

The Subjectivity of Good, Evil, and Morality



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“One Voluntaryist’s Perspective” is an original bi-weekly column appearing every other Monday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins. Archived columns can be found [here](#). OVP-only RSS feed available [here](#).

I think an often overlooked concept in ethics (at least to my admittedly limited knowledge on the subject) is the subjective nature of “good” and “evil.” Along with that, the idea of “objective morality” seems to me to be an oxymoron. What is considered evil by one person may be considered good by another. Likewise, what is considered an immoral act by one may be moral to another. Can good, evil, and morality be objectively defined? I think so, but only in the broader context of subjectivity, or, only relative to the ends being sought by human action.

Subjectivity and Objectivity

I don’t mean to make this discussion too long, but I feel I should define a few terms. Subjectivity is judgment based on personal feelings and opinions, rather than external facts. Objectivity, on the other hand, is judgment based on external facts, rather than on personal feelings and opinions. Value, for example, is subjective. How one feels about something, say an item for sale, will determine how much he is willing to pay. If the price is set too high, he will forego the purchase. Another example, the color of something is an objective fact. Feelings and opinions are irrelevant. A purple box has a definite color, purple. If I were to say that the purple box is red, I would be wrong. The box being purple is a fact, not an opinion. Thus are subjectivity and objectivity.

Good and Evil

Let us now turn to “good” and “evil.” I posit that for one to consider something good, he has determined for himself that it’s existence, utilization, or application will lead to his desired outcome. Further, the opposite is true for evil, that something’s existence, utilization, or application will lead away from one’s desired outcome. Whatever it is, if it moves reality toward one’s desired end, it is considered good; away from one’s desired end, evil. Clearly then, what is considered good and what is considered evil depends entirely on the ends sought by one making the determination. Hence, good and evil are

subjective.

Nothing I have said here (however shallow my analysis has been) should be taken as heresy by those who believe in the existence of (capitalized) Good and Evil. It's just that those who believe in a supreme Good or a supreme Evil merely boast either the allegiance of popularity, or the allegiance of deity. The consideration of good vs. evil is still subjective, albeit popularly or divinely accepted (or decreed). God saying that murder is evil does not make murder objectively evil. Nor does the majority of a society saying taxation is good make taxation good. It only means that in God's *opinion*, murder is evil, and in the majority of society's *opinion*, taxation is good. (I know of psychopaths that consider murder good, and my compatriots who consider taxation as evil. No, my compatriots are not psychopaths, at least, I don't think they are.)

Objective Morality

So, how can I squeeze into this discussion the idea of objective morality? The same way I can squeeze out of positivist Austrian School economics the idea that Socialism is evil. Namely, by defining (subjectively) our ends (for example, a prosperous society, considering Austrian School economics and Socialism). Having done so, within the context of that end, an action or thing (or whatever) can be considered objectively good or evil. In other words, what contributes toward reaching a defined end is good, and away from it, evil. Relative to our desired end, something is either objectively good or objectively evil. Once we have defined our end, we can define, objectively, good, evil, and morality (which I define as: the application of good and evil).

It is my desire that I live. I feel that my life has value and I want to continue living. If someone were to declare their intent to end my life, I would label them an "evil person." Many believe that God puts a high value on the lives of his creations (namely, humans) so in the eyes of [their conception of] God, murder is evil. With or without God's decree on the morality of murder, many people consider murder to be evil. That murder is evil is a popularly- and (possibly) divinely-accepted fact relative to the subjectively-desired end of living. Hence, any discussion on objective morality must be couched within a subjective, pre-determined end.

Final Thoughts

I have no doubt that what I have discussed here could be greatly expanded upon. Perhaps I will do so someday. In the mean time, it should be remembered that there's nothing objectively wrong with words like "good" and "evil." You may or may not use them. If you do, or if I do, it should be remembered that they are subjective terms, unless used within the context of a pre-determined end. To call someone good or evil is to assume that they share your desired ends. If they don't, then you really have no basis in their eyes for your

opinion of them. It may be considered illogical, then, to use these terms in the absence of well-defined ends, goals, outcomes, or what have you. I'm sure I'm guilty of that, and I hope to be more careful in the future.

Update 1/14: The following links expand on this analysis: [Objective Statements](#), [TortoiseDream on reddit](#).

Update 1/19: After several discussions on this topic I feel I need to make some corrections. In my analysis above, I used the word "murder" when it would have been more appropriate to use the word "kill." The reason for this is that in the last few days I have come to the conclusion that certain words exist as shorthand for objective statements. Murder, rape, theft, are some of these. Murder, for example, implies a value (subjective), that of the desire to live, as well as a fact (objective), that this desire was ignored. If the person killed did not value his life, did not desire to live, than can it really be called murder? I don't think so. He was killed (or killed himself), but he was not murdered. Therefore, when one says "murder is wrong," he is really saying something like, "killing is destructive to human well-being." We don't say that we murder animals for consumption (okay, *some* people do). We say that we kill them. If we said murder, we would be implying the animal's objection, his values. Perhaps that will clarify some thinking; it has mine.

Update 12/2: I wrote again on "good" and "evil," and I no longer consider it productive to label someone as an "evil person."