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Subjective Truth, Objective Truth, and Moral Indifference

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SUBJECTIVE TRUTH, OBJECTIVE TRUTH,  
AND MORAL INDIFFERENCE

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A fundamental question in ethical theory is the following:

In what sense (if any) can moral judgments intelligibly be characterized as true or false, correct or incorrect?

In his important book, *The Status of Morality*<sup>1</sup>, Thomas Carson offers an answer to this question based on an Ideal Observer Theory (hereafter 'IOT') which allows for moral truth but which relativizes it to the attitudes of different ideal observers. On Carson's view, the judgment that *x* is wrong would be true *for me* if and only if *I* would have an unfavorable attitude toward *x* were *I* an ideal observer, while the judgment that *x* is right would be true *for you* if and only if *you* would have a favorable attitude toward *x* were *you* an ideal observer (pp. 94–95).<sup>2</sup> Such a view, Carson maintains, has a number of important advantages over traditional metaethical theories: it avoids nihilism, and although it involves commitment to a moderate form of ethical relativism, it still allows for the possibility of at least a mild form of objectivism, i.e., it still allows for the possibility that there are *some* moral judgments which are correct for all human beings. The details of these arguments and of Carson's characterization of ideal observers shall not concern us here. Rather we shall attempt to show only that his analysis of the notion of moral indifference (which he claims is central to his defense of ethical relativism in Chapter Three), in conjunction with his account of subjective and objective truth, leads to inconsistency. We shall then suggest a way of repairing the damage that we believe will leave intact the central features of his account.

Carson begins by explicating and defending what he describes as a 'Brentanist' account of moral judgments according to which moral judgments are analyzed as assertions about the correctness or incorrect-

ness of holding certain attitudes toward the objects of those judgments. On this view, to say that something is morally right is to assert that it is correct for everyone to have a favorable attitude about it, to say that something is morally wrong is to say that it is correct for everyone to have an unfavorable attitude about it, and to claim that something is morally indifferent is to assert that 'it is a matter of indifference what kind of attitude we have toward it,' i.e., that 'it can be correct to have a favorable, unfavorable or neutral attitude about it' (p. 7). He then argues that if we reject moral realism (as he maintains we should (pp. 43–47)), the Brentanist account of the meaning of moral judgments commits one to a version of the IOT as the standard for the correctness of moral judgments since '[a]n attitude about something is correct provided that one could continue to hold it if one were fully informed and fully rational, etc.' (p. 47).

Carson considers three different versions of the IOT. The first he dismisses because it takes the *moral judgments* of ideal observers as the standard for determining the correctness of moral judgments yet (he argues) nothing in his theory would require an ideal observer to form *any* moral judgments whatever (pp. 81–82). The second version, which takes instead the *attitudes* of ideal observers as the appropriate standard, may be represented by the following table:

IOT (version II)

<i>Judgment</i>	<i>Conditions for the Objective Correctness of the Judgment</i>
1. <i>x</i> is right	All IO's would have a favorable attitude toward <i>x</i>
2. <i>x</i> is wrong	All IO's would have an unfavorable attitude toward <i>x</i>
3. (no name for this concept)	All IO's would have a neutral attitude toward <i>x</i>
4. There is no correct moral judgment about <i>x</i>	It is not the case that all IO's would share the same attitude toward <i>x</i> .

Carson adds (p. 83) that he intends (II) to be understood in such a way that it *excludes* the possibility that a given attitude could be correct for a particular person yet not be correct for everyone (objectively correct).



Insofar as we are dealing with moral judgments to the effect that something is right or wrong, no obvious difficulty obtrudes. But what about the case of a judgment that something is morally *indifferent*? A striking feature of the second version of the IOT (which purports to provide standards of objective correctness for moral judgments) is that the corresponding table lacks an entry for the concept of moral indifference even though, as we already noted, Carson accepts a Brentanist analysis of the meaning of moral judgments according to which the claim that something is objectively indifferent is equivalent to the claim that *any* attitude toward it would be correct. Carson, who is aware of this oddity, tries to deal with it by arguing that the assertion 'there is no moral judgment about  $x$  that is [objectively] correct' (the entry in line (4) of the table representing (II)) and the assertion ' $x$  is [objectively] morally indifferent' have precisely the same truth conditions: they are both true when and only when different ideal observers would exhibit 'the full range of different and opposed attitudes (favorable, unfavorable, and neutral) about [ $x$ ]' (p. 83).

A minor problem with this response is that it does not seem necessary that different ideal observers exhibit *all* possible attitudes with respect to  $x$  for it to be true that there is no objectively correct judgment concerning  $x$ . Surely all that is required is that there be *some* difference in their attitudes. Second, and more importantly, this proposal involves a straightforward inconsistency. For suppose that Smith would have an unfavorable attitude about  $x$  were *she* an ideal observer. According to Carson's preferred version of the IOT (III), which specifies when moral judgments are true for individual persons, we would have to say that

- (1) 'x is wrong' is true for Smith

But further suppose that the class of ideal observers would disagree about  $x$ , some favoring it, some (like Smith) disfavoring it, and some holding an entirely neutral attitude toward it. According to Carson's general account of when a moral judgment is objectively true, we would then have to say that

- (2) 'x is indifferent' is objectively true.  
But (2), in conjunction with Principle P, entails that

(3) 'x is indifferent' is true for Smith.

(1) and (3), however, are plainly inconsistent with one another (at least on the innocuous supposition that the predicates 'wrong' and 'indifferent' are contraries<sup>4</sup>).

We believe that the source of Carson's troubles here is his commitment to the Brentanist account of moral indifference. He writes:

To say that something is morally indifferent is not to say that it is correct (in a sense that is opposed to mistaken) to be indifferent to it. To say that something is morally indifferent is to imply that it would be correct to be indifferent to it, but it does not imply that favorable or unfavorable attitudes are incorrect . . . Calling *x* morally indifferent doesn't mean that we are committed to being indifferent about it, rather it means that it is a matter of indifference what kind of attitude we have about it (p. 6).

We submit that such a view is in fact less intuitive than the view he rejects, viz., that to say something is morally indifferent is to say that a neutral attitude is the *only* attitude toward it that it would be correct to hold. About the only reason Carson gives for preferring his own analysis to ours is something which he terms the 'non-killjoy principle': 'if it is correct to be indifferent to something then it must also be correct to have a favorable attitude toward it' (p. 10). However, although he initially characterizes this principle as '*prima facie* plausible' (*ibid.*), he later concedes that

the general sorts of considerations that moved us to accept the IOT should convince us to give up this principle if necessary. For if all ideal observers would be indifferent to something (there is no reason to think that such a case could not arise), then one's having any other sort of attitude about it must be the result of some kind of error or cognitive failing (pp. 84–85).

Abandoning the non-killjoy principle, however, would seem to leave Carson open to our suggested revision of his analysis of moral indifference. This revision could be effected by (i) modifying the table corresponding to (II) so that the judgment entry on line (3) becomes 'x is morally indifferent' and (ii) no longer interpreting the table in (II) so as to exclude the possibilities delineated in the table corresponding to (III).<sup>5</sup> Making such a revision removes the inconsistency with which we have charged Carson since it eliminates the possibility that a judgment that something is indifferent could be objectively correct without also being correct for each individual. Finally, if the analysis is modified in this way, (II) will no longer be a *competitor* to (III); rather, (II) will

serve to specify the conditions for the *objective* correctness of moral judgments while (III) will continue to be the account of when moral judgments are correct *for individuals*.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> D. Reidel, 1984. All page references in the text are to this work.

<sup>2</sup> As Carson realizes (pp. 35–37), something more needs to be said about the *sort* of favorable and unfavorable attitudes involved if we are to be able to distinguish moral from aesthetic judgments. This complication will be ignored in what follows.

<sup>3</sup> Carson argues that a moral judgment may be correct for all human beings without being correct for all persons (pp. 75–76).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed the inconsistency could be demonstrated even more straightforwardly. The claim that *x* is morally indifferent is itself a *kind* of moral judgment, viz., an assertion to the effect that it would be correct to hold any attitude toward *x*. Hence the truth conditions for such a judgment are conditions which make *that* moral judgment *correct*. But it would be incoherent to suppose that that very set of conditions could *also* be the truth conditions for the assertion that there is *no* morally correct judgment about *x*.

<sup>5</sup> Although cases in which ideal observers disagree are cases in which there is no objectively correct judgment (line (4) of the table corresponding to (II)), such cases need not be cases in which *any* attitude we have is equally arbitrary. For suppose that, with respect to *y*, some ideal observers would have a favorable attitude and some would be neutral but that *none* would have an unfavorable attitude. In such a case it would appear most reasonable to hold that, although there is no objectively *correct* judgment about *y*, there *is* an objectively *incorrect* judgment about it, viz., the judgment that *y* is morally *wrong*.

<sup>6</sup> We are grateful to Tom Carson for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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