance of values if objective ethical truth requires invariance with respect to all attitudes? Above I suggested an alternative, constructivist explanation. But that explanation allows the truth-value of a given ethical judgment to vary with attitudes, if not our actual attitudes, then our hypothetical ones. When what is in fact true is explained as a construction of our hypothetical, well-reasoned judgments, this is to say that the truth would have been otherwise had our well-reasoned judgments been otherwise. So if no other explanation is forthcoming, can’t we conclude that insisting on global invariance with attitudes requires Platonism, or something much like it?

Several clarifications are in order here. First, the objection assumes some explanation of the invariance of values is necessary for values to count as fully objective. I have sought to motivate and sustain ultra-minimalism, in which case no such explanation is necessary, however much it is required for reasons other than objectivity.36

Second, even if explanation is necessary, the objection at most shows that permissive minimalism cannot address the questions of scope and explanation independently of one another. Thus the constructivist cum permissive minimalist may argue that we should give up global invariance with attitudes. Strictly speaking, it may be argued, variance with hypothetical, well-reasoned judgments does not compromise our commonsense commitment to the invariance of values. So since constructivism delivers invariance with our actual attitudes, it gives values full objectivity, as we ordinarily understand it.37

Third, I used constructivism above merely as one possible alternative explanation which needed to be considered. The larger, methodological point was that an argument for Platonism
must explicitly rule out all such alternatives. That point remains even if the constructivist explanation per se cannot be sustained.

IV. THE OBJECTIVITY DEBATE: PROSPECTS FOR IRREALISM

So minimalism is significant for several reasons. It shows there to be a distinctive issue of objectivity; it refutes Mackie’s argument, exposing the often unappreciated significance of comparative, explanatory argument; and it emphasizes the need for clarity about the precise nature of any proposed explanatory demands. It is also worth mentioning, in closing, how it might move the objectivity debate forward.

I have suggested that the issue whether we should believe in objective values is not, in the first instance, a metaphysical issue. The central issue of objectivity is best located elsewhere, chiefly, in the plausibility of relativist and subjectivist views, which deny objectivity by allowing ethical truth to vary with attitudes.

Given what I have argued, relativist and subjectivist views will not deny objectivity if their only claim is that moral or practical judgments are sensitive to attitudes. As we’ve seen, this is a mere point of common sense, which is quite compatible attitude-invariant truth (at the level of general primary judgments). The relativist’s or subjectivist’s claim is often stronger than this. David Hume, for example, can be naturally (if not uncontroversially) read as denying objectivity in the sense I have specified. Hume famously argued that “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions,” because reason cannot have “an original influence on the will.” As mere means/end and mathematical reasoning, reason is never the origin of new motivations; it only steers motivations that flow from the deeper springs of desire. While this thesis appears at first to be a mere psychological claim, about motivation, Hume takes it to have normative
upshot; it is supposed to follow, as a general constraint, that what reasons someone has *always* varies with his or her passions. On the present account, the general constraint is what is crucial. Hume is not just saying that reasons vary with attitudes *when they happen to be part of the content or conditions of application of a general, operative practical judgment about what one has reason to do*. To claim that would be to claim mere sensitivity to attitudes. What Hume means is that reasons for action vary with attitudes *regardless of whether there is any such substantive ground for this variance*. That is to say, even the *general* judgments, about what one has reason to do, must vary with attitudes. Hume even advertised this clash. His remark, “Tis’ not contrary to Reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger,” could not have been deliberatively provocative unless we ordinarily assume that a preference to scratch instead of save is *not* grounded in any more general operative practical judgment.\(^{39}\) This is tantamount to denying objective truth, on the present proposal, since it means that the truth of any practical judgment, both *general and applied*, varies with our attitudes.\(^{40}\)

Although subjectivism has been much discussed, minimalism opens some possibilities for irrealist explanations of objectivity. For example, Humean subjectivism is sometimes defended as a substantive thesis (and not, as for Hume, as a thesis about motivation). In this case, one might argue that Humean subjectivism does not deny the objectivity of values after all. The resulting sensitivity to attitudes would be *mere* sensitivity, not attitude-variant truth at the level of general practical judgments. I think Hume himself shows the difficulty of defending this view, by dramatizing how far subjectivism clashes with our substantive intuitions about the extent to which our reasons depend on our preferences. But there is also a further possible position: one might hold a *revisionist* conception of objectivity. That is to say, one might
propose that we revise our substantive intuitions, in accord with substantive Humean theory. Once we do that, we can then claim that any sensitivity to our attitudes is *mere* sensitivity, and therefore compatible with attitude-invariant truth.

I would reject this position as well, in favor of a non-revisionist constructivism. But that argument, like the defenses of subjectivism and relativism I have mentioned, remains to be made.

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Relativist or subjectivist theses themselves are presumably true regardless of our attitudes. This is not inconsistent so long as they are treated as non-evaluative theses (or in any case as not of the same evaluative kind as the relativized or subjectivized notion). Though it will not be my focus, I return to the status of relativist or subjectivist theses below.


I will mainly work with examples of realist and irrealist theories, without offering any general account of the difference. It should, however, be noted that my argument is meant to apply not only to traditional, metaphysical realisms. It also applies to “minimal realisms” which do not posit metaphysical values, but deny any explanation of propositional moral or practical truth in further terms (e.g. as a construction of reasoning). My claim is that any such realist denial cannot be justified based on appeal the idea of an objective value.

Nozick, *Invariances*, p. 236, discusses but rejects this possibility, taking the notion of an “objective fact” as more basic than the notion of being objective.


I discuss constructivism in this sense in Aaron James, "Constructivism About Practical Reasons," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (forthcoming), and Aaron James, "Constructivism as a Foundational Theory" (unpublished ms.).
In these examples and below I assume that ethical or value judgment is a species of practical judgment: to make a claim about moral or other values is to make a claim about practical reasons. Thus, to say that a value is objective is to say that it is an objective truth that some fact of a situation counts in favor of, or provides a good reason for, some response on the part of some agent(s). For this kind of view, see Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), Christine Korsgaard, "The Reasons We Can Share: An Attack on the Distinction between Agent-Relative and Agent-Neutral Values," in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996c), Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

This is the view that (i) declarative statements of an ethical or normative kind express propositions that can be assessed as true or false; that (ii), in fact, ordinary ethical or normative judgments are not by and large mistaken; and that (iii) it is otherwise an open question whether any further facts or properties make such judgments true. In assuming minimal truth for the sake of posing a question about objectivity, I follow Rosen, "Objectivity and Modern Idealism: What Is the Question?" For discussion of minimalism about truth, see Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).


Specifically, according to Mackie ethical claims aspire to truth or falsity but commit an error of false presupposition. Consequently, they are not always *false*, but rather never succeed in stating claims which are genuinely true, or genuinely false.


Ibid., p. 33.
Ibid. Parallel passages are found on pp. 29 and 40.

See below for discussion of such substantive “sensitivity to attitudes” and why it does not compromise attitude-invariant truth.

Constructivism does entail variance with hypothetical attitudes, i.e, our ideally well-reasoned verdicts. I address the significance of this below.


See Warren Quinn, "Truth and Explanation in Ethics," in *Morality and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993e) for this kind of argument, which partly depends on distinguishing epistemological requirements from requirements for objectivity.


For Williams a “perspective” is contingent in the sense that it is constituted by a community’s repertoire of “thick” ethical concepts, which is in turn constituted by interests and dispositions of evaluation which are parochial to locale and time. See Ibid.

See, in particular, Ibid., pp. 151-2.

Ibid., p. 148.

One kind of variance with attitudes which is compatible with objectivity should be mentioned but set aside. If someone is a reliable judge of the truth about her reasons for action, it will not be the case that her reasons for action would have remained the same, even had she thought otherwise. Had she thought otherwise, her belief would have been correct. If, however, reliability is reliability with respect to independent truths, then the idea of independent truth is the more basic notion. We should characterize it first, setting the idea of reliability to one side, and then use the resulting conception of independence to explain what reliability consists in.


That is, Albert would have no reason at all not to kill insects if, as I will assume, he has no reasons other than reasons of conscience not to.
What are the “general operative judgments” more generally, present cases aside? I cannot take up this matter in any detail here. Roughly, they are the general judgments a fully competent user of the relevant value or reason concept would assume to be true, while considering the situation entirely on its merits, quite aside from meta-ethical considerations. The proposal about objectivity broached in the text below would need to be put in these terms to have full generality, but I leave this complication aside.

It is worth noting here how my account of objectivity differs from the minimalism suggested in Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It." For one thing, Dworkin does not clearly take the position I have advanced on the issue of scope. Most important, unlike Dworkin, I do not base my argument on a more general rejection of explanatory demands. My claim is that even if explanation of some sort is needed for vindication, pace Dworkin, it is not required for values to count as fully objective. My own view is that foundational explanation is not required to legitimate belief in the objectivity of values, but that it is desirable where it is possible and illuminating. I argue in this vein for the possibility of a constructivist foundational account in my “Constructivism as a Foundational Theory” (unpublished ms.).

Thus “our very idea of an objective value” would be understood in the inclusive, non-conceptual sense specified above.


Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) can be seen as denying objectivity on similar grounds. Since he accepts that practical reasons vary with our dispositions based on considerations of motivation, not independent practical argument, our reasons vary with subjective conditions regardless of whether or not we would take this to have a substantive grounding. A version of this point is made is Christine Korsgaard, "Skepticism About Practical Reason," in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996d). Williams agrees in Bernard Williams, "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame," in *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), note 3.

Some forms of moral relativism raise complications I cannot adequately address here, because they sometimes offer substantive practical considerations in favor of relativized moral standards. According to the relativism discussed in Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 329, for example, the fact that an action is wrong provides overriding (non-relative) reason not to perform it. It is then argued, as a non-relativistically true
conclusion, that this condition can only be met if the truth of a moral judgment depends on what is generally accepted by those who share one’s way of life. This would not give up on moral objectivity by the standard proposed in the text. I believe this implication is quite correct, although I cannot defend that claim here. Other forms of moral relativism which do not take the form just described, such as those which appeal to non-normative facts about disagreement or variation in moral codes, would still deny objectivity for much the same reasons that Hume’s subjectivism does.