

Shafer-landau ethical theory summary and analysis



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In this section, Shafer-Landau seeks to draw attention to a major flaw which he finds to exist in subjectivism through its incompatibility with an individual's tendency to question his or her own moral values (p. 296).

To begin his argument, Shafer-Landau states that if subjectivism is correct, whatever is "right" is what he, Schafer-Landau, "approves of." According to Shafer-Landau, this is because, under the subjectivist model of ethics, a person's own values are the "ultimate authority" in determining what is morally right and what is morally wrong (p. 296).

In Shafer-Landau's view, however, this use of personal values as the predominant ethical authority does not make sense, as it does not account for instances where a person may be undecided as to the value of their beliefs (p. 296). Arguing to this end, Shafer-Landau claims that he, himself, has personally experienced circumstances where he has been drawn to question his values and their supporting justifications (p. 296). According to Shafer-Landau, this tendency to for an individual to question their beliefs is incompatible with the use of these beliefs as the basis of moral truth (p. 296).

Through close analysis of this argument as it is made by Shafer-Landau, it appears that he is thereby reaching this conclusion based on one of two premises: either it is wrong to question one's values because they represent moral fact, or it is impossible for our individual values to represent moral fact because they are founded in beliefs that may be influenced by internal debate and which may therefore change over time; in other words, these

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values cannot represent moral fact because they lack consistency and objectivity. To counter this argument, I will seek to show that both of these premises are false: the first, due to its inability to describe a legitimate threat to the status of individual values as moral truths, and the second due to its inability to accurately represent the nature of individual, subjective truth described by the subjectivist model.

Regarding Shafer-Landau's first possible premise to this conclusion, it seems unsound to conclude that because a fact is questioned it cannot be a fact. Certainly, there are many ideals which we now consider to be fact that have been heavily scrutinized throughout history. As a notable example, the fact that the earth is spherical and not flat has been, and in some cases even continues to be, questioned extensively.

Further, it does not seem that the act of questioning a potential fact plays any role in determining whether or not an idea is truly factual. Consider, as an example, the many conspiracies which assert that the Buzz Aldrin and the United States did not land on the moon. Despite this argument and those counterarguments which assert that the United States did, in fact, place a shuttle on the moon, the actual fact of the matter, whatever it may be, is a fact in and of itself and is not affected in any way by this questioning. In other words, the legitimacy of a fact is independent of and cannot be affected by any acts of questioning its value or legitimacy. Therefore, if it was Schafer-Landau's intent to argue that our tendency to question our values is incompatible with our values forming the basis of moral fact, this reasoning seems false, as it relies on a poor argument that our act of questioning a fact damages that fact's legitimacy.

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Shafer-Landau's second possible premise for his conclusion appears to be equally flawed, as it seems to disregard some major components of the essence of subjectivist moral reasoning. According to Shafer Landau, the act of questioning the legitimacy of one's moral values "cannot make sense, since [one's own] approvals and disapprovals are the ultimate test of right and wrong" (p. 296). Assuming that, through this argument, Shafer-Landau intends to say that moral values are unfit to represent moral truth because they represent ideas that are subject to change under the influence of internal questioning, it appears that Shafer-Landau is overlooking a key aspect of the subjectivist ideal. According to Merriam-Webster, subjectivism is a moral doctrine which states that "individual feeling or apprehension is the ultimate criterion of the good and the right" (Subjectivism, n. d.). From this definition, it is understood that under the subjectivist model, there are no objective moral truths; rather, the subjectivist ideal champions that each individual's values represent subjective moral truths, which are the highest level of moral truth (*Ethics Guide: Subjectivism*). As a result, subjectivism does not give preference to any single moral value, but supports every individual value as ethically meaningful to that individual. And it seems that the essence of this idea can easily be expanded to the individual level used within Shafer-Landau's argument. If all ideas between individuals are morally valuable so long as they reflect the subjective moral beliefs of that individual, it seems to follow that all differing values within an individual are morally valuable so long as they reflect that individual's perspective, feeling, or belief at the given time.

When considered in this light, it no longer appears that the susceptibility of our subjective moral truths to change truly conflicts with the subjectivist model of morality, as Shafer-Landau may be arguing. Rather, it seems that Shafer-Landau's argument rests on a misrepresentation of subjectivism, whereby he is arguing based on a false perception that subjectivism intends for subjective moral truths to possess the level of infallibility and rigidity held by objective moral truths. Because the kind of subjective moral truths championed by subjectivist theory are not expected to possess this level of infallibility, and are, in fact, often celebrated for their tendency to differ and change across people and cultures, Shafer-Landau's argument for the presence of a conflict in our tendency to question our own moral perceptions while using them to determine our moral beliefs appears false if it intends to argue that this conflict is derived from the resulting susceptibility of our moral values to our own questioning.

Through his argument in this section, Shafer-Landau seeks to convey that subjectivism conflicts with the tendency of individuals to question their moral beliefs (p. 296). I have objected to this conclusion in two ways, each of which correspond to one of what I perceive to be the two most likely reasons for which Shafer-Landau believes this conflict to exist. First, I have identified that Shafer-Landau's conclusion is unsound if it is based on the false premise that this conflict exists because of our tendency to question factual moral truths. Second, I have found this conclusion to be unsound if it is based on the premise that subjective moral truths cannot be susceptible to adaptation or change due to our questioning our own moral values.

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